

A PLACE OF BRIGHTNESS

by Keith Massey

Chapter One

The spring of 1962 awakens in the area of Brasov, a hundred miles north of Bucharest, the capital of Romania. For fifteen years the “Haiduci” have carried out guerrilla attacks against the Securitate — the Secret Police of the Communist government. Now, in the final days of this insurgency, a Haiduci family conducts what they hope will be their final mission.

“I hate these moonless nights,” Petre said, plodding through the darkness under towering pine trees.

“Look there,” his sister Doina said. She raised her walking staff and pointed to their right. “It’s rising just now on the horizon.”

Petre saw a sliver of silvery light over the distant Carpathian Mountains. “So you inherited our father’s eyes as well as his ears,” he said. “What magic powers did I get?”

“I can’t fire a gun as well as you,” she answered.

He laughed. “If you could, you wouldn’t need me at all. And the Communists would fall from power in days.”

The lights of the city of Brasov dotted the horizon. There, as in all Romania, each apartment building and every place of work had informants who told the Secret Police about any activities deemed dangerous to the State. Going to Church or reading the wrong books could place one under suspicion of treason.

“I can’t do this alone,” she said, adjusting the shoulder strap of her AK-47. “Your aim is even better than Grandma’s.” She smiled in thought. “It’s strange how these powers cross between the genders and generations of our family.”

Petre took a deep breath and slowly released it. The growing light from the moon illuminated the mist that streamed past his face. “The day you were born Grandma told us about her premonition. She said that your sons would end communism once and for all.”

“Maybe your future children could help?” she asked nervously.

Petre stopped walking. “Do you ever just wish we were normal people?”

She continued a few paces forward and turned suddenly to face him; her long black ponytail swirled to land gracefully in front of her tall and svelte frame.

“No!” she exclaimed. “Everyone in the village thinks we’re just farmers. But we’re members of the Haiduci!”

“That word used to denote bandits and brigands,” he said. “I prefer the term ‘Freedom Fighter’.”

Doina grabbed his shoulder and pulled him forward. “Tell me again how it all started.”

Petre laughed and walked with her. “I’m more interested in how it will finally end.”

“I want to hear the story again.”

“You know it as well as I do.”

“But I love the way you tell it,” she said seriously.

He smiled and relented. “Long ago, the Turks invaded our land. One of our ancestors began to fight them using a shepherd’s skills.”

As they continued, Doina picked up a rock from the ground. Peering into the dark forest before them, she hurled it forward. A moment later an explosion of stone on bark echoed back. “You mean like that?”

“Showoff,” he said. “So skills with a shepherd’s staff and throwing stones were developed and passed down by fathers and mothers to sons and daughters alike. Over time we’ve added newer weapons. But one thing has never changed. Whenever the sovereignty of Romania is threatened, our family feels the duty to fight.”

Petre saw Doina moving her lips along with his practiced words. “After the Turks, we fought the Nazis,” he continued. “And today —”

“We face our greatest challenge,” she interrupted. “The Communists are more vicious than the Turks ever were. The struggle for our land will take generations.” She closed eyes suddenly misting with tears. “We fight for a day when Romania will once again be free.”

“You always take over the story at the end,” he said.

“Next time I’ll let you finish it.”

Doina stopped and explored the pockets of her camouflage-patterned coat. “It’s time for the pre-attack inventory.”

“Right.” Petre checked the various pockets in his ragged brown leather coat. “I’ve got five good throwing stones.”

“Same here,” she said. “Three loaded clips for a total of ninety rounds. And I have the hunting knife. I’m all set.” She placed her weapons carefully on the ground and stretched her arms into the air. As she then reached

down to touch her toes, she winced and carefully touched her left side through her heavy jacket.

Her brother noticed. "Are you still in pain?" he asked. "That guard kicked you pretty good last week."

"Last thing he ever did," she said, sitting down on the ground. "It's not so bad. What bothers me is that I'm only twenty years old and already not in the shape I was just two years ago."

"And I'm five years older than you!" Petre gave a last look through his pockets. "Weapons status confirmed," he said, sitting down beside his sister. "Remember what we said, Doinitsa."

"I know. It's our last mission."

"After those recent arrests, the Secret Police have our code names," he said, reaching toward his toes. "If we keep going, they'll eventually figure out who we are."

Doina nodded slowly as she watched him reach for his toes. "Turn to each side a little more," she said. "You always cheat on your stretching."

He complied with her advice and contorted his body. "I'm just not as limber as you," he grunted. "You really think I'll ever have to twist this way in the field?"

"You never know."

Petre stood up slowly. "And also don't forget that we need to settle down and have families ourselves. We can't let this old tradition end with us."

"I notice you've got a prospect in that area," she said, stretching forward and extending her fingers well past her toes. "You and Elena are the talk of the village."

Petre's eyes lit up. "She's an amazing woman."

Doina jumped to her feet. Flinging her rifle over her shoulder, she turned to her brother. "Let's go," she said.

They began to walk.

"What about you?" he asked. "Anyone in the village have your attention?"

"No ..."

She closed her eyes and was surprised to feel tears again flow. "Ever since we decided to stop our attacks — I've been thinking about my future."

"Alright," he said slowly, sensing the seriousness of her words. "So what do you want to do?"

She stopped walking.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I've put a lot of thought into this."

"Tell me," he said, stepping toward her.

She turned her gaze to the ground. “But promise me you won’t laugh.”

“Doina,” he said softly.

She looked up at him anxiously. “I’ve been thinking that maybe —”

“You want to become a nun.”

She smiled with surprise. “How did you know?”

“Why were you afraid to tell me about this?”

“I was nervous about what you’d think,” she said, peering into the black sky.

He put his hands on his sister’s shoulders. “I know how much you love the Church.”

“It’s so beautiful,” she said, looking into his eyes. “And so different from this life we have now. I’m just tired of the killing.”

“I know you are,” he said. “And your burden is that you’re so good at it.”

She nodded. “That’s why I want to dedicate the rest of my life to another form of insurgency. And my only weapon will be prayer.”

Petre embraced her. “Just be happy, Doina.”

“And it’s alright that I won’t have any children?”

Petre kissed his sister’s forehead. “I’ll take care of that for both of us. Elena and I will have a dozen of them. And I’ll teach them everything we know.”

“Good,” she said.

“Except for one thing,” he said, starting to smile. “You still have to teach my children hand-to-hand combat. They have to learn from the best.”

She laughed through a sudden sob. “It’s a deal.” Doina broke from the embrace. “Alright, we carry out one more attack and then we start new lives.” She dropped to her knees and swept leaves aside to make a clearing. “Final review of the operation.”

“The target is a Secret Police safe house,” Petre said, kneeling beside her and pressing his finger into a spot in the soil. “They’re interrogating a prisoner they brought there yesterday. We’ve never hit this place before. They don’t think we know about it.”

Doina drew her finger in a line some distance from the point her brother had marked. “Here’s the edge of the forest,” she said.

“Got it.”

“In Phase One, you shoot the two guards patrolling in front of the building while I rush out from the trees here.”

“Understood,” he said.

“In Phase Two, I burst into the safe house and take out the three agents inside.”

“And we’re sure there’s only three?”

“Based on surveillance, yes. And they’re only wearing side arms.”

“You can handle them?” he asked.

“Last time I took out four. After my gun jammed, I used my staff to kill the one who kicked me.”

“This from a future nun,” he said with a smirk.

“In Phase Three, you run in after me. You assist with any clean-up and we make our escape with the prisoner.”

“Plan confirmed,” Petre said, coming to his feet. “Then we retreat back to our secret mountain to wait a few hours. Does your side hurt enough to be counted as a liability?”

“No. We have no liabilities.” Doina got up from the ground. “Let’s move.”

They walked in silence through the forest for several more minutes until the lights of Brasov filled the horizon.

“It’s time,” he whispered.

They stood shoulder to shoulder in a custom passed down to them, repeating an ancient family prayer.

“We beg your forgiveness that we must take lives precious to you,” they said together. “Have mercy on all the dead of our family and of those enemies we have slain. Grant them rest in a place of brightness and a place of repose. According to your will, O God, assist us in our efforts so that we can create a world in which peace profound reigns. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” they concluded, each making the sign of the cross. “Amen.”

They looked out from the forest at the outskirts of Brasov. Beyond the row of buildings visible a quarter-mile ahead, they saw medieval towers silhouetted by distant streetlights.

Through the sight of his rifle, Petre silently studied a particular single-story gray structure. It was the only building on the street that was illuminated from within.

“Two men standing guard, just like last night,” he whispered.

“Good,” she said. “Code names only from this point, Apollo. On one?”

“Doina, I —”

“Code names!”

“Diana,” he said. “In case something goes wrong, just know that I love you.”

She shut her eyes tightly and took a deep breath. “Nothing’s going to go wrong.”

He nodded. “On one, Diana.” Petre crouched and focused his rifle sight alternately on the two men standing guard in front of the safe house.

Doina started the countdown to commence the operation. “Five,” she whispered, “four, three, two, one.” She bolted from the spot.

For their attack plan to work, Petre would need to shoot the guards the moment they noticed Doina. The sound of his shots would reach the building just before she burst in, preserving her element of surprise.

As he squinted to focus on his target, he saw Doina nearing the building. One of the guards turned his head and lifted his gun. Petre pulled the trigger and immediately shifted his aim to the cohort. The second man had not noticed that his partner was collapsing. Petre pulled the trigger again and scanned the scene through his sight. He spotted two bodies lying on the sidewalk just as his sister was kicking her way through the front door.

“God help her!” he shouted, jumping to his feet and starting his own race toward the safe house.

As he ran, he saw flashes of light through the windows of the house. He counted them and knew that more than one gun had been fired.

“Damn,” he said under his breath, trying to increase his speed.

Petre reached the building and burst through the entrance. His eyes strained in the sudden brightness.

“You can relax now,” Doina said softly.

He saw his sister standing in the middle of an empty room, five bodies scattered on the floor around her.

“You’re alright?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, starting to smile. “We’ve done it, Petre.”

“I’ll feel better after we get out of here,” he said, looking about.

“There were two more than we expected,” Doina said sadly, looking down at the dead men. “God have mercy on them.” She pointed to a man crouched in a corner. “There’s our liberated prisoner.”

Petre turned to see a man in a black robe looking back at him nervously.

“He’s a Greek-Catholic priest,” she said. “That’s judging by the straight third bar on his crucifix.”

“You’d know that stuff better than me,” Petre said, kneeling down in front of the man. “Don’t be offended, Father. But we have to make sure you’re not carrying a hidden weapon before we take you with us.”

Petre ran his hands vigorously along the man’s sides and legs. He looked up at his sister. “He’s clean.”

The man began to weep. “They did things to me,” he whispered. “They did such horrible things.”

“We know,” Petre said, helping the man to his feet. “We’re going to get you somewhere safe. But we need to move fast.”

Chapter Two

Just before dawn, Doina and Petre stood at the top of a pine-covered mountain several miles north of Brasov. Their liberated prisoner sat on the ground a few feet away.

“We have to deliver him to another Haiduci cell,” she said. “We’re not equipped to get him out of the country.”

“I know,” Petre replied, looking up through the clearing above them. He could still see a single star directly overhead, but the faintest hint of orange light was spreading over the east. “All our old contacts are either dead or captured. Is there any group left that we can trust?”

“The Bear’s cell, based at Red Mountain. That’s about it.”

“It’s pretty far,” he said. “If we left soon and did a forced march we could be there by midday. But why do you suppose they were interrogating a priest?”

Doina looked over at the man. “The Communists hate the Catholics just a little more than they hate us Orthodox,” she said. “They know he has a boss in Rome, outside their control. Our own bishops have all but surrendered.”

“Don’t judge them, Doina,” he said. “They have the survival of the Church on their shoulders.”

“So do we.”

Petre sighed and smiled. “I love this place. It calms me after all the chaos.”

Doina stepped toward their guest and pulled a blindfold off his eyes. “How are you doing, Father?”

“Where are we?” the man asked.

“This is where we always wait for a few hours after our attacks. It’s kind of a secret hideout. I hope you’ll understand I couldn’t let you see how we got here.”

“And now I have another reason to love this place,” Petre said. “Last week I brought Elena up here. Right on this spot we kissed for the first time.”

Doina turned back to him quickly. “You didn’t!” she whispered.

Petre looked at her in confusion. “She doesn’t know what we do,” he said. “Even if she did, she’d never betray us.”

“Oh God, I hear noises,” she stuttered, closing her eyes in concentration. “Someone’s out there. Petre, we’re surrounded.”

“You’re sure?”

“You know my senses.”

“This is impossible,” he said, his voice catching in his throat. “They must have found us some other way.”

“That doesn’t matter now,” she said. “We need a battle plan.”

“How about ‘The Circuit’?”

Doina looked up in thought. “Maybe in full daylight. And the last time we used it we had our father’s third gun.”

Petre and Doina both instantly knew that there was only one possible escape route. A deep fissure ran down the eastern slope of the mountain. It was filled with pebbles and leaves accumulated over years. They had scouted it once as a possible emergency slide from the summit to the base of the mountain. They had also decided that someone could get injured in the attempt.

“We hoped it would never come to this,” he said. “There’s really no other choice?”

Doina shook her head. “Father,” she said, grabbing the priest by his robe and lifting him to his feet. “You need to do everything we tell you or else we’re all dead. Do you understand?”

“I do,” he whispered.

Indistinct voices and sounds now ringed the mountain and approached rapidly.

Doina wrapped her arms around the priest and Petre. “Away we go,” she said.

The three slid together down the naturally formed tunnel. Sounds of gunfire echoed around them as their attackers spotted the escape attempt.

For a full minute they tumbled downward, picking up speed as they went. A paved road at the base of the mountain suddenly stopped their descent.

“Status check,” Petre groaned, rolling to all fours on the road. “How is everybody?”

“I’m alright,” the priest said. “At least I think I am.”

“I’ve got a problem here,” Doina said quietly, holding her left arm with her right. She tried to get to her feet but then fell backwards.

Petre stood and walked slowly toward his sister. He saw her forearm pointing unnaturally away from the rest of the limb.

“Do what you have to do. Just do it quickly.”

“My sister,” he said, carefully taking her arm in both hands. “Relax now.” She shut her eyes. “Just do it!” she cried.

Petre saw her face turn ashen. “Take a deep breath, Doinitsa,” he said.

Suddenly she opened her eyes wide. “Petre,” she gasped. “Communism will fall.”

“Of course it will.” He moved her limb back into place, feeling and hearing the broken bones within.

“I’m sending you a present,” she whispered, her eyes rolling back.

“You’re delirious, Doina,” he said softly. “Sleep for awhile.”

“The Circuit,” she mumbled, fainting away.

“I know. We should have tried it.”

Petre sat down on the road next to his sister. “Get praying, Father,” he said. “We’re in some serious trouble.”

Petre sipped some plum brandy from a small bottle.

“I’m ready for a bit of that myself,” Doina said, taking it from his hand. She tasted it and shook her head. “Nope, not a good idea yet.” She handed the bottle back. “How long was I out?”

“Just five minutes or so. That gave me enough time to get us away from the road and put a splint on your arm. What do you remember?”

“I remember showing you my arm and then I was waking up a few minutes ago.”

“Before you passed out you said you’re sending me a present,” he said. “I hope you didn’t give away a surprise party or something.”

She chuckled. “I don’t remember that.” Doina held her arm carefully and stood up. “We have to get going now. They could be down off that mountain anytime.”

Petre stood. “Now to the matter of this so-called prisoner,” he said, turning toward the priest. “Maybe my girlfriend betrayed us. Or maybe you aren’t who you say you are.”

“What do you mean?” the man asked.

“Maybe you’re not really a priest and somehow you helped them follow us,” Doina said.

“But you searched me and found nothing.”

“My brother searched you for weapons,” Doina said. “For all we know you’ve got a transmitter in your stomach. Here’s a test for you. Recite the Lord’s Prayer in Greek. A Greek-Catholic priest would have learned this at seminary.”

The man looked up at them seriously and got to his feet. “*Pater eemon, o en tees ouranees,*” he recited. “*ayiaستهeto to onoma ...*”

“Stop,” Doina said. “You know, I still don’t believe you. But we’re going to have to take you with us for now. Don’t think we aren’t watching your every move.”

The three started off through thick woods. The orange glow of morning flared to life on the horizon, coupled with a gathering fog.

Doina stopped walking. "Did you hear that?" she whispered.

"Yes," Petre answered in a low voice. "One person, somewhere behind us. I'd put him at twenty meters."

"No, there's two," she said. "One's twenty meters, with a second trailing him by another ten."

"Our liabilities are, obviously, your arm and this priest," he said. "Do you have a plan?"

"I don't like it, but we're going to have to split up. I continue walking with the priest. You stop and take up a sniper position. I'll fake the sounds of a third walker with my staff."

"Got it," he said. "I'll take them out one by one as they follow you."

"If I hear less than two shots, I'll throw some stones a few meters from your position to flush the last one out."

"It's a good plan," he said.

"On one," she said.

They continued walking and Doina began the countdown under her breath.

"Doina —"

"We don't have time to talk, Apollo," she said. "Three, two, one."

He turned and dropped to the ground. Sliding behind a tree, he aimed his rifle into the fog.

"Keep walking with me," Doina said to the man. "If anything happens, just fall to the ground and don't move, understood?"

"Yes."

Petre peered into an increasingly foggy dawn. His heart froze. Sounds were all around him now. Multiple enemies in every direction.

"*An ambush,*" he thought. "*Must warn Doina.*" He fired his rifle twice quickly and then again after a slight pause. It was a pattern they had devised to signal the complete loss of a mission. He was instantly surrounded by men cocking and aiming their rifles at him.

A distance away, Doina heard the three shots and stopped in her tracks. She turned slowly to the priest. The man had taken a defensive stance.

"So you are one of them."

"I was just waiting for you two to get separated," he said. "Now drop that gun. I'm a trained fighter. I'll kill you if I have to, but I'd like to bring you in alive."

"How did you know the Lord's Prayer in Greek?" she asked.

“I *was* a priest. But then the Party enlightened me,” he said. “Oh, and you were right about the transmitter in my stomach.”

Doina took a few steps backward and looked at him sadly. “May God have mercy on you.”

The man smiled. “Obviously it’s not a fair fight with that gun. But consider yourself warned.”

“I won’t use my gun,” Doina replied. “Take your best shot.”

The man sneered and lunged forward. Doina dodged a swiftly thrown fist and swung her broken arm around. The sticks of her splint landed squarely in the man’s throat. A crunch of broken cartilage rang through the forest. She gasped from the explosion of pain that followed.

The man dropped to his knees, grabbing his throat. He looked up in astonishment, trying to pull even one breath into his lungs.

Doina squeezed the splint with her good hand and felt the bones again find their proper placement. “My grandmother taught me that move,” she whispered.

The man closed his eyes, still slowly clawing at his throat.

Doina turned around quickly and ran into the growing mist. “I’m coming, Apollo!”

Through the fog, Petre saw a flame sucked into a cigarette.

“Push that rifle aside, Apollo,” a voice said. “If you help us finish off the Haiduci, you and your sister can go back to your village. We’ll let you go free. How does that sound?”

Petre saw the glow of the cigarette flare up as the voice drew deeply from it.

“What will she do now?” the voice asked. “Your signal means that she’s supposed to give you up for dead and escape to save herself, right? But she won’t be able to do that. Without her beloved brother she’s all alone in the world, am I right? So she’ll try to save you. And then we’ll kill you both. If you want your sister to live, push that rifle away like I said.”

Petre drew a deep trembling breath. He tossed his weapon to the side. Immediately men snatched it away and pulled him to his feet.

Doina walked as silently as possible, hiding behind trees and peering into the distance. She could now hear dozens of people ahead of her.

“Forgive me, Apollo,” she whispered. “I have to try something.” She aimed her rifle into the fog. “*They’d hold you in the center of the group,*”

she thought. “*And so ...*” She turned her weapon slightly to the right and squeezed the trigger.

“Tell her to surrender,” the voice repeated. “This is your last warning.”

A man standing next to Petre gasped and began to fall. The next instant a gunshot echoed through the trees.

“She’s good,” the voice laughed. “But your time’s up, Apollo. Tell Diana to surrender.”

“Run away!” Petre screamed.

The voice stepped out of the fog and pointed a pistol. “Your choice.” He fired a shot into Petre’s chest. “Go get her!” he shouted to his comrades.

Doina shuddered at the sound of the single shot. Multiple guns now fired in her direction. She jumped behind a tree and heard bullets ricocheting off bark all around.

“I can’t leave you here!” she screamed.

Another volley of shots rang out. She heard the sounds of approaching feet.

Petre dropped to his knees, blood spurting from his mouth. As he fell onto his back, he drew in one pained and gurgling breath. “Go!” he shouted.

Doina heard him. And she understood. She pushed herself from the tree and sprinted away. As she ran, she wept.

The midday sun had burned away the fog. Doina sat against a tree in a cool and now silent forest. She listened in every direction and knew that she was utterly alone. She buried her face in her hands and released a scream.

Doina grabbed the rifle beside her and threw it against a tree. “I love you, Petre,” she managed through staggered breaths. Her face convulsed in deep grief. “And I didn’t tell you that.”

She stood and turned in the direction of the ambush. “What am I supposed to do now?” she whispered, tears flowing from swollen eyes. She picked up her rifle and hugged it. “Where do I go?”

A PLACE OF BRIGHTNESS
Copyright © 2011, Keith Massey
To purchase the rest of this novel, visit:
www.linguasacrapublishing.com