

CHAPTER ONE

Hannah took two small steps forward in the immigration line entering America at LAX. She was in a large white room with a line for people like her and another line for people who belonged. The people who belonged laughed and slouched, wore clothes that fit their bodies, and smelled of milk, dry cleaning, and deodorant. The people who didn't belong stood upright unless they couldn't, wore dressier but older clothes, and smelled of body odor, hot sauce, fish, garlic, and cheap perfume.

Hannah wished she looked like an American teenager. If only she'd been able to change out of these dirty Moldovan clothes. At the airport in Romania, they'd made her check her suitcase, and she'd been so flustered, she hadn't taken a single thing out of it. In the suitcase, she had a brand-new pair of jeans that the good agent had given her to look more American, as well as her T-shirt that said GOOD NEWS with a monkey dancing below the words.

Those clothes would have given her a type of armor, but this dirty white shirt with the frills on the front and the too-blue slacks from her babushka made her look poor and desperate, exactly what the good agent had warned her she must try to avoid.

She squeezed the book with her fake documents inside. Two couples, a family, and an older woman and a man were in line ahead of her. Then it would be her turn.

The line slid forward like a slow escalator, pulling her closer to the grim immigration officers who sat on stools behind a long white counter, separated into glass booths. They were examining people's documents, searching for fakes like hers. They waved most of the people through a large white archway into America, but they sent some through a door with a tiny unbreakable window, which she was sure led to an interrogation room.

She'd never been a good liar. The man in front of her was probably a bad liar too. He kept scratching the back of his hairy neck, above the collar of his ill-fitting suit, turning the skin bright red. She wished he'd stop. His nervousness was spreading to her like a disease.

The man stunk too, worse than she did, for sure, though her own smell embarrassed her. She'd tried to wash in the small bathroom on the plane, but her clothes held the smell of panic and fear and she couldn't wash that off.

There was a faint tapping noise. She looked down and saw it was her black shoe, tapping on the white linoleum floor. Great. If the Americans had a camera on her and they were watching her in some secret room, they'd know something was up. Her mother used to rub her back in slow circles and remind her quietly not to fidget, that nobody needed to know if she was nervous. The memory made her sad.

The man turned around and stared into Hannah's green eyes

and then gazed down at her breasts and her hips as if she were a picture he could just look at for as long as he liked. She cleared her throat, glaring. He looked up in surprise and turned back around.

She wished she were more like her mother. Even when her father used to come home drunk and singing, her mamulya never yelled or got angry. She'd take in a deep breath, let it out, and relax, like her body was an armchair she carried everywhere she went.

Hannah breathed in as deeply as she could and let it out, but it didn't work. Her brain felt fuzzy. From the moment she'd left the bad agent in the taxi outside the airport in Bucharest and walked inside, alone, she'd been in a kind of daze. Her mind drifted to what had happened there, in the taxi, but then she shook her head. She was tired, that was the problem. No sleep for thirty-six hours. Anyone would feel this way.

She looked longingly toward the line for Americans. The family she'd met on the plane was at the counter already. They were all blond. The boy was ten, the girl six. She'd learned this from brief conversations with the mother. Hannah had shared her cookies with the girl, and the boy had done his math homework, of all things. Even though Hannah was pretty good at math, she couldn't imagine an international flight being so boring that you could do your math homework.

The line moved forward. In a few minutes, it would all be decided. If she could get a kind immigration agent, she might make it through, but none of them looked all that kind.

There was an Asian man with a too-large shirt, an Asian

woman with a too-tight bun, two black male officers, and one older white male officer. It seemed odd to Hannah, entering America, that only one of the officers was white. She studied the two black officials with interest. In all of her life, she'd seen only one black man in the flesh, strolling along Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard. People had pointed and yelled, but he'd acted like he didn't see them. Everyone said he was an aid worker.

The white officer crooked his finger at a Moldovan family at the front of the line. The man shuffled toward him, leading his tiny wife and two young girls. They looked hungry. Hannah had seen families like this one when she'd visited the village where her mother had grown up.

The officer slid his glasses down his nose as he examined their papers. This was not a good sign. Anyone who put glasses on the end of their nose was mean. But she hoped they'd make it through. The mother was wearing several sets of colorful clothes, including two bright headscarves, probably to save room in the suitcase, because the husband and children were only wearing one set of clothes each. She was such a contrast to this plain white room that she made Hannah miss Moldova just a little.

The white officer pointed to the door of the interrogation room. The father bowed his head and walked to his fate. His family followed obediently. No! *Anyone but the white officer*, Hannah thought, scanning the others. She picked the Asian man because of his too-large shirt—it made him seem vulnerable somehow, and she figured he'd be softer with her.

Two more people and then it was her turn.

The good agent, Olga, had told her to look the immigration

officer in the eyes so that she'd seem trustworthy. Olga had also told her to smile, and then said, never mind, she was much more beautiful when she didn't smile. Hannah ran her tongue over her crooked top teeth. They made her look less American and more like an outsider than anything else, but there was nothing she could do about them now.

She squeezed together the fanning pages of her novel, *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy, and looked down to make sure the fake Russian passport and the real student visa were still tucked neatly inside. Her father had given her this book when she was just eight, and it reassured her now to hold it. She felt as if she were a little girl again, holding his hand to cross the street. That was long before he and her mother were killed, when times were good and he still read to her every night.

The older Russian woman was called. Now it was just the man with the scratching problem and then her. Five minutes and it would be over.

The fact that she'd have to lie was the most terrifying part. The new name and the fake passport weren't her idea, but she was doing what she had to do. Along with the fake documents, the bad agent had given her a list of instructions to get through American immigration. She could not mess up her new name. She could not say she was from Moldova. And she had to act Russian. Whatever that meant.

Fortunately, her family was Russian and she spoke only Russian with her babushka and most of her friends, who were mostly Russian too, even though the majority of her schooling was in Romanian. The official state language was Romanian,

but because Moldova had been ruled by the Soviets for nearly fifty years, older people spoke mostly Russian, younger people spoke mostly Romanian unless they were Russian, but everybody spoke a little of both for communication. She'd been practicing her English, too, and she wasn't horrible, so she should be able to avoid a translator.

If they got a translator for her, she'd have to slow down her dialect, and make it less clipped and more formal. Every country from the former Soviet Union had a slightly different Russian dialect and a good translator would be able to tell where she was from within seconds.

The bad agent had told her she'd make it through if she wasn't too stupid. Pig. She was smarter than he was, she knew that much.

She repeated her new name in her head like a chant. *Elena Platonov. Elena Platonov. Elena Platonov.* In the tiny bathroom on the plane, she'd stood in front of the mirror and repeated it out loud at least fifty times, but the name had sounded like a lie every time she said it.

She smoothed the frizzy little hairs flying out of her ponytail. *Elena Platonov. I am from Moscow. I want study English. I stay with uncle.*

The man in front of her stepped forward. He got the Asian officer with the big shirt. Panicked, she scanned the other officers, trying to pick another one to wish for, but before she had the chance, she heard "Next." The white officer was bending his finger at her, like she was a bad child. She gulped down the saliva gathering in her throat. Her feet would not move.

Her mother's words came into her head. *Stand up tall. Be*

proud of who you are. Hannah held her chin up, pulled her shoulders back, and stepped toward him.

She cleared her face of any expression: eyes straight ahead, cheeks flat, mouth relaxed but closed. After her parents were killed in the bombing, this was the mask she'd worn to shield herself from all the stares—if she could make it through that, she could make it through this.

Once she got to the counter, she opened her novel, slid out her documents, and gave them to the officer. Her hand was shaking. She looked at him quickly, worried he'd seen, but he was already flipping through her passport. He slid his glasses down his nose and examined her picture. As if suspecting a fake, he rubbed the picture with his forefinger, and then his bluish gray eyes shifted up and he examined her face with an intensity that reminded her of her grandmother, whom she affectionately called Babulya. She would not be able to lie to him.

“What is your purpose for coming to America?” he asked.

Her mind went blank. She understood him but couldn't think of a single way to respond. He repeated the question.

“Study.” The word burst out of her mouth, as if she didn't know how to speak English at all. She formed a sentence. “I want learn English.”

“You only have a three-month visa,” he said.

“Yes.” She had practiced an explanation for this with the good agent.

“How do you think you're going to learn English in three months?” he asked.

“I am good student,” she said.

“Are you going to stay here *longer*?” he asked.

Longer. This meant something was bigger, like a shirt or nails. She made a guess that he was talking about the length of time and then remembered what Olga had instructed her to say. “If it is necessary,” Hannah said, lifting her chin up, “the school will obtain extended visa.”

He moved on. “Who will you be staying with?”

“M-my relatives,” she said, gulping at the lie.

“What kind of relatives?”

This was not a question she’d studied. She stared at the reflection of fluorescent lighting in his reading glasses on the end of his nose and tried to make sense of his words. Did he want her to describe their personalities or their jobs? He tapped his gray pen twice on the counter. He looked down at her fake passport, then back up at her, and pursed his lips. He was going to get a translator, she thought, and then they’d figure out that she spoke Russian with a Moldovan accent.

“Repeat please,” she said.

“Your aunt?” he asked. “Your cousin? Your father?”

When he said her father, she felt her heart pounding like an old woman punching dough into bread, but she finally understood. “I stay with uncle. He have wife and two children.”

He looked up. “Where are your parents?”

She couldn’t say they were dead. Olga had said this would bring more questions. The trick was to seem as uncomplicated as possible.

“They are in Mol—” She froze. In her attempt to lie about her

parents being alive, she'd nearly said Moldova. She felt dizzy with fear. Her face flushed. "Moscow."

He looked her straight in the eyes and seemed to know everything in that moment. Her heart thumped. *Please*, she thought, *please, just help me*.

He gave her a grim smile and flipped back between her visa and her passport. She waited. He lifted a stamp—one that would likely send her to the interrogation room, and then, once they found out who she was, off to a small island in the middle of nowhere for suspected terrorists.

He banged the stamp down on her passport with such force it made her jump. He folded her visa and tucked it in the passport. "Study hard," he said, handing her the documents.

She knew "hard" was the opposite of "soft," but she had no idea what this had to do with studying. It was best to agree. "Yes."

"Okay," he said, as if he was expecting her to do something.

She pointed at the beautiful arched entrance into America and he gave her a quick, impatient nod.

She tucked the fake documents back into her book and continued past the counter, walking as slowly as she dared, even though she wanted to run. Electricity shot through her arms and legs; her whole body buzzed. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Finally her life was turning around. A smile crept to her face, but she covered it with her hand, in case someone was watching.