



## THE ROAD DIPPED AGAIN.

And there he was, way down at the bottom of the hill . . . racing along as if nothing else mattered.

“Benyomin!” I shouted so hard my throat almost ripped wide open. But he kept right on going. “Benyomin!” I screamed loud enough to wake the dead. But the wind snatched my words away. “Cossacks!” My voice sounded strange and shrill. “Get home!” I shrieked.

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# CHAPTER

## 1

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I'll never forget that cold afternoon. It's fixed in my head as clearly as Beryl's face and the warm sweet smell of his bakery. Such a smell could fill an empty stomach!

I was heading there right after *heder*—itching to tell him the trick we'd played on our teacher and hoping for a bagel to fill myself up a little. But Lila, a neighbor lady, came rushing up to me on the road.

"Fivel, I heard there's a man at your house." She leaned in too close, smelling strongly of garlic. "Do you know who it is?" Lila always wanted the gossip. So even if I *had* known, I might not have told her. But the only man I could think of was Pa. My heart leaped at the thought. Was it possible?

"I'd better go see" was all I said. Then I raced down the road so fast my own breath had to run to catch up with me.

Pa. That one word thundered through my whole body. Maybe I'd finally meet him. Maybe he had come for us *himself*. I ran so hard, the heels of my feet hit me from behind. Maybe, maybe, we'd soon be with him in America.

I burst into my house and stopped short.

A tall well-dressed man in city clothes was talking to Ma. We'd never had such a rich-looking man in our house before. And no one had ever stepped onto our hard dirt floor with such shiny leather shoes. He was speaking Polish, not Yiddish—our Jewish language. And he did not have the full beard of a Jew. So it wasn't Pa after all. Disappointment weighed on my chest, heavy as a pile of stones. It took me some time to even care enough to listen or wonder why he was here.

"Please understand, Mrs. Myzel." I heard him say. "All of us will benefit." He stroked the side of his nose with his pointer finger. "You, most of all, with one less mouth to feed." He gave a stiff smile showing mostly teeth. Ma set her lips firmly and shook her head. The man frowned. "Mrs. Myzel, as you well know, life does not look promising for Jews in Poland. So far, 1920 does not bode well." He drew a folded paper from his coat pocket, snapped it open, and offered it to her—"Here is my name and address"—not knowing that Ma couldn't read. "You must realize that I can give him a much better life than *this*." He shot an ugly look around our one-room house and down at the hard dirt floor. It made me want to kick him.

Ma didn't take the paper. "Thank you for your concern." She spoke in Polish, clipping each word. "But we're managing." Her face was rigid as she held the door open for him.



He thrust the paper into her hand anyway. "If things get worse for you Jews, and mark my words they will, you'll be grateful you have this. Good day." He turned and left.

Ma quickly shut the door and gave a little shudder.

"Who was that?" I asked.

She didn't answer. Her mouth was set in a thin tight line.

But my sister Kvola spoke up. "That man . . ." her eyes flashed. "He wants to take you!"

"No!" I threw my arms around Ma.

My sister Hannah was bent over our table mending. She hunched into herself even more at Kvola's words. Ma was still glaring at the door.

Just then, my brother, Benyomin, rushed in, his face flushed from running. "That man," he pointed outside. "What was he doing *here*? Did you see his fancy horse and carriage in front of Tomas and Ana's house?"

A horse and carriage! I hadn't even noticed. I'd been in such a hurry to see Pa. I'd barely glanced next door. He must be very rich. I squeezed Ma's arm. Rich people always seemed to get what they wanted.

Kvola narrowed her eyes. "He wants to take Fivel away. His wife wants 'a good little boy.'" She gave a stiff smile like his—full of teeth.

"What?" Benyomin looked at Ma. "He can't do that!"

"Don't let him!" I clutched Ma around the waist. "*Please.*"

"Of course not," said Ma impatiently. "I'm already one child poorer." A shadow of sadness swept behind her eyes. I didn't know what she meant by that. But it wasn't comforting. She drew her mouth into that tight line again as if she'd said more than she'd meant to. She gave Hannah and Kvola a sharp warning look.

"But Ma, what if he comes back?" I cried.

Ma shook her head. "Don't worry." Yet she sounded more tired than reassuring. She set the paper on the table.

That troubled me. I badly wanted to crumple it into a tight ball, throw it into our clay oven, and watch it burst into flames. But something about the heaviness in Ma's shoulders made me uneasy. Now my shoulders sagged, too.

"Pff!" Kvola made a spitting sound. "Don't even think about him! He's gone." She gave a strong kick in his direction as if she, herself, had booted him out of our house. That made me smile. "Don't you worry, Fivel." She tugged my shoulders back up. "Everything will be fine."

I nodded. "Soon we'll be safe in America." I tried to sound just as strong and sure as she did. I looked up at Ma. "Won't we?" I asked, hoping maybe she'd talk about Pa and America like she used to when I was little. But Ma was in her own thoughts. She wiped her hands on her apron and turned to the pot on the stove.

"Soon Pa will send for us." I tried again, enjoying the

sound of those words in my mouth, as though saying them aloud would bring the time closer.

But Ma wasn't in a talking mood. She ladled out our soup for tonight—mostly water with some potatoes and onions, leaving the rest in the pot for tomorrow.

"It's almost *Shabbos*," she reminded me, feeding a few more sticks to the fire. "Here." She handed me the pot. "Quick to Beryl's. And come straight home before sundown."

I lifted the latch and hurried into the sharp autumn air and down the dirt road. An icy gust swept through my clothes. I shivered, but not only from the cold. That man in city clothes gave me chills. And what about Ma? One child poorer? It made no sense. But why had she looked so sad?

I walked as fast as I could without spilling our soup. I tried to shake off the man's parting words but they clung like burrs. *You'll be grateful you have this.*

"No!" I shouted into the cold wind. "No we won't!"