CHAPTER 7

Libearty Sanctuary Zarnesti: Sharing Love and Sheltering Life in Eastern Europe

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First Friends: Lidia, Cristi, Viorel, and Maya

At a 1998 international conference addressing the concern of stray dogs, I met a few people who were working for the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA, now World Animal Protection, or WAP). In the course of conversation, they asked about several Carpathian brown bears they had heard about, bears caged near Brasov. And so it was that, on return to Romania, I went to see about these bears. I did not anticipate how that visit would change the course of my life.

Lidia, Cristi, and Viorel were held near a restaurant at Poiana Brasov, a sport resort, while Maya was held near the Dracula Castle in the city of Bran. Lidia, Cristi, and Viorel were housed on wet concrete in a dirty hole, without a pool, grass, or a single shrub. Nothing around them resembled the forests in which they had once lived. All that they had in their dank pen were beer bottle shards. All of these bears suffered severely from neglect, and were chronically hungry, but Maya suffered more than the others. Maya, alone and miserable, lay lifeless on the concrete floor of her dirty little cage, surrounded by metal bars and cement. When I first saw her, she was so weak that she could barely lift her head. She had been waiting for days for someone to bring food. Forgotten by all, she seemed to wait for life to leave her thin frame. Compassion and horror welled up inside me as I looked into her dull eyes, and I felt a boundless rage toward those who could condemn her to such a painful life and drawn-out death.

Looking into Maya's eyes I could see something of myself. Her eyes reminded me that we are all creatures of God, sisters and brothers on a planet that doesn't belong to us! Human beings are merely caretakers on behalf of the Creator, with the sacred duty of protecting God's beautiful earth, and glorious creatures, charged with handing this amazing creation on to future generations—all of it, not just what is left.

In Maya's eyes I was confronted with the wrongness of what we have done to God's creatures. She had been stolen from her rightful home in the forests, deprived of the company of her own kind. Her teeth and claws had been removed so she could not defend herself against a cruel humanity. She had
been placed in this cage to attract the attention of tourists—and then forgotten. I knelt down next to her miserable little cage, and cried.

Though she could never be returned to the wild without claws and teeth, I promised that I would do everything that I could to help her find a measure of happiness and freedom in her life of captivity. I was determined to keep her alive long enough to offer her a better life. My commitment to Maya extended to Lidia, Cristi, and Viorel, and every day for the next ten years my husband and I (and a few other compassionate friends) travelled more than 100 miles to feed and tend these dependent bears. Living alone and unwell, Maya needed the most care and attention. We included vitamins with her food, and hung a tire from a chain so she might have something to play with in her barren pen. Over time, her health improved and her spirits lifted. She recognized the sound of our car, and when we arrived she would stand up to greet us enthusiastically. Maya reminded us of the value of every soul, the strength of each individual's will to live, and the depth of gratitude that can be felt in the heart of an innocent bear.

In 2001 Maya began to show new signs of depression. I renewed my promise to her that one day she would again have a measure of freedom to run through woods and play in a pool. I asked her to be patient, to hang on; I begged her to trust me, to wait. But Maya had long ago lost her faith in humanity, and she started to self-harm, chewing her right paw almost down to the bone. When I saw the blood on Maya's paw, I understood that she wanted a way out—an escape from the endless boredom of confinement, the lonely hours between metal bars with no companion, no peace, no independence, no small pleasures to mark off another passing day. Despite operations from two wonderful vets, Dr. Liviu Harbuz and Dr. Monika Koller, who helped Maya in those difficult times, Maya died in my arms on March 11, 2002. I will never forget her soft fur and the depth of her sad eyes.

Much to our horror, we arrived one day to find that Viorel had disappeared. I knew that Viorel had been sold and would end up at a "game farm." His skin and fur, complete with head and claws, would become a trophy on some heartless human being's floor, a man who thinks that he can show his toughness by killing a worn-out, tame bear who is trapped in an enclosure and cannot escape his relentless bullets.

I was heartbroken. Maya and Viorel were gone. I had failed to rescue them, and now I could not ever bring them to a place of peace on earth. With Maya and Viorel's passing I was yet more determined to keep my promise to the other three Carpathian bears—to create a sanctuary where they could retire from the misery of confinement and be permanently offered peaceful, spacious, safe surroundings.