

CHAPTER 1

Krevietsky, Russia, 1910

Faigel Friedman would always remember the strange feeling of uneasiness she felt the moment she woke up on that Friday morning, just before the break of dawn, and how she wished that she had heard Chatzkel leave for shul. Those few minutes would have been so precious. Just to have warmed his coffee! Just to have seen his first morning smile!

She would remember the white cotton curtains of her bedroom and how they danced to the rhythm of the soft murmur of the wind entering the house through the tiny slot of the window. She would remember, once and again, that it had seemed as if someone was yelling from afar, “Oh, oh, oh!” “But it was just the wind, of course,” was all she whispered to herself on that day.

She wrapped herself tightly in the thick patchwork bedspread and the feather quilt. Maybe their warmth and coziness would make her feel better. She tried to rest for a few more minutes before getting up. Faigel loved Fridays, even though they were definitely the day she had the most work to do. She made a quick checklist in her mind. She would go with Raizel, her neighbor, to buy the chicken, and

hopefully the butcher, Reb Kalman, would throw in a few extra wings and some schmaltz. “For my daughter’s friend, a little something, from this old man!” was what he would always say.

Then she would run back home and knead the dough for the challah so it would have time to rise. She hoped Chatzkel would soon grind the carp he’d caught the day before and that he would help her make the gefilte fish.

Let’s see, she thought to herself. The chicken soup, the wings with rice, the knishes. . . Oh, and the kneidelach!

She giggled. Almost the same menu every single Shabbos, since she was married, and she still wondered what to do first! She hoped to quickly finish cooking her cholent. She would take the pot over to the oven in the plaza next to the marketplace, where everyone left cholent cooking until the next day. If she finished soon enough she would be able to walk together with her neighbor Chedva. . . She must find out if her daughter was finally going to get engaged to the Chandler’s son!

Faigel sighed and smiled while thinking of the flowers Chatzkel would bring for Shabbos from the field. Would they be lilacs today?

What was that strange noise she was hearing? Well, whatever it was, she had better get up, dress, and start the day.

The little village of Kreviety was bordered on one side by a hill, which was covered by a forest of eucalyptus trees, and by the Dniester River on the other. The scent of the trees and the melody of the flowing stream wrapped the little village with ribbons of green and blue, a heaven that was engraved in sweet, fresh memory in all who traveled by.

In this little Jewish shtetl there was just one of most everything. There was only one rabbi and only one shul; only one butcher, only one water carrier, only one blacksmith. . . and on and on. No one knew for sure, but an old Jewish legend said that more than a hundred years

before, a great tzaddik from a village near Kiev, who was on his way to the city of Omsk, stopped in Krevietyky. He spent one Shabbos in the village, and that was enough for him to decide to go back and bring his wife and *kinderlach* to settle there. Almost two hundred Jews lived in Krevietyky at the time, and the great tzaddik devoted his life to them, blessing each one that he should always live in harmony. It was well known that the great tzaddik had a gift for unburdening whatever troubled the hearts of his children—which meant the town as a whole, for everyone felt he was like a father to them.

Some said the reason that there was only one man for every trade was to prevent any rivalry and to make each individual necessary and important to everyone else. For all this, Krevietyky was known throughout the neighboring shtetls as a very special place.

Every Friday morning, the whole village would wake up with excitement and enthusiasm, ready to prepare for the holy Shabbos. That Friday wasn't any different from the rest.

"Good morning, Shaindel. Wake up, *maidele!*" Faigel opened the curtain that separated the girl's corner of the cabin from the rest of the house. "Who's going to help Mama turn this little house into a palace for the Shabbos Queen?" Faigel sat down next to Shaindel's cot and caressed her daughter's long blond hair.

"Ummm, I'm asleep."

"Asleep? Sleeping girls don't talk!" answered Faigel, tickling her all over while both mother and daughter laughed.

"Hurry, get dressed. There's plenty of work. Tatte and Mordechai will be back from *shacharis* any minute."

As she helped Shaindel tie her shoelaces, Faigel realized that whatever that strange noise was, it was getting louder. She looked out the window into the fields. It was not common for the authorities to give permission to Jews to cultivate the fields, but Krevietyky was one of the few lucky villages where even though they could

not own the land, Jews were able to grow crops. The fields were off to one side of the village's neat rows of thirty-seven identical thatch-roofed houses and the one small road connecting them to the shul and the market.

Faigel glimpsed the stalks of wheat swaying from side to side with the wind. But...what was that? Was it smoke? *Oh, Ribbono shel Olam*, she said to herself. What was happening? At that instant, she heard her neighbors screaming, "Pogrom! Pogrom!"

It couldn't be. Her husband and her son... Where were they? The door burst open and in ran Mordechai.

"Tatte is wounded! Come, Mama, run!"

"What? No! Where?"

Faigel grabbed Shaindel's hand and ran out with both her children. The neighbors had begun running in all directions, crying out the names of their loved ones. In a matter of minutes, the quiet village of Krevietzky had turned into complete pandemonium. No one knew where to run. Mothers held babies in their arms, trying at the same time not to let go of older children. The villagers were screaming hysterically, trying desperately to make sense of where to go. Smoke and fire could be seen in the distance, close to the river.

"Mordechai!" screamed Faigel, but the chaos drowned out her voice. Shaindel began to cry.

Mordechai yelled, "Hurry, we cannot stop!" Soon they reached the path that crossed the field and just a few feet away, lying on the ground, between the stalks of wheat, was her husband.

"Chatzkel!" she screamed. She lifted his head into her arms. He opened his eyes. He tried to speak; he was out of breath and could not articulate. "Chatzkel, please, please!"

"Run...loose log..." he sighed.

"Chatzkel!"

"...log...top...chimney...rubles...candlesticks..."

“Chatzkel, no, come stand up, what are you saying? Chatzkel, please!”

“Run...America...”

“Tatte, Tatte...” cried Mordechai together with Shaindel.

“Chatzkel, come, come with me, I’ll help you!” cried Faigel as she tried to lift him up.

“No, it’s over. But you...must escape.” He looked into her eyes and sighed. “My Faigel...” Then his head dropped to the side.

“Chatzkel, don’t leave me... *Chatzkel!!*” she screamed and then cried hysterically while her children cried together with her, holding her tight. “Mordechai, ask for help, bring someone, anyone!”

The boy ran out into the road and in just a few minutes, he came running with Yenta, one of their neighbors. As Mordechai parted the stalks of wheat and she saw Chatzkel lying on the ground, Yenta yelled, “Oh no!”

“Help me, Yenta, help me! We must carry him!” cried Faigel.

“But...is he breathing? Is he still alive?”

“He is not dead, he cannot be dead!” Faigel yelled at her.

Yenta leaned toward Chatzkel. His head lay on one side; his eyes were closed. She ripped a stalk of wheat and put it under his nose. It did not move.

“Faigel, your husband isn’t breathing anymore. I’m so sorry, he is dead!”

“No! No, he is not dead!” Faigel threw herself on the ground.

Yenta tried to lift her up. “You must run, you must save your children. Faigel, there’s nothing we can do. They will kill us all. Please, hurry!”

“Then I will die too!” exclaimed Faigel.

“Faigel, stop it! Your children...they cannot hear you say that. Get up and run, you must save them!”

Mordechai, his eyes full of tears, pulled his mother up and yelled,

“Hurry, Mama! The Cossacks are coming!”

“Chatzkel!” She could not stand up.

“They will kill us all!” cried Mordechai. His father was dead. He had not been able to save him. But he must save his mother and sister.

Yenta helped Faigel up. She grabbed Shaindel, hurled her into her mother’s arms, and yelled, “I have to take care of mine. You must save your children, Faigel! We will cry later. Now you must run!”

Faigel was drenched in tears. “Yes, you are right. The children, I must save them.” Shaindel’s cries almost did not let Faigel hear her friend’s words. As Yenta ran down the road in search of her own family, Faigel knew that she had to find the strength to leave Chatzkel’s body in the middle of the field and run with her children.

“The chimney. We must go back.” She grabbed Mordechai’s hand, held Shaindel tightly, and ran toward their house. The door was still open, as they had left it. They ran inside.

“Mordechai, hurry, take the candlesticks,” she yelled. Her son grabbed them, the only valuable object they possessed. Then she went to the chimney and started pounding on the wall surrounding it while she whispered, “Where is it? Chatzkel, you showed me once, but I forget. Which log is it?” Just then she felt that one of the logs was a bit loose. She pushed it and there it was, the leather bag they had hidden so many years ago, just after they were married. *We’ll leave this here, just in case.* Those were Chatzkel’s words.

Shaindel kept crying, “I want my *bubale*, I want my *bubale*!” In the girl’s mind, she thought that perhaps if she could hold her doll again in her arms, all the screams and the fear would disappear.

“Let’s go, children, quick!” yelled Faigel.

“I want my *bubale*, I want my *bubale*!” Shaindel ran to grab the rag doll from her bed.

“We have no time. Let’s go! Children, run, into the woods!”

They ran as fast as they could. The whole village was in total chaos,

terrified of the sudden arrival of the Cossacks. As they reached the forest, they stopped to catch their breath and saw from afar that people were running in all directions.

“Mama, we can’t stop,” Mordechai said urgently. They ran through the tall trees and kept on and on until it was just impossible to keep on running, and they threw themselves, exhausted, to the ground. Just a few more steps away they could discern the end of the woods. They lay there, breathing in silence, listening to their own heartbeats, until the only sounds were the birds and the wind shifting through the trees. Only Hashem knew how long they stayed still.

Much later, the sun began to set, and the day that had broken their lives, tearing away their beloved father and husband from them, silently faded, replaced by the darkness of the night.

Faigel slowly sat up. Mordechai and Shaindel reached for her and the three embraced as one and cried until they did not have the strength to cry anymore. Then Mordechai said, “Mama, there’s something I have to tell you. Something very bad.”

“What is it?” asked Faigel.

“Mama... I... I...” He buried his face into his hands.

Faigel gently took his hands away from his face and said, “What, Mordechai? Tell me.”

“I...I...killed a man,” he sobbed.

“You what?”

“We were finishing *shacharis* when we heard shots, and then a Cossack came into the shul, took his sword, and started killing everyone with his sword. He grabbed me and was about to kill me when Tatte struck him. As the Cossack was fighting with him, his sword fell to the ground. I didn’t want to kill him, Mama, but when I saw that he was about to kill Tatte, I...I took the sword...it was all so sudden...I didn’t know what I was doing... I didn’t mean to kill him, but I stuck it through his back. He died, Mama.”

“A Cossack, Ribbono shel Olam! Did anyone see you?” exclaimed Faigel.

“Yes, Mama, there was another Cossack that saw us leaving, he fired at us, and it was he who wounded Tatte. He screamed, ‘I’ll get you, Jewish pig!’ But when he saw his partner lying on the ground, he went over to help him, and that’s when we ran away.”

“A Cossack!” exclaimed Faigel again. “Are you sure he saw you? Do you think he can recognize you?”

Mordechai lowered his head. “Yes, Mama, he probably can.”

Shaindel grabbed her doll tightly and Faigel hugged her close. “Mordechai, you mustn’t let anyone see you.” *They’ll probably come into the woods*, Faigel thought. They had to leave the forest. But... the documents, the leather bag... *Please, Hashem, let them be there!*

She quickly opened the bag that Chatzkel had hidden in the chimney. Yes! The kopeks Chatzkel had saved in case of an emergency... *Go away, tears, I must be strong. Leave me now!*

Shaindel began to cry again. Faigel embraced both of the children tightly and swallowed her own tears of desperation.

“Shhh, my *kinderlach*... Shhh, we mustn’t make any noise.”

What was she to do? She couldn’t go back to Krevietsky; maybe the Cossacks were searching for her son! She started whispering the sacred words of *Tehillim*: “Hashem is my shepherd; I shall not lack... Though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me... I will fear no evil...for You are with me... You are with me...”

Faigel’s words soothed her children and as she rocked them gently, they slowly dozed off. She sat leaning her back against an oak tree, letting time slip by. As the sun finished setting, Faigel realized that it was already Shabbos. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Last Friday at this time...

Shaindel in her nicest blue dress, her braids tied at the ends with white ribbons, setting the cutlery next to each plate... Mordechai adding an extra log of wood to the chimney to warm the house before Shabbos... Chatzkel brushing his shtreimel while humming the zemiros, welcoming Shabbos Kodesh... Faigel tying her white silk tichel while saying, "Kinderlach, Chatzkel, I'm ready to bensch licht."

The tablecloth her mother had embroidered for her as part of her dowry had been the last she had sewn, for she had already begun by then to feel weak and had died soon after in her native Kiev. On top of it, the off-white porcelain dishes with soft flowers of green, blue, red, and yellow outlined with a line of thin gold, a gift from her husband's rich uncle from Uman; the silver Kiddush cup and of course the freshly baked challahs. She hasn't covered them yet. The reflection of the candles over the bread is the reflection of the Shechinah, the holiness.

Next to the table is a shelf on the wall where the shining silver candlesticks stand, filled with olive oil, for whoever lights with pure oil, his children shine in Torah and good deeds.

It is almost sunset. First Faigel lights a candle on the side in honor of her mother's soul, then two for the Shabbos and one for each of her children. She then recites the blessing: "Baruch Atah Hashem...lehadlik ner shel Shabbos." She takes her time; this is her special moment. The children embrace their father, saying, "Gut Shabbos, Tatte." Chatzkel and Mordechai walk to shul together with all the neighbors, everyone greeting each other: "Gut Shabbos, gut Shabbos."

Faigel checks the blech... Mmm, the aroma of chicken soup with kneidelach fills her home. She takes her black woolen shawl and wraps it around her shoulders. Shaindel grabs her doll from her mattress, hugs it tightly and whispers, "Gut Shabbos, bubale." Shaindel holds Faigel's hand and they walk out to have a stroll with the neighbors, down the gravel road leading toward the two-story shul.

Every house looks almost the same, one next to the other, and through

every window one can see the Shabbos candles burning. The sun is gently falling over the horizon, tinting the sky with brushstrokes of yellow, orange, and red. Shaindel runs toward her friends, who are anxiously waiting for her to come and play. The laughter of the children, the davening of the men, the chatter of the women... Maariv ends and they walk back to their home, greeting everyone they meet with, "Gut Shabbos!"

Chatzkel's parents arrive. As they enter, Zeide places both hands over his son's head and closes his eyes, and then Chatzkel and Faigel place their hands over their children to bless them as well. Faigel covers the bread while Chatzkel gives his father the honor of reciting Kiddush... They sing "Eishes Chayil"... They narrate the parashah of the week... They sing zemiros...

Laughter... Chatzkel...

This was going to be such a sweet Shabbos...like every single Shabbos!

But now, as she dried her tears, she said to herself the words her mother had always told her: *Forward, always look forward!* She must leave Russia. She must take her children to America and try to start a new life. But...how could she just leave? Chatzkel's parents... Had they survived the pogrom? They would bury their son without her! How could she leave without saying goodbye to them? They had been like a real mother and father to her since the day she arrived in Krevietsky, only a few days before her wedding.

Her friends, and most importantly, her father and her brother Yaakov! Should she go to Kiev and say goodbye to them? Maybe that would also be dangerous. Should she ask them to come with her? Her father was too weak to travel. She must protect Mordechai.

At a distance, she heard the howl of an animal. The sound of rustling leaves made her look to her right and she saw a big black rat standing still, looking straight at her. She held her breath for an

instant and then grabbed a stone from the ground and threw it. The rat ran away. She slowly stood up, trying not to wake the children. She walked a few steps and looked through the trees. What should she do? She looked up toward the sky, as if perhaps there she would find an answer. A bitter smile crossed her lips as she remembered how Chatzkel would always tell the children that the night sky seemed as if angels were tightly holding a black velvet cloth embroidered with sparkling diamonds.

She shivered as a cold breeze blew her shawl off her shoulders. She grabbed it and held it tightly. She could make out the outline of the Dniester River not far from where they were. Was that a boat in the distance? They could escape! She remained still, looking through the darkness toward the dock. But how could she just leave everyone behind? What else could she do? Yes...they had to escape at once!

CHAPTER 2

Faigel approached her son.
“Mordechai, wake up! Look over there,” she whispered in his ear.

“What? Where?” The confusion of waking in the middle of the night, lying over the ground in the woods, made him sit up abruptly.

“Sha, it’s okay, but listen to me. We must escape now, it’s dark and no one will see us. We must leave immediately. Let’s go to the boat and board it. With Hashem’s help we will be on our way to America and safe from the Cossacks very soon. I’ll wake up Shaindel.”

Mordechai stood up quickly, as if he hadn’t been asleep. “Mama, wait!” he cried. “We cannot board that boat!”

“Don’t worry, Hashem will help us. I know you’re scared.”

“We cannot board that boat tonight,” insisted Mordechai. He looked deep into his mother’s eyes. Oh, how he resembled his father with his blue eyes, his brown, wavy, thick hair!

His eyes watered. Faigel held her breath. He wasn’t a boy that cried. She knew that he was heartbroken, that she had to be strong for him.

“Mordechai...”

“No! Mama, please...we cannot leave now!”

“But...”

He began to sob, and then in between sobs he said, "Tatte...his words! 'Whoever keeps the Shabbos, Hashem keeps him.' I think that Tatte would have waited to board the boat until after Shabbos."

"Shabbos!" whispered Faigel.

"I could have saved him, Mama! I should have struck the Cossack sooner. If only I had saved him, he would tell us not to break Shabbos! I'm sure of it, but now he's dead! Because I was not able to save him!"

"Mordechai! It's not your fault!" She tried to hug him but he pushed her aside and dropped to his knees. Faigel bent down next to him and held him firmly. He cried, letting the torrent of tears that had been locked inside pour onto his mother's heart. She rocked him from side to side: "Sha, sha, it will be all right..." Just then she noticed Shaindel standing a few feet away, tightly holding her doll.

"Shaindel, come here with us." The girl stood still. "It's all right, honey, please come here." The girl ran toward her mother and Faigel embraced both of the children.

"It is my fault! I could have saved him!" Mordechai repeated over and over again.

"Mordechai, stop. What are you saying? You cannot blame yourself, you did everything you could."

"But he is dead!" he yelled. Faigel pushed Shaindel's head toward her chest, trying to shield her from hearing her brother scream.

"Mordechai, please...that is what Hashem wanted! We will never know why. And we are not going to blame ourselves. Your father finished his *tafkid*. Oh, what am I telling you; you're only a child. Please, try to understand that...that...that there is really nothing that we can understand!"

She had to find the right words. But she felt so overwhelmed; all she wanted was to hug her children and cry with them. "Mordechai, it was not the Cossack who decided. He was just an instrument. If your father had to die, he would have died even if there had not been a pogrom."