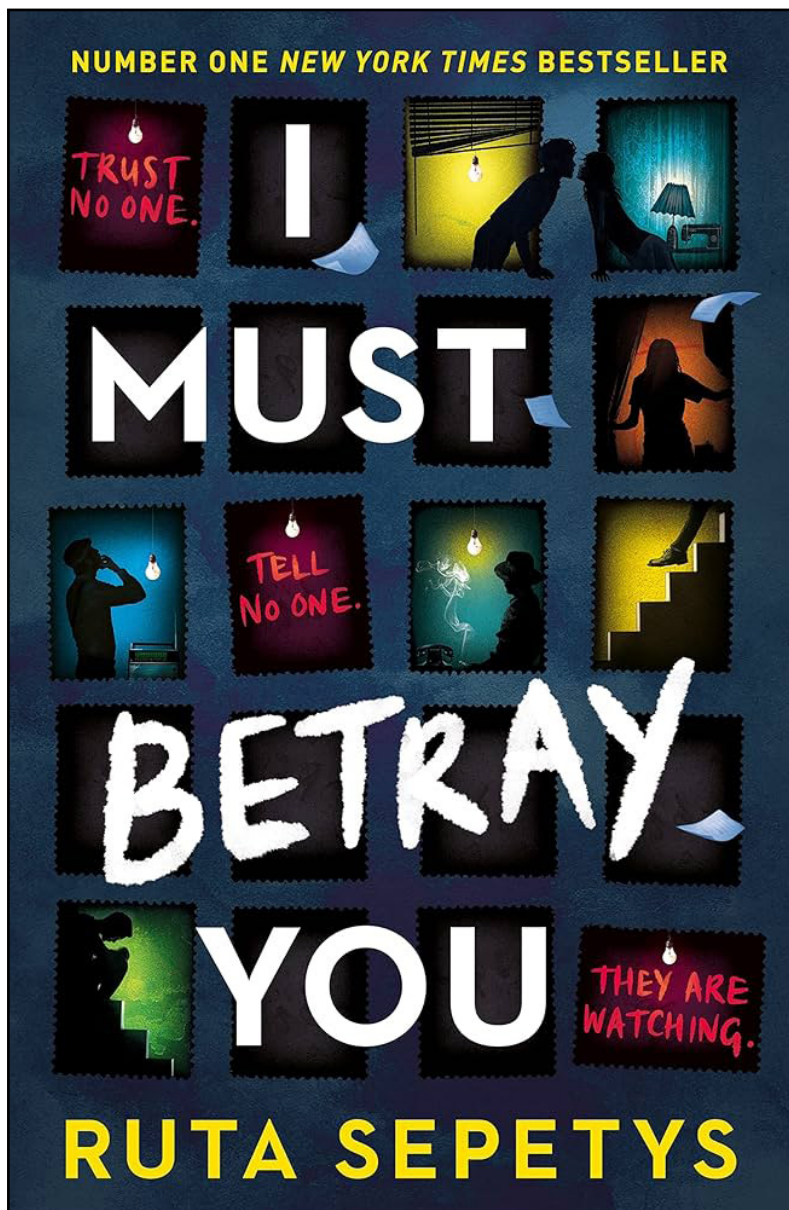
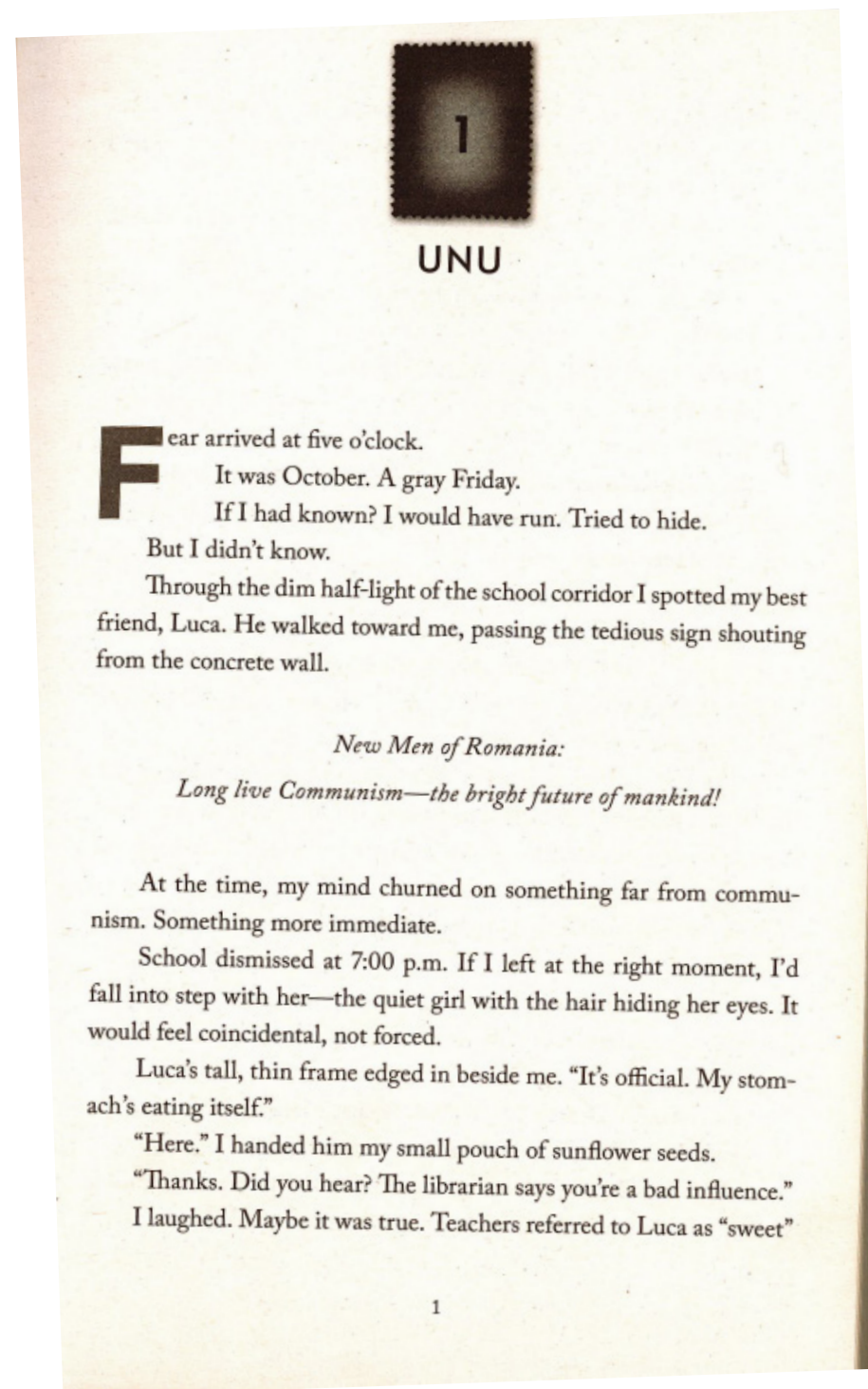




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but said I was sarcastic. If I was the type to throw a punch, Luca was the type to break up a fight. He had an eagerness about him, while I preferred to evaluate and watch from afar.

We paused so Luca could talk to a group of loud girls. I waited, impatient.

"*Hei, Cristian,*" smiled one of the girls. "Nice hair, do you cut it with a kitchen knife?"

"Yeah," I said softly. "Blindfolded." I gave Luca a nod and continued down the hall alone.

"Pupil Florescu!"

The voice belonged to the school director. He lingered in the hallway, speaking with a colleague. Comrade Director shifted his weight, trying to appear casual.

Nothing was ever casual.

In class, we sat erect. Comrade Instructor lectured, bellowing at our group of forty students. We listened, stock still and squinting beneath the sickly light. We were marked "present" in attendance but were often absent from ourselves.

Luca and me, we wore navy suits and ties to *liceu*. All boys did. Girls, navy pinafores and white hair bands. Embroidered badges sewn onto our uniforms identified which school we attended. But in the fall and winter, our school uniforms weren't visible. They were covered by coats, knitted mufflers, and gloves to combat the bitter cold of the unheated cement building.

Cold and dark. Knuckles aching. It's hard to take notes when you can't feel your fingers. It's difficult to concentrate when the electricity snaps off.

The director cleared his throat. "Pupil Florescu," he repeated. "Proceed to the office. Your father has left a message for you."

My father? My father never came to school. I rarely saw him. He worked twelve-hour shifts, six days a week at a furniture factory.

A slithering knot coiled inside my stomach. "Yes, Comrade Director."

I proceeded to the office as I was told.

Could outsiders understand? In Romania, we did as we were told.

We were told a lot of things.

We were told that we were all brothers and sisters in communism. Addressing each other with the term "comrade" reinforced that we were all equal, with no social classes to divide us. Good brothers and sisters in communism followed rules.

I pretended to follow rules. I kept things to myself, like my interest in poetry and philosophy. I pretended other things too. I pretended to lose my comb, but really just preferred my hair spiky. I pretended not to notice when girls were looking at me. And this one—I pretended that studying English was a commitment to my country.

"Words are weapons. I'll be able to fight our American and British enemies with words, not only guns."

That's what I said.

Our weapons course was called Preparing Youth for Defending the Country. We began training with guns at age fourteen in school. Is that old or young compared to other countries? I remember jotting that question in my secret notebook.

In reality, my desire to speak English had nothing to do with fighting our enemies. How many enemies did we have, anyway? I honestly didn't know. The truth was, English class was full of smart, quiet girls. Girls I pretended not to notice. And if I spoke English, I could better understand song lyrics that I heard illegally on Voice of America broadcasts.

Illegal, yes. Many things were illegal in Romania—including my thoughts and my notebook. But I was convinced I could keep everything hidden. After all, blankets of gloom are thick and heavy. Good for covering things, right?

I proceeded down the dark hallway to the office.
I was an idiot.
I just didn't know it yet.

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