

Chapter 1

Ionica

Ionica wandered to the living room window and leaned his hot forehead against the glass. Tearfully he gazed at the same old view from the fifth-floor apartment where he lived with his grandmother.

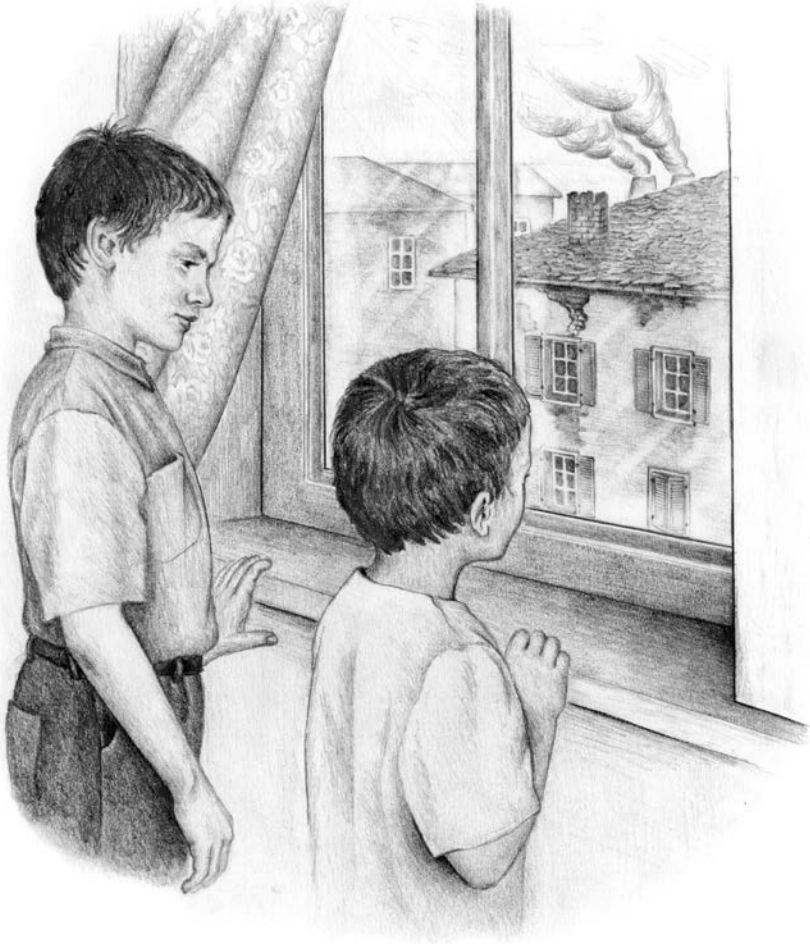
Crowded together in front of him were gloomy apartment buildings of Bucharest, the largest city in Romania. Smoke from many factories billowed into the sky. Behind him was the dingy apartment.

Ionica did not turn around to look at it. He knew what was there—and what was not there. No father. No mother. No money. No food.

Grandmother did her best to care for Ionica and his two brothers and two sisters. But she was eighty-two years old. Sometimes she did not feel well, and most of the time she was tired.

I wish Tată and Mama had not died, thought Ionica. I wish Andi and Vasile and Nicoleta and Tina and I still lived with them. I wish the doctor could have fixed them. I wish, I wish, I wish . . . Is there no medicine for cancer? Since Tată and Mama died, everything is going wrong. Nothing is like it used to be. I don't want to sing. I don't even feel like playing . . . And I am so hungry.

Ionica was six years old, but he could not keep from crying a little. Then he heard footsteps behind him. Quickly he brushed his eyes and stuffed his hands into his pockets. His big brother Andi joined him at the window. Ionica saw him from the corner of his eye, but did not turn his head. He did not want Andi to know he had been crying.



“Are you hungry, Ionica?” Andi asked softly.

Ionica nodded.

“Me too,” Andi said. “We must be brave. It took the last of Grandmother’s money to buy the bread we ate for lunch. Now there is nothing left.”

“What will we do?” Ionica whispered.

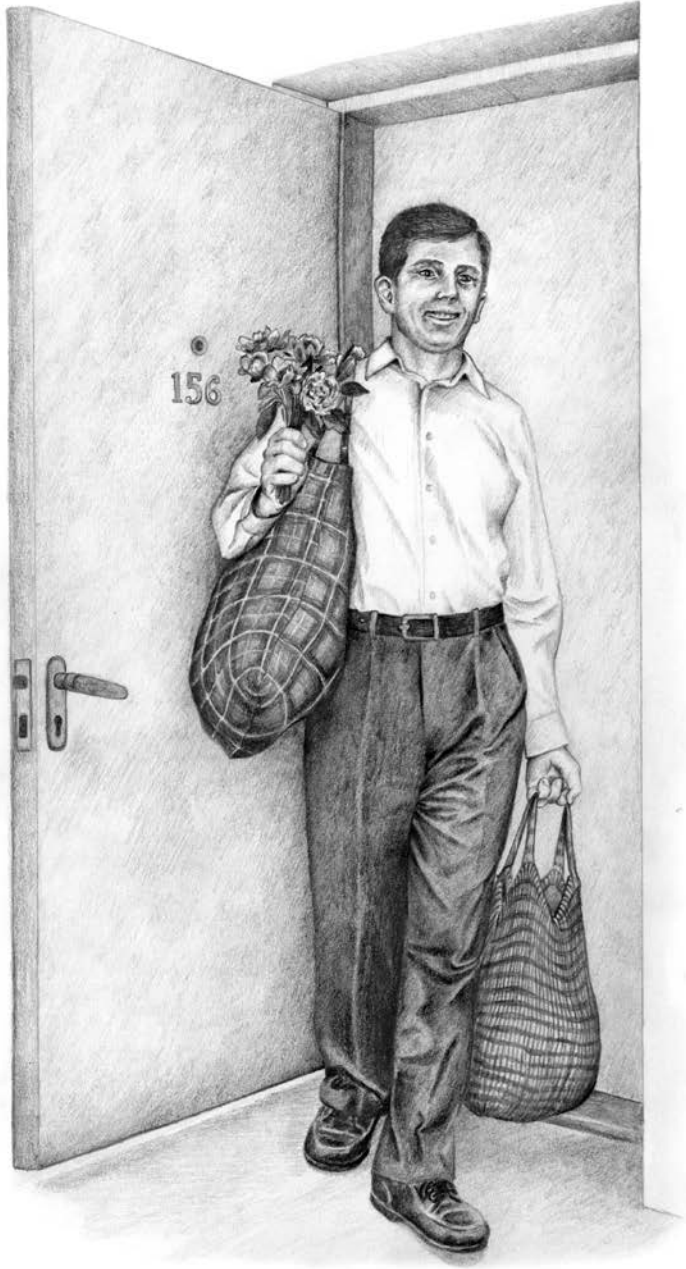
Andi lowered his voice and leaned closer. “A few days ago I heard Grandmother say she sent a letter to Uncle Nicu. I hope he can help us.”

Ionica’s eyes widened. Uncle Nicu was Grandmother’s only son. Hardly anyone ever spoke about Uncle Nicu. The whole family tried to keep away from him as much as possible. Ionica wondered why. He faintly remembered hearing his parents talk about the Orthodox Church, and Uncle Nicu leaving it. Tatã and Mama had called him a “repenter.” What did that mean? Was Uncle Nicu bad? Right now Ionica did not really care. He just wanted someone to help them find food.

He looked up at Andi and managed a little half-smile. “I hope he comes soon,” he said quietly.

“Me too,” Andi said. “But Uncle Nicu lives near Bacău, and that’s a long way from here, about two hundred kilometers, Grandmother said. Even if he got the letter already, it may take him a while to get here. We need to be patient and try not to think about food. Maybe he will come soon.”

That night the children went to bed hungry. Ionica lay awake a long time, trying not to listen to his stomach growling. Instead, he thought about Uncle Nicu. It seemed he was their only hope. Would he come? Could he help?



Chapter 2

Uncle Nicu

The next day Ionica jumped when he heard a *Knock! Knock! Knock!* on the door.

“Come in! Come in!” exclaimed Grandmother when she saw who was there. All the children crowded around her. A tall, friendly-looking man stepped inside.

“*Bună Ziua! Good day,*” he said with an affectionate smile. Ionica watched him slip off his shoes and hand Grandmother a bouquet of pink peonies. *This must be Uncle Nicu,* thought Ionica.

The man shook Grandmother’s hand and kissed her on both cheeks. Then he turned to the children. “I am Nicu, your mother’s only brother,” he said. “My wife Roza and I have five children, just like there are five of you. I am eager to learn to know all of you. My sister had a fine family.” Turning to Grandmother, he explained, “I got your letter and came just as soon as I could arrange to leave my work.”

Ionica watched his uncle curiously. He liked Uncle Nicu’s friendly voice and kind eyes, but the bulging sacks he carried looked even more interesting. How Ionica hoped they were filled with food! He looked from the bags to his uncle and back again.