



CHAPTER 1

A cool breeze swept through the treetops as Michla stood outside the tiny wooden post office. In one hand she held the letter, its words scrawled in Schleman's unmistakable Cyrillic script. In her other was the money that had accompanied it—well-worn currency from the United States, smoothed flat from the long journey the letter had taken from New York to the village of Naroulia where she lived. Almost two hundred dollars in total. She'd never seen even a single dollar from the United States and had no way of knowing how much it was really worth. She only knew it was enough to pay for passage on a ship to the United States for her and her two sons.

“America,” she whispered, as a sense of sadness welled up inside. “It is finally time to go.”

After two years, filled with long nights yearning for the time when she and Schleman would once again be reunited and equally long days wishing for her sons to be once again with their father, at last the day had arrived when they could begin the journey and complete their dream of being together again. Of living in a country that offered them safety and a bright future for their children. And now she found the moment wasn't at all what she'd expected.

She was glad that she and Schleman would be together again, as a husband and wife should be. And equally glad that their sons would be with their father. But getting all of them together again as a family would come at an expense. One beyond the cost of passage on a ship or the anxiety of settling in a new land.

From the time of her birth until the day the letter arrived from Schleman, Michla had lived in the Gomel and Minsk regions of Belarus, which then was part of the Russian Empire. Now the prospect of leaving Russia and traveling to America, of going beyond the familiar confines of the region, of leaving the only home she'd known, left her nostalgic, anxious, and already homesick.

Not so much a longing for the place, perhaps, as for the memories. Of growing up in Mazyr, forty miles to the northwest, the town where she was born. And of Vishnyeva, still farther to the north, where her parents lived. She'd been separated from them, too, but they were only

a few hours away by train. If she went to America, she might never see them again. Returning would be impossible for her. Or for any of them. They would become Americans, through and through, with no possibility of living in Russia again.

Not that living in America will be a bad thing, she thought as she tucked the letter and money back into the envelope. There's certainly nothing here for us now.

Since the death of Tsar Alexander III, life had become unbearable for Jews in the Russian Empire. Not only were economic conditions deplorable but persecution and sporadic waves of ethnic cleansing made life treacherous. Even in Michla's native Belarus, roaming bands of Russians attacked them, indiscriminately dragging Jews from their homes and shops and from the streets. Sometimes beating them. Sometimes killing them. Sometimes burning their homes. And all of it with the approval of the current tsar, Nicholas II.

Three days later, Michla took the boys, Nochem and Mottle, on the train and traveled north, toward Vishnyeva. If she was going to America—and she most certainly was—she could not leave without telling her parents. More than that, she would need their help.

As the train passed through Mazyr, she remembered the day she and Schleman married. It was a wonderful day and it seemed the entire town had turned out for the ceremony. They danced and sang and laughed all day and into the night. And the thought of that night

brought a smile to her face. Schleman had been so nervous. She would have been, too, if she'd stopped to think about what would happen after everyone was gone and they were alone in the bedroom. But she pushed it from her mind and only thought about it when the moment came, and then she wasn't nervous but excited. He, apparently, had been thinking of it all day and as the evening grew late kept telling their cousins, Simon Cohen and Shura Guzman, who were playing the violin and providing the music, to play yet one more song. And he continued to swing her around and insist on one more dance, laughing and singing with the music the entire time. Later she learned just how anxious he had been about the married things they would do when they were alone.

It seemed like such a long time ago and memories of the years they'd been together filled her mind, but as the train continued north past Mazyr her thoughts moved on to her childhood and growing up with Bella, her sister, in their father's house. They played and laughed together, and they dreamed together, too. At first of marrying and living the life of a wife and mother. Then of moving beyond the Pale of Settlement—the region of the Russian Empire, including Belarus, where Jews were allowed legally to reside—of attending the Bestuzhev Courses in St. Petersburg, the highest schooling offered for Russian women. Michla was certain neither of them really believed that dream would come true, but they never spoke of their doubts, only of their optimism and hope that one day they would be educated and equipped

for a life beyond the confines of Russian limitations. And now that life was opening before her. Not in St. Petersburg and not in Russia, but in America where—

Just then, Nochem spoke up. “I’m hungry.”

Michla opened an oversized bag made of heavy fabric and pulled out a small loaf of bread. She pinched off a piece and handed it to him, then gave some to Mottle. They leaned against her, one seated on either side, and slowly chewed the bread. She was hungry, too, but she would wait before eating. It wasn’t that far to where they were going. Not today. On the trip to America, that would be different. But for now she could last a day without food.

Late that afternoon they arrived on the outskirts of Vishnyeva, a town of modest size located halfway between Minsk and Vilnius. The train slowed as it clattered gently past a stockyard and tannery, then along rows of houses that lined the dirt streets on either side of the tracks. As Michla let her eyes scan over the settlement, she again saw what she’d always noticed about it—that all of the structures were made of wood, unpainted and weathered to a gray hue that gave the place a bleak appearance, as if the town were forever trapped in the overcast twilight of winter, even on a pleasant summer day.

In a few minutes the station came into view, and as the train slowed along the platform Michla saw her father, Mikael. He made his way down the platform, timing his steps to the speed of the train,

reaching a point opposite the door to their car when the train came to a stop.

His payot—the magnificent dark curls hanging from his temples—protruded from beneath his black broad-brimmed hat and dangled past his ears to his jaw. His beard fell across the collar of his jacket and tumbled toward his chest. *He looks like a rabbi*, she thought. And indeed he was.

As chief rabbi at the synagogue near the center of town, Mikael was responsible for the care and direction of the region's largest congregation. He'd held that position since not long after Michla and Schleman had married.

With Mikael that day was Zvi Meltzer, the cantor rabbi—the *chazzan*—who acted as Mikael's assistant, helping with services at the synagogue. In his official duties, he led the congregation in worship, guiding them in the prayers and readings. Unofficially, he was Mikael's best friend.

Her sons in tow, Michla made her way up the aisle to the door of the train car and down the steps to the platform. Mikael stepped forward to greet her. Michla collapsed against him, her head resting on his chest, her arms wrapped around his waist. "Oh, Papa," she sighed. "I have missed you."

He gave her a hug. "And I have missed you."

After a moment, Mikael pulled away and knelt beside her, taking the boys in his arms. "You two have grown a meter since I saw you."

“You say that all the time,” Nochem giggled.

“And each time I say it,” Mikael laughed, “it becomes truer than before.”

Michla greeted Rabbi Meltzer, then they slowly walked up the platform, through the station building, and around to a horse-drawn wagon that was parked on the street side. Rabbi Meltzer put her bag in back and helped her up to the seat while Mikael lifted his grandsons and set them in the wagon. Then Rabbi Meltzer got in with the boys, Mikael sat on the seat with Michla, and they started toward the house.

The day they arrived was market day, when farmers from the surrounding countryside came to town to sell their produce and livestock. Baskets filled with vegetables and cages of chickens lined the street near the train station. Interspersed were pots full of wonderful things to eat and tables covered with quilts and clothes made by the people who lived in town. The crowd was large and the sound of it rose around them, all but drowning out the plodding clop of the horse’s hooves and the rusted creak of the wagon wheels turning beneath them.

Although she’d never lived there, the town had always felt like home to her and now, as she absorbed the sights and sounds of it once more, the same sense of sadness she’d felt that day at the post office welled up inside her. *This may be the last time I see this town. The last time I see their faces or hear their voices. And the last time I*

smell the aroma of their presence. A lump formed in her throat but she swallowed hard, slipped her arm in the crook of Mikael's elbow, and leaned against his shoulder.



Late that evening, after the boys were asleep, Michla sat at the dining table with Mikael and Goldy, her mother. Michla reached into her pocket and took out the letter, then handed it to her father. "This is why I came to see you."

Goldy reached across the table and gave Michla's arm a squeeze. "I knew there must be more to it than merely a visit. And whatever it is, you did the right thing coming to us."

Mikael read the letter, then handed it to Goldy. Tears filled her eyes as she scanned over it. "I prayed this day would never come," she whispered softly. "And I prayed it would come quickly." She laid the letter on the table and wiped her eyes.

Mikael gestured to the letter. "And he sent you the money?"

"Yes, I have it in a safe place." Michla looked over at him. "He thinks it should be more than enough for the trip."

Mikael nodded. "It should be."

"But where do I begin? Where do I buy the tickets for the ship? And what ship do we take?"

"Relax," Goldy patted her arm once more. "One thing at a time."

“You can’t purchase tickets until you get to the ship’s office,” Mikael explained. “So you will have to wait to buy them until you get to Libau.”

Michla frowned. “Libau?”

“Yes.”

“In Latvia?”

“Yes.”

“Why not Riga?”

“You must go to Libau. Just as Schleman did.”

“But why Libau?”

“The authorities in Libau are...more sympathetic.”

“Oh.” Michla looked away with a worried expression. “That is a long way,” she said softly.

Mikael noticed the look in her eye and heard the concern in her voice. “I will go with you.” He made the offer without checking first with Goldy.

“But we can’t make it in a day.”

“No, we can’t,” Mikael conceded. “But we can stay with Semyon Ginsberg and his wife. I will make the arrangements.”

“They are in Lithuania. I thought we were going to Latvia.”

“We must go through Lithuania first. To get to Latvia.” He smiled at her. “I will help you. Don’t worry. You will see.”

“You will write and make the arrangements?”

“Certainly he will,” Goldy replied. She cast a glance in his direction

as she turned to Michla. “He will travel with you and the boys as far as Libau. It will be fun.”

Michla nodded with a wan smile. “Perhaps you could come to America with us? Both of you.”

Mikael shook his head. “No. Our place is here. We must care for our people.”

Michla couldn’t help but notice the sadness in her mother’s eyes. As if she knew something terrible awaited them. Something horrible and unspeakable. Something inescapable.

Their fate, Michla mused silently. She knows their fate already.

Schleman had warned her of what was coming. “The Germans will return. And the end for those of us who remain will be worse than any our people have ever known.”

She hadn’t understood him then, and even now she wasn’t sure what he meant. But her mother knew. And if her mother knew, so also did her father, though he never spoke about it. Never said *anything* about the Russians or the Germans or anyone else. He was careful, she realized. Cautious. As were many his age.

Sitting at the table that night with her parents, a foreboding sense of doom settled over Michla. The threat Schleman had warned her about—whatever that threat might be—was real. And it was not merely a threat to her parents or to her or to those who remained in the region. It was a threat to her children. Nochem and Mottle were in danger. Serious danger. She didn’t know what it was. She

didn't know how things would happen. But she knew that whatever was going to happen, it was going to be even more real than any of them could imagine. And with that realization came the urge to flee right then. To get up from the table, take her children, and go.

"Perhaps we should go tonight," she suggested.

"Not now," Mikael replied. "We must make arrangements."

"The Ginsbergs will not give us a place to sleep if we arrive unexpected?"

"It is not them we are concerned about."

"Then who?"

"The Bulak-Balakhovich."

Michla frowned. "The volunteers? I have never heard of them."

"Not merely volunteers," Mikael replied. "But the Bulak-Balakhovich. A volunteer army."

"You never know who might be watching," Goldy added. "You must not arouse suspicions."

"Watching?" Michla asked, still not understanding. "People are watching us?"

"It will be fine," Mikael said with a smile. "We will go in a few weeks. After I have made the arrangements. Then we will go. When all is in order."

"That will be soon enough?"

He nodded. "Yes. It will be soon enough."



Three weeks later, Michla traveled by train with her father and her sons northward across Belarus and into Lithuania. The border crossing went without a problem, their papers permitted it without restriction, and they spent the night at Vilnius with the Ginsbergs.

The following day, they continued north to Klaipeda, a town on the coast of the Baltic Sea. Neither Michla nor her sons had ever seen the sea, and the sight of it, with its seemingly unending expanse, made her realize how enormous their adventure was.

“It’s so big,” she said as she stared out at the waves.

“And that is not even the Atlantic,” Mikael noted.

“I know,” Michla sighed, though she hadn’t thought of it until then.

“Don’t worry,” Mikael said. “A journey is taken one step at a time. Not all at once. You only have to do what’s next.”

“And what is next?”

“We wait...for nighttime.”

They rested that evening at the home of Esther Kopel, an elderly woman who lived alone in an apartment above a butcher’s shop. Michla had never met her before, but Esther seemed to know Mikael very well and she doted on Nochem and Mottle with chocolate babka and rugelach.

That night, they traveled by truck to Būtingē, a rural community just south of the Latvian border. A slender gray-haired man met them

there, hid them, and then took them into Latvia. They traveled beneath the load of a freight wagon that carried stacks of lumber, the timbers cut and arranged to form a hollow cavity in the center of the load with just enough room for Mikael, Michla, and her sons.

It was late the next day when they arrived at Libau. All the ships' offices were closed. Mikael found a room in a boardinghouse where they could have dinner and spend the night. The room had only one bed, which Mikael insisted Michla and her sons should share.

"And where will you sleep?" she asked.

"Over here," Mikael grinned, pointing to an overstuffed chair in the corner.

"You cannot sleep all night sitting in a chair."

"I have done it many times before," he insisted. "And besides, I will return home to my bed."

"The ship will not have beds?"

"Not like the one you will sleep on tonight."

The following day they went to the office of the Russian American Line, a shipping line that was part of the East Asiatic Company. Mikael insisted it was the best. "They make a trip to New York almost every week," he explained. "And not one of their ships has had any trouble."

Trouble. Michla hadn't thought about trouble at sea. Ships sometimes had trouble. Boilers exploded. Engines failed. And icebergs. She'd known about all of these. She just hadn't thought of them. Or maybe she didn't want to think about them. And anyway, there was

nothing she could do about it. She had to go to New York, and travel by ship was the only way.

After examining her papers—a birth certificate and immunization card—the clerk at the shipping office issued Michla tickets for passage to New York on the *SS Czar*. It had arrived two days before and was preparing for departure the next morning.

The clerk nodded to Nochem and Mottle. “You may board now, if you like. We have a full complement of passengers for this trip and if you wait until tomorrow you will stand in line all day.”

“Thank you,” Mikael replied. “We need to return for their luggage.”

“The crew will be there all day.” The clerk paused to scribble a note, then handed it to him. “This is the location of the *Czar*. Simply show up at that berth.”

Michla looked over at Mikael. “What about Schleman?”

Mikael had a puzzled look. “What about him?”

“How will he know to meet us?”

“I will send a message to him.”

Michla looked perplexed. “You can do that?”

“Yes, I will send a message to him in New York. He will be waiting for you.”

“He will know where to find us?”

Mikael smiled reassuringly. “He will know.”

With travel set, Michla, Mikael, and the boys returned to the

boardinghouse to collect their luggage, then loaded it onto a livery wagon for the trip across town to the docks.

Two blocks up the street, they stopped at a bakery and purchased three loaves of bread, then returned to the wagon and continued on their way. Tears filled Michla's eyes as they wound through the busy streets.

"This is really happening?" she asked.

Mikael nodded. "You are about to be on your way to New York."

"I am scared." Michla leaned against him as tears streamed down her face. "Really scared."

"You will be fine," Mikael patted her shoulder. "You will board the ship now. That will give you an opportunity to get settled before the ship gets full. Then you and the boys can eat the bread for dinner. But make certain you save some of it for tomorrow. The ship will feed you at least one meal, but not until after you are under way."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is simple, actually. It only seems more."

"Board the ship. I can do that."

"Yes. You can do the rest, too, but you needn't think about it now."

"The rest?"

"Getting settled in America. Schleman has been there two years already. He will know what to do."

"All I have to do is board the ship?"

"Right. After that, the rest is simply enduring the crossing."

Michla wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands. “Enduring?” she asked with a worried look.

“You will be at sea,” Mikael explained. “Every day will be the same.”

“You mean we will get bored.”

“Nochem and Mottle will.”

“And I?”

“You are their mother.” He grinned. “A parent’s life is never boring.”

Before long they arrived at the dock and located the berth where the *Czar* was moored. A porter took their luggage aboard and stored it, then returned with a receipt and handed it to her. Mikael paid him for his help.

He turned to face her. “Well, I guess this is it.”

“I miss you already.” Michla rested her head on his chest.

“I know.” He put his arms around her shoulders. “But this is the right thing to do. And it is what you must do. You cannot remain here.”

“But what about you and Mama?”

“Our end was chosen when I became a rabbi.”

“Surely, they need rabbis in America.”

“No doubt, they need many rabbis in America. But my congregation is in Vishnyeva.” He squeezed her tighter. “Yours is in New York.”

Michla looked up at him and for the first time in her life saw

tears in his eyes. She brushed them away with her fingertips, then buried her face against him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

They stood there a moment, holding on to each other, both of them knowing this was the last time they would be together, then he whispered to her, “I love you.”

“I love you, Papa.” Michla’s body shook as she sobbed. “I don’t want to let go of you.”

“I know, but it is time for you to go. And Nochem and Mottle need your attention.”

Absorbed in her own anguish, Michla had lost track of time and realized she hadn’t any idea where her boys might be. She jerked around to check, her eyes wide and alert with fear. Almost at once, she caught sight of them standing a short distance down the dock, tossing pebbles into the water.

“They are safe.” Mikael answered the question he knew was on her heart. “I have kept an eye on them.”

And that, Michla knew, was the one thing she would miss most. The watchful eye of her father. She would be far away from him now. First on board the ship, then at sea, and finally—too finally it seemed—in America.

Michla gave him one last hug, gathered up her heavy handbag, and called for Nochem and Mottle. Together, they started up the gangway, the boys in front, Michla urging them forward.

On the ship's main deck, she turned toward the dock, located Mikael standing right where she'd left him, and gave him a wave. He waved in return and she lingered there a moment, then turned and started down the steps toward the steerage-class quarters.