



*To escape an arranged marriage, Danica runs away from her Texas home. She does not want to live the life of her Croatian immigrant parents. She wants to be an American girl with her modern haircut, clothing, and attitude. Her mother dislikes Danica's desire for education and independence.*

## **DANICA'S DESTINY**

by Rosemary Gard

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A woman is seen from the waist down, walking through a field of tall grass. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved dress with a delicate floral pattern. In her right hand, she carries a large, dark, rectangular suitcase. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of late afternoon or early morning, with a clear blue sky in the background.

ROSEMARY GARD

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## CHAPTER 2

Danica never understood why her mother disliked her so. Mara wasn't terribly loving to the other children, but she wasn't as displeased with them the way she was with Danica. Mara constantly criticized Danica, making fun of her reading and especially when Danica would talk about the stories she had read.

What Danica didn't know was that her mother and father had run away from Petrinja, a place near Zagreb, because Mara was pregnant. Her father was the kind of man who he would have either sent her to a convent or killed Ladra, or possibly both.

Ladra had sold his horse and wagon, borrowed money, and then secretly the couple sailed to Galveston, Texas on an Italian ship which then sailed to South America.

The crossing took two torturous weeks. Mara was one of those women who was quite ill during her pregnancy. Seasick and nauseous with her pregnancy, Mara cursed the rolling ship, Ladra, and God.

When Ladra, with his sick wife, came to Taylor, Texas, they did not find all the Croatians he had expected. There were Germans, Swedes, Czechs, Hispanics, and Blacks. With very little money, Ladra was able to rent a shack from Emil Kurecka, a Czechoslovakian man who had been in Texas a long time and had a large family along with many acres of cotton.

Ladra was heartsick that he had brought his beautiful young wife to a new country only to have her live in a shack. Ladra had to work for Emil Kurecka, to help pay for staying at the shack.

Mara complained constantly, always reminding Ladra who she should have and could have married. Instead, she left Petrinja to come to this hot, awful place where she knew no one. Occasionally one of the Kurecka daughters would come to visit, but Mara was not pleasant to be near.

The months passed and when Mara started her labor, Ladra could find no one at the Kurecka house. They were all away at a wedding.

Ladra tried to comfort Mara, telling her she would be fine. He cooled her face with water and held her hand as he sadly listened to her moaning.

Growing up in Petrinja, Ladra had delivered farm animals, but never a human baby. In fact, he had never seen a baby delivered.

When the time came, Ladra said a prayer and all alone delivered Danica. They hadn't named her yet. He bathed the baby, tied the cord, wrapped her in a sheet, and held her in his arms. It was love at first sight. This was his child. He thought she was beautiful. He kissed her tiny hand with tiny fingers. He thought he saw her smile.

Placing the baby alongside Mara, he said "Evo Cherka...here is a daughter."

Mara never found the baby as enchanting and special as Ladra did. Without realizing it, Mara had always blamed the baby for her unhappiness with Ladra as a husband and starting their life in America living in a shack.

Ladra, noticing how Mara ignored Danica, tried to make up for it by giving the child attention. Danica's first words were not Majka...Mama, but Tata...Dad.

Now, upstairs in the bedroom, Danica looked out the window and saw Anna and the boys playing hide and seek.

Her heart was heavy as it always was when her parents quarreled. She could still hear them saying hurtful things to one another.

She watched the children play for a while, hearing them laughing and squealing the way children do when they play. Even the dog chased after them.

Behind the bed was a carpetbag, used for traveling. It was called a carpetbag because it was made of carpet material. In it, Danica reluctantly put another skirt and blouse. Also her comb and whatever she could get to fit in it, making sure she had room for her book.

When the bottom drawer of the dresser was pulled out all the way, Danica had hidden money there she had kept from the eggs she sold at market. Only Tata knew. He had told her, "You never know when you will need some money of your own."

She slipped the money in the bag before sliding it under the bed.

Late that night, when she was sure everyone was asleep. She slipped out of her bed, ever so slowly, not wanting to wake Anna. The bright moon gave enough light in the room for Danica to get dressed. Again, very slowly and almost silently, she pulled the carpetbag from under the bed. She carried her shoes, walking barefoot down the stairs, careful to miss the two stairs that squeaked when stepped on.

She stood stock-still in the room where they had entertained Gosp. Kurpis and Andra. Danica stood silently and listened. Everything was still. Somewhere she heard an owl hooting. Moonlight shone in the room. On the table, on the crocheted tablecloth, was her father's black rosary. She looked at it and picked it up. Danica kissed it and dropped it in her bag.

Slowly and quietly, she opened the front door. On the porch, she slipped on her opanke...shoes, and walked to the road with the carpetbag held firmly in her hand. In the distance she heard two cats squalling, but nothing else.

She wished she could have kissed her Tata goodbye. She loved him so. Maybe someday she would write to him from where ever she would be.

Unable to sleep, sitting in the barnyard with only his dog as a companion, Danica's father saw, with the aid of the bright moonlight, his baby girl, his darling daughter, his very own Danica, walking out of his life. His little bird was leaving the nest. He didn't call to her, instead he felt the tears roll down his cheeks.

She didn't belong here. He knew Danica had to spread her wings, to be something special. He bent over sobbing into his hands for his little baby girl who he felt he would never see again.

"Dragi Bog...Dear God, watch over my baby." he sobbed.



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