

Chapter One

Schaad Joseph

Joseph began to feel afraid. The voices of his friends grew fainter and fainter, until Joseph could no longer hear them at all. The frosty air prickled his throat and nostrils like pine needles. The tips of his ears tingled.

At first, he had been able to keep up with the bigger boys. *Cheder* had let out early, well before sundown, because tonight began the Sabbath. Everyone had to be finished with their work so that they could greet *shabbos* when the sun went down. After a week of sitting on hard benches all day, repeating Hebrew after the *melamed*, one's legs felt cramped with the pent-up need to run and play. So, as soon as the *melamed* dismissed his class, Joseph and his friends raced out into the wintry fresh air.

“Bendit!” Joseph stopped to call, much as he disliked letting his friend and the other boys know he had fallen so far behind. Joseph was eight years old, and he was small for his age. Always, he felt, he lagged behind, even with boys his own age. He always had to struggle to keep up.

Now he was in the woods surrounding his village of Schaad. Mama had warned him not to go beyond Schaad's outskirts. There were dangers beyond the tight-knit village, where people were like a second family, a family whose members helped one another, where no one was ever alone. Away from the family's embrace, the world was a strange and cold place. Paths criss-crossed the hard earth, disappearing under brush.

Crrrack! Joseph jumped back, trembling. His mouth went dry. The soldiers Mama cautioned his older brother Nathan about! Could it be? Had the soldiers of a man called the czar come to

seize him, force him into an army of stolen Jewish boys, from which he'd never return?

Joseph closed his eyes and breathed deeply when he saw a large animal, perhaps a mole, lumber across a broken twig. How scared he had been! So scared that the snapping of a twig sounded like a thunderclap.

Nevertheless, Joseph had to find his way back to the village. What time was it? Mama would be worried. He scanned the sky and then he saw, peeking between the tops of some trees, a thin plume of smoke. Guided by the chimney smoke, he made his way back to his village.

When he passed the abandoned house of the Aronofsky family, he knew he was almost there. He glanced at the shuttered windows on the tiny wooden house and wondered how the family fared in America, where they had gone. The Aronofsky family was only the latest to leave for America. Every few months, it seemed, another family left for America. People called it America Fever. Even Joseph's Papa had caught America Fever and left Schaad three years before.

Now, as the stalls of the market square came into view, Joseph forgot his fear. He knew he was home. He loved the marketplace with its people and activity. It was a large one, as Lithuanian villages went. He knew it so well—as well as he knew the clasp of Grandfather's large, dry hand around his: the women, bell-shaped in their many petticoats and skirts; the men in their tall, mud-caked boots; the horses waiting patiently in front of their wagons. He loved the good smells of steamy baked potatoes, of cinnamon rolls, of apples. And the clip-clop of horses' hooves, the booming voice of the pickle man.

And here was Mama, by her stall. Her cheeks were as round and red as two crisp apples. Her kindly blue eyes sparkled, and her chapped lips curved in a smile. She reached out her hands to

Joseph. Her hands in her worn gloves felt icy. Her hair was covered by a faded scarf tied at the back of her head.

She stepped from behind her stall in the market square. Its counter was lined with fat white candles. A sweet-salty whiff came from a pail by its side. Way at the bottom, two limp herrings lay in a puddle.

Joseph helped Mama tuck the candles into a box. All around them men and women were moving about quickly on the snowy ground. The snow sparkled like glittery powder. The people worked swiftly, packing away their eggs, cheeses, sacks of flour. Some tied baskets of beets into horse-drawn wagons. Soon, few people were left in the square.

“Wait, wait,” Mama called to the grocer as he was about to load the last of the carrots aboard his wagon.

She pointed to a large bunch of carrots, then to some beets, then to a couple of potatoes. She tipped her little cloth purse into her hand and a few coins, her profit from a day’s selling, tumbled into her palm. Out of it, she chose the largest one, then smaller ones and gave them to the grocer.

The little collection of coins in her hand was much smaller now. Joseph glanced at Mama, thinking of the long hours she had stood out in the cold, selling her candles and herring.

Joseph picked up the pail of herring while Mama took hold of the box of candles.

“Now we go to the Levins,” she said. “I only wish I could buy a nice, fat chicken for them, as well as these few vegetables.”

The Levins were neighbors in the village. They had a little girl, all smiles and laughter, with whom Joseph liked to play.

“Good *Shabbos*,” a woman called out as she passed. Her long skirt swirled the snow from the ground in a wispy spiral.

“Good *Shabbos*,” Mama replied. She glanced at the wintry sky.

As they neared the Levins’ house, Mama paused and turned to Joseph. A serious expression came over her face.

“We must be very quiet, Joseph,” she said. “The vegetables I bought were for them. We will leave it there so they will not know where they came from.”

“But why, Mama?” Joseph asked.

“They must not know because they must not feel in debt toward us,” Mama explained.

“Can we hide the vegetables somewhere, and give it to them later?” Joseph asked. “I want to play with Shayna.”

“Not today,” Mama replied and resumed her walking.

Mama sighed. “Our poor friends. Ever since Mr. Levin came down with that cough, he cannot work, and he must stay in bed all day. And Mrs. Levin, with her baby twins and Shayna to take care of! It is a hard life, harder than ours. You probably don’t remember Mr. Levin’s brother, the one who went to America. He helps, when he can.”

There it was again! America. The Golden Land. It was on everyone’s tongue and in everyone’s thoughts. It was a faraway place, America. A place full of cowboys with big hats, riding galloping horses over the plain.

Soon the Levins’ house came into sight. The wooden boards that barely held up the roof seemed more weather-beaten every time Joseph saw them. The boards were patched together, where leaks had been mended. A thread-like wisp of smoke rose from a tumbledown chimney.

Mama kept clear of the tiny house's one window, bending low and off to the side, and placed the beets, carrots and potatoes in a basket at the side of the door. As soon as she put the basket down, an inner warmth lit her, as if she'd forgotten all about the cold. She smiled. Mama had always taught Joseph and the children that it was a joy to give, that when you did so, you were filling one of God's most important commandments.

Joseph hung in back of Mama. He felt a sneeze coming on, but held it back, to keep quiet, as Mama had told him to do.

As they turned to go, Joseph heard Shayna's voice, singing a Yiddish tune, like the one the traveling *klezmers* sang when they came to the village. The song asked a riddle: "Pretty little girl, good little girl, I will ask you a clever riddle. What is higher than a house? What is swifter than a mouse?"

Joseph knew the answer, and the merry notes bubbled up into his throat. He forced them back, mindful of Mama's request he be quiet. Oh, but how he wished to join in! What harm if he sang the answer to the riddle back? Only Shayna would hear, not her mother and father.

And before he knew it, Joseph sang out: "Smoke is higher than a house, The cat is swifter than the mouse."

Instantly, Shayna was outside the door. "Joseph! I thought that was your voice!" she cried delightedly.

Joseph heard Mama gasp. Her face had collapsed like a fallen cake.

"Oh, Good *Shabbos*, Joseph, Hannah," Mrs. Levin was at the door.

She looked at the basket at her feet. "Oh, Hannah, for us?"

Mama's face turned redder than the beets in her basket, and she stammered, "Those carrots looked so good, and I bought some for my family."

Mama shrugged, with a stiff smile on her face. "Then I realized I had bought too much for us."

Mrs. Levin picked up the basket tenderly. "Thank you, Hannah. You are so kind to buy it for us. I know you have little for yourself and your own family."

Mama and Joseph walked to their own house in silence. Joseph hardly dared look up at Mama's face. Mama rarely scolded; she didn't have to. Joseph knew when he had disappointed her, and the hurt from that was greater than any Mama could inflict herself. He stole a glance. Her face looked sad.

"I am sorry, Mama," he said.

Mama looked thoughtful for a moment. She didn't answer right away.

"I know you are sorry, Joseph," Mama said at last. "But you can learn from this. It is important to control your actions. To give is *tzedakah*, an act of justice and charity. But the best *tzedakah* is the kind where the receiver does not know who the giver is. That way, the receiver will not feel indebted. No one should ever feel beholden, for we are all responsible for one another,"

It was a short walk to the Goodmans' home. The Goodman house looked much like the Levins'. Joseph saw the familiar slant of the roof and the wooden boards slapped together, the top one falling partway over the one below. A hen dawdled in a patch of ground bare of snow.

Inside was a large room, and only one room. There were two beds, a crib, a table and six wooden chairs. A pair of brass candlesticks stood on the table. A stove in the corner gave off a warm glow and an aroma that made Joseph's mouth water. A box hung

from a nail in a corner; it was for contributions for *tzedakah*. Every Jewish home in the village had one.

The smells were so wonderful on Friday afternoon. There was the rich, moist aroma of chicken soup and the smoky aroma of gefilte fish. The fragrance of cherry strudel seeped from the oven.

Mama glanced at Joseph, a kindly look on her face. She handed him a coin. Joseph knew what to do with it. He dropped it into the copper box the Goodman family kept for *tzedakah*. Every Friday, a member of the family put a coin in the box. At Passover and other holidays, they gave it to a needy family to buy wine and food. Being the person to deposit the coin was an important deed, an honor.

As he dropped the coin into the box, Mama smiled at him. And Joseph felt better. Letting go of the coin allowed him to let go of the shame he had felt at the Levins' house. One could make mistakes, but they could be redeemed by a sincere heart and a giving hand. Joseph felt redeemed—somewhat—in Mama's and his own eyes.

Chapter Two

The Sabbath Dessert and Papa's Picture

Ruth

Since before noon, Ruth had been busy at work. Before the sun set and *shabbos* began, there were potatoes to peel, fish to clean and grind, the floor to sweep, water to draw, and four-year-old Frieda to bathe in the wooden tub.

There had been no lessons today. There was no time, for there was much to be done to prepare for the Sabbath. Ruth often wondered what went on inside the *cheder*, which Nathan and Joseph and the boys of the village attended. Girls learned at home. Mama had little time to teach Ruth to read and write in Yiddish. Luckily, *tante* Raisa, an older woman whom everyone called *tante* or “aunt,” came to the house a few days a week to spend a couple of hours giving lessons.

Now, Ruth snipped bits of dried dill and tossed them into the bubbling soup. Their brother, Nathan, who at twelve was the oldest of the four children, stoked the stove with wood. Frieda, the youngest one, sat in a corner playing with a rag Grandfather had twisted and tied into a doll.

Mama set her barrel down and sank into a chair. Her arms hung by her sides, and her feet splayed out in front of her. She closed her eyes.

Ruth worried about Mama sometimes. It was difficult with Papa gone. Mama had so much to do. She often looked tired.

“Joseph,” Ruth called over her shoulder. “Set the table. Soon it will be time to light the candles.” Joseph took a stack of dishes from a shelf.

In an instant Mama was on her feet. She threw her tiredness away like the core of a used-up cabbage. How swiftly she moved from the stove to the table, the table to the stove, again and again. She disappeared behind a curtain attached from the ceiling and around her bed. When she came out again, she wore not her faded everyday dress, but a fine, black silk one, her Sabbath best. Her scarf was gone, and in its place sat tall the glistening brown *sheitel*, the wig she wore on special occasions. Ruth marveled at her.

When the last ray of light fell below the windowsill, the Sabbath meal looked as if it had been put on the table with time to spare. The family seated themselves. At the head of the table, a chair remained empty. That was Papa's chair, where he would have sat had he been here and not in America. Although he was not here, his place was kept for him nevertheless, out of respect.

Soon Mama was covering her eyes over the candlelight and saying the *shabbos* blessings. She asked God's blessing upon Papa, that he be kept safe in America, so far away. She asked God's blessing for Nathan, praying to keep him safe here in Lithuania. She prayed for Joseph to become a good man, a learned man, who would always remember his people. She prayed that one day she and Papa would find Ruth a husband, a man who was both learned in the Talmud and kind. And she prayed that the time would soon come when little Frieda would see her Papa again.

Then a glowing happiness came over her face. All troubles disappeared to be replaced by the special Sabbath peace.

Joseph

The best part of *shabbos* was that Grandfather came to visit. He lived alone in a little house at the other end of the village. Grandmother Rachel, for whom Ruth was named, had died ten years ago, shortly before Ruth was born.

It was Grandfather who brought each of the children to school on the first day—the school where the teachers wore long black

coats and long black beards. Grandfather was a carpenter. He also drew things. Joseph loved being with Grandfather. Grandfather was so patient. He understood Joseph better than anyone in the world.

“I’m a little man,” Grandfather often said of himself. He meant that he was short. But to Ruth and to all his grandchildren he was tall. He had a soft, gray beard and bright blue eyes like Mama’s. He walked with a slow, steady gait. On Saturday after services in the synagogue, he walked home beside Joseph. Along the way he pointed out different kinds of flowers and plants. He loved the natural world.

Joseph’s most special times with Grandfather were the times Grandfather showed him how to draw. Holding a pencil in his hand, Grandfather would sketch the flowers that abounded in the forests around Schaad.

“When you draw something, you really come to know it,” Grandfather would say.

Joseph would take the pencil in his own hand and try to copy what Grandfather had drawn. Then his eye would alight on a violet growing wild, and he would try to sketch it on his own.

“That is a good likeness,” Grandfather would say encouragingly as he examined a drawing of a rosebush. “Now notice how the petals peek from the bud, like they can’t wait to come out.”

On this *shabbos*, Grandfather had brought a guest with him.

“This is Reb Friedberg. He is from Romania.”

The Goodmans often shared their *shabbos* table with a guest, sometimes a traveler passing through the town, sometimes a student on his way to the famous yeshiva in the nearby town of Telshe. *Reb* meant rabbi, but was a term of respect for all Jewish men.