CHAPTER ONE

Two from Tupik

On a bright summer day in the year eighteen hundred and twelve (by the gentile reckoning), a girl left her mother's house—the little house where she had been born—and went to the brambles on the far side of the forest to gather the small summer strawberries that grow in the shade.

These were the best kind of berries, tiny and soft, and the girl crouched in the bushes, staining her lips and fingertips red: one for her mouth, one for her apron, and so on and on.

At first the girl was sure that she must be imagining things. She was far from the village here, far from the road, and she alone knew of the berry bush.

Surely no one else would come to this place.

But she was not imagining things.

The column burst out into the clearing like a ball from a musket: men in orderly rows, stepping in time, their buttons and bayonets shining in the sun, and more and more and more men—the young lady had never seen so very many. Now horses came as well, and taller men in splendid uniforms astride them. Mules and wagons

and great bronze cannons thundered past the girl in the brambles, and feet and hooves and studded wheels churned the grass into a muddy slaw.

The girl was not foolish; she kept hidden and did not draw attention to herself. But when one particular man reached the clearing, she could not help but rise up to get a better look.

Even in the heat of the summer sun, he wore his long, pale blue coat. The gray stallion beneath him moved dexterously at his urging, as if it were a part of him, and as he loped out into the clearing, it quickly became clear that the entirety of the column—all the men and horses and cannons and shot, all of it—was simply an extension of his body.

This, of course, was the great war emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

He had come to take the Russian Empire.

He had come to take the world.

An officer on a dappled charger came cantering up to his elbow, and the emperor turned his head. It was in this moment that he caught sight of the girl in the bushes.

His eyes bore into hers, and she locked her lips tight, unwilling to let even the lightest breath pass between them.

The officer was speaking.

The emperor did not look away.

And then he turned back toward the horizon, answered his officer, and spurred on his horse.

And that was that.

The girl made her way home. The sun sank behind the advancing troops.

The year wore on. Battles were fought. Men were killed. The leaves changed color and fell. Napoleon retreated and, in due course, was overthrown.

Soon thereafter, the girl was led beneath a wedding canopy, where she traded the name of her father for the name of her husband, and from that day on, she lived in his house, cleaned his mess, boiled his chicken soup, and waited for him to return home at night.

But something odd happened: one day, the girl looked into the mirror and found that the face staring back at her was no longer her own. She had loosened, wrinkled, worried herself into something that no longer resembled her at all. Only her lips remained the same—locked in a light, tight frown.

That evening, her husband did not come home.

It was not long before she knew that he would not be returning at all.

The frown deepened.

Before the week was out, the lady who had been a girl took her son, Zalman, and moved far away from the village of her birth to a place where no one knew, and where no one would whisper: all the way to a tiny, out-of-the-way shtetl called Tupik.

She took a small room in the attic of the baker's house and apprenticed her boy in the bakery on the ground floor.

The baker died. The bakery passed to the lady's son, Zalman.

She remained in the attic.

And as if in a chrysalis of silence, the lady in the attic turned into an old woman. Before long, as she was eldest, the women of Tupik began to call upon her to attend the births of children, and for more than a generation, every boy and girl born into the shtetl of Tupik was caught by the old woman's hands.

But only two of them made any lasting impression on her.

The first was a scrawny boy, born before his time into a blustery, rain-soaked evening. When his tiny eyes blinked open, bright and clear and icy blue, they focused perfectly into hers.

She had seen that expression before: once, as a girl, long ago, crouched in the brambles, fingers stained, fear in her heart, sweetness on her lips.

Eight days later, breaking with her custom, the old woman went to the synagogue to hear what name the boy would be given.

It was Yehuda Leib.

And that evening, the child of her son, Zalman, was born—a girl named Bluma—and as the baby emerged, pink and squalling, the old woman found herself filled with a sense of unutterable gladness.

But when she looked down at her granddaughter's face, another feeling stole into her heart: a sort of guilt, of pity and compassion.

There, as if reflected in a little mottled mirror, was her very own mouth, locked in a light, tight frown.

Yehuda Leib's mother, Shulamis, woke before dawn, dragging her clacking bones up from the warm bed hours before it was reasonable. It was unpleasant, but if she wanted a chance of collecting enough odd jobs to afford a bit of food for the evening, she would have to start early.

Her back ached.

Tupik was leaning forward in anticipation this morning, silent and still in the gloaming. The gray clapboard houses huddled over the muddy streets as if to steal the rising steam of the passing people's breath, and at the outskirts of town, the tall pines seemed to bend inward over the roofs as if to better see what might transpire.

Perhaps it was the growing cold, perhaps the thick gray slab of cloud covering over the sky, but whatever the cause, everything felt weighted down—coiled.

Waiting.

In the corner of the little front room, Shulamis's son, Yehuda Leib, pretended to sleep in a twisting of sheets.

She glanced down at the pan by the cooling embers of the fire.

Half a potato. This was all the food left in the house. Even the saltcellar was empty.

With a sigh, stomach moaning, Shulamis rose from the hearth, took Yehuda Leib's warm red scarf from the chair by the door, and tucked it into the crook of his arm. She'd made the scarf with her own two hands, stitch by stitch, the thread passing between her ruddy, cold-stiffened fingers night after night until finally it was done.

Truth be told, there was as much worry as wool in it.

"You'll be good today?" she said.

"Yes," said Yehuda Leib flatly, his eyelids clamped shut, as if he still might manage to convince her that he was sleeping.

"You won't make any trouble?"

"It's never me who makes the trouble, Mama."

Shulamis frowned, as if she just might believe this. "Of course not." And then, crossing to the door, "There's a little potato left in the pan," and, halfway through the door, "Don't forget your scarf."

It was only moments later, the sound of Shulamis's squelching feet fading down the muddy road, that the front door yawned open again to admit a bright-eyed boy into the morning.

A boy with no red scarf.

It was itchy. And it choked him.

Yehuda Leib couldn't stand being constrained.

The sun was rising.

Few mothers in Tupik could see Yehuda Leib coming down the street without feeling the urge to protect their children from

the ill influence that seemed to mass around the boy like a crowd of flies. And this was not entirely unjust. Yehuda Leib's name was rarely heard in the synagogue or marketplace without an attendant sigh—*always brawling, climbing, running*—and if a quick glance over the shoulder showed that neither the boy nor his mother was near, the sigh was very likely to be followed up with the remark that *of course, everyone knows what his father was like.*

But if everyone knew that Yehuda Leib had a tendency to do what he wanted—often with some lightly destructive results—there were few, perhaps none, in Tupik who really understood the extent of his capabilities.

Little escaped the notice of his keen blue eyes.

This morning, for example, he was careful not to waste time lounging in bed once his mother made her way out into the world. Judging by the particular glimmer of the light, he could tell who was likely to be awake, who was on his way to morning prayer at the synagogue, who was making her way to the marketplace. Not only could he therefore say which kitchens and larders were likely to go unattended, but he could also guess which routes he might safely take to get into them without being seen—and, consequently, blamed once he'd acquired what he'd gone for.

Not that he was prone to lifting enough to be noticed—on either the taking or the receiving end, for his mother would never approve of his appropriations—but all the same his face and reputation were familiar enough in town that he knew it was best to avoid notice if he could.

Was it honest? No. But the more he was able to thicken their stores of milk and flour and salt, the easier his mother could sleep the next night.

And besides—as everyone knows—a boy cannot grow on half a potato a day. Not even an ordinary boy.

And Yehuda Leib was not ordinary.

This morning, Yehuda Leib managed a decent haul in the brief window of time safe for grazing, and by the time he climbed out of a certain second-floor window and turned his feet toward the synagogue, the pockets of his worn black coat were well laden with the scraps and leavings of a handful of houses: a hunk of cheese, a crust of bread, a half-eaten apple. Even his mittens were full: salt to replenish the dwindling supply in his mother's cellar.

Perhaps he was a nuisance, perhaps a petty thief, but for all the mischief he made, no one in Tupik saw things as clearly as Yehuda Leib.

It was Yehuda Leib's aim each day to position himself on the steps of the study hall opposite the synagogue's front doors well before the morning service concluded. Once the worshippers began to mill about the threshold, the day's schmoozing would start in earnest, and if he slung the brim of his cap low over his bright, keen eyes, huddling into the corner where the railing met the wall, their chat would flow freely: who had what errands to run, who was traveling, who sick in bed. This talk was indispensable to Yehuda Leib if he was to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention throughout the day, and if he was in his place on time, the talkers rarely took any notice of him.

This was why, today, it was so strange that they did.

Things started out normally enough, the droning hum of prayer within the synagogue dwindling and coming to an end. The

doors were thrown open, and the most industrious of the worshippers squelched off to get their morning's work under way, leaving the schmoozers to gather around Yankl, a lanky old schlepper who had gotten in late from Zubinsk the night before.

Zubinsk was the closest thing to a real place anywhere in the vicinity of Tupik. Nestled at the edge of the wide forest in which Tupik was located, it could be reached in the better part of a day's travel, barring any complications on the road.

But as everyone knew, complications had a way of cropping up: wagon axles broke, donkeys sprained their ankles, men lost their way.

The grandmothers of Tupik had troves of tales hours deep about the malevolent demons of the forest: how they hid in the darkness between the overhanging boughs and dropped down upon your head when you stopped for a drink of water; how they tempted men off the path with the flicker of false fire and the aroma of roasting meat; how, if you were foolish enough to stop for a nap, they would sneak in through your ears and steal everything away—your thoughts, your memories, your very substance—until there was nothing left behind but the papery husk of you.

One could never be careful enough.

Men like Yankl, then, who made their living transporting goods between Tupik and Zubinsk, had a way of collecting charms and protections about them. Once, Yehuda Leib had heard Yankl cataloging his arsenal: the hunk of iron at the bottom of his heavy pack, the faded bracelet of thin red thread around his wrist, the amulets carefully inked onto small squares of parchment, rolled tight, and stashed in all the pockets of his clothing.

It was, in fact, about a new talisman that Yankl spoke as he came out of the synagogue door this morning: an old, hard slice of bread with a small bite taken out of one corner.

Someone asked how on earth he thought a piece of bread would keep away the demons, and at the sound of this word, Yankl spat superstitiously over his shoulder.

"This is no ordinary slice of bread," he said, raising a finger instructively. "This is bread from which the holy Rebbe of Zubinsk has eaten."

This pronouncement was met with a chorus of appreciation. If the stories of the demons were numberless and dark, the stories of the Rebbe were just as numerous and just as bright—his wisdom, his wonders: they said he could see straight into you and pluck out the sorrow like a rotting apple.

A voice spoke from the knot of gossips. "And how are the wedding preparations going, Yankl?"

"The whole town is in an uproar," said the schlepper. "It's as if they've declared a new holiday!"

Two days hence, just before the beginning of Chanukah, the holy Rebbe of Zubinsk was to marry off his final granddaughter, the youngest of five. It was going to be a massive celebration, and for weeks the rumors had been building: so many wagons full of fine food had arrived, and twice as many musicians; the bride's dress had been made specially for her in Kiev; the groom's family was bringing a famous wedding jester all the way from Vilna.

And best of all: the invitation was entirely open. Everyone was welcome, without exception.

Needless to say, this was a tempting prospect, no less to those interested in the holy Rebbe than to those interested in the promise of a good party, and it was in the midst of describing the torrent of arriving visitors that Yankl stopped short.

"Oh!" he said. "And you'll never guess who I saw at the tavern: Avimelekh. *Avimelekh!* Can you believe it? I wouldn't have thought—"

But what Yankl wouldn't have thought went unsaid; at precisely this moment, the rabbi spoke up.

"Yankl," he said, his soft voice cutting through the chatter like a knife.

All heads turned to where the rabbi stood in the door.

"What?" said Yankl.

The rabbi gave his head a sharp little shake as if to say, *Don't,* and then gestured to the place where Yehuda Leib was sitting.

Now the eyes of the crowd turned toward him.

Yehuda Leib's cheeks began to burn.

They were all looking at him.

Why were they looking at him?

"What?" said Yehuda Leib, and when no answer came, he repeated himself: "*What?*"

It was in this moment that Moshe Dovid Frumkin, the stern and pious town butcher, came forward and, mercifully, broke the silence.

"Yankl," he said. "Yankl, did you get my new hat?"

"Ah!" said Yankl. "Yes!" Yankl stepped back inside, produced his hefty pack, and set to untying the large, round box secured to its bulk. This turned out to contain the hat in question: a rich fur crown of a shtreimel, glossy and fine, for special occasions.

Now the knot of schmoozers split, some gathering in close to admire the shtreimel, some splintering into their own conversations or drifting off into the day.

But Yehuda Leib was frozen where he sat. His heart was pounding. He did not care to be stared at—he who was so often blamed for broken or missing things, who was no sooner seen than suspected.

Why had they all stared at him?

What did they all know that he didn't?

The morning was not shaping up well.

And this is why—even more than was normally the case—Yehuda Leib found himself growing angrier and angrier at Issur Frumkin.

Issur was the son of Moshe Dovid the butcher and he was the only other boy in Tupik of Yehuda Leib's age. This inevitably invited comparison, and not to Yehuda Leib's advantage: Yehuda Leib was scrappy and small; Issur was tall and broad. Yehuda Leib was dirty, poor, always in trouble; Issur was none of these things. Because his father was prosperous, Issur's hours were rarely occupied with work, and he was free to sit in the study hall reading holy texts; Yehuda Leib had to occupy his hours finding food to eat.

But what made Yehuda Leib jealous was neither the comfort nor the esteem belonging to Issur Frumkin. It was something altogether simpler:

Issur had a father and he didn't.

And, to make matters worse, Issur had two very different faces. The first, which he always wore in his father's presence, was deferential, humble—the picture of Reb Frumkin's expectation. The second, which he had a habit of turning on Yehuda Leib when others—particularly parents—were not around, was bratty, sneering, and superior.

And there he was now, standing in the synagogue door, doting cloyingly on his father, trying on his new hat. It was far too big on him, of course, and it slipped around and made him look even more foolish than he did in the first place.

But still, Issur's father smiled and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder as if there were nothing his son could do wrong.

No one ever touched Yehuda Leib like that.

Now Issur was asking to keep the hat with him at the study hall, and his father answered with the fond admonition that it was new and expensive, and he must be very careful.

The little fire in Yehuda Leib's chest was picking up heat.

By the time Yehuda Leib looked back up, nearly everyone was gone—Moshe Dovid off to his butchery, the rabbi off to his breakfast. But Issur was crossing the road toward Yehuda Leib now, his feet kneading through the well-turned mud.

It was not kind—and it was probably not wise, either—but Yehuda Leib was in no mood to give Issur Frumkin a free pass. Rooting in his pocket for something to eat, he shifted his body into the doorframe to block Issur's way.

"Hey," said Issur, mounting the front stairs. "Move."

Yehuda Leib did not react, keeping his eyes low beneath the brim of his cap, chewing assiduously on a hard rind of cheese.

"Hey! Yehuda Leib!" said Issur. "I know you can hear me. Move, you idiot."

At this, Yehuda Leib sighed and scooted himself over, but rather than clearing the doorframe, he moved farther in, taking up as much space as he possibly could.

"Oh," said Issur. "Think you're funny?"

Now Yehuda Leib looked up and smiled through a mouthful of cheese.

"You're disgusting," said Issur. "Get out of my way."

Again, Yehuda Leib did not budge.

"Some of us have important things to do," said Issur. "Why don't you stand up and move, you little *bastard*?"

It is entirely possible that Issur was not aware that, coming from him of all people—on this morning of all mornings—that

word would scorch Yehuda Leib's guts with its injustice. It is, in fact, likely that Issur Frumkin had no idea what he was getting himself into.

But none of this made the slightest bit of difference to Yehuda Leib.

Calmly, he stood. Tossing aside the stripped rind of cheese, he stepped out of the doorframe, and as he passed Issur by, he swatted at the brim of Moshe Dovid's fine new hat, sending it flying up and out into the street, where he trod on it hard, crushing it deep into the mud.

Issur stood quivering on the study-hall stairs above.

Yehuda Leib turned and smiled.

"There," he said. "How's that?"

And this is how the fight began.

The house of Reb Zalman the baker was on the forest side of Tupik. Coming in from Zubinsk, you had to pass through the little cemetery on the hillside to reach it, and if you didn't take care to lose sight of the clutch of leaning headstones before turning to the baker's door, you might have had the uncanny feeling that you carried some residue of the graveyard inside with you.

For this reason as well as others, the baker made sure to leave a cup and basin for hand washing by the door.

The ground floor of Zalman's house was occupied primarily with the necessities of his business: large sacks of flour, wide wooden workbenches, a vast clay oven stoked to blistering temperatures each morning before the sun even had a chance to rise and compete. Baskets of rolls, rugelach, and, on Fridays, shining brown

loaves of thick, braided challah crowded close in around the door. If you wished to speak with Zalman, you would invariably find him here, attempting, it seemed, to cover each of his sober black garments thoroughly with flour before his day was done.

It was mainly on the narrower second level that the women of Zalman's house led their lives. His wife, Feygush, insisted on maintaining a second kitchen there, away from public view, which required quite a bit of schlepping—water and other necessities—up the rough wooden stairs.

This schlepping almost always fell to Zalman's daughter, Bluma.

Bluma was widely considered a good girl—pretty, kind, generally receptive to the needs of others. Her only fault was a slight overfondness for the fleeting territory between sleep and waking, where the eyelids are heavy, the blankets are warm, and the entirety of the world seems to be confined behind a thick sheet of glass. Rarely did she rise until midmorning, when she might creep downstairs to steal a wink and a smile from her father—and often a sweet bun besides.

It was because of this abundance of time spent in bed that Bluma was the member of the family far most familiar with the activities of her grandmother, who lived on the third floor.

Third floor, though, was charitable. In truth, it was a cramped attic, almost perfectly triangular, in which Bluma's grandmother lived with her crabby, toothless gray cat. *Attic* even was a bit too kind: there was barely enough space among the rafters to accommodate the bed, the table, the chair, the old woman, and the cat all at once. And what little floor space there was hung directly above Bluma's bed.

Bluma knew the sound that the ceiling made when the old

woman first shifted in bed in the morning. She knew the sound of the cat jumping from the pillow to the windowsill. She knew the sound of tiny old feet shifting onto the floorboards, of the chair being pulled from beneath the table.

And on this particular morning, the floorboards above her were dead silent.

"Papa?" said Bluma.

Zalman looked up from his kneading and smiled. "Good morning, darling," he said.

"Has Bubbe come down?"

Zalman shook his head and began to knead again. "I think she's still upstairs."

Bluma shook her head. "I haven't heard her all morning."

Bluma's bubbe was nothing if not reliable. Reliably, she stumped down from her attic in the morning to retrieve a bit of bread and water, and reliably, she creaked back up without having spoken a word to anyone.

This had been the way for nearly as long as Bluma could remember.

"Hope she's feeling all right," said Zalman, his voice jumping with the exertion of his work. "Here," he said. "Take her a bit of milk and some rugelach. She'll like that."

Bluma's bubbe, as a rule, did not care for people. She took what little food she ate on her own schedule and often in her own room. Once a week, on Fridays, she would come down to make a pot of chicken soup, and when they all sat down to eat it, she would quietly wish her son and her granddaughter a good Sabbath.

She never spoke to Bluma's mother.

Bluma arrived outside her grandmother's bedroom door and tapped lightly with her knuckle, twice.

"Bubbe?"

For a period of time, Bluma had spent her days reading on the little landing just outside her bubbe's bedroom door. She'd hardly meant to make a habit of it, but while she'd lain there one morning, her grandmother had pulled open the door. Bluma had expected to be shooed away, but her bubbe had simply stared down at her. After a moment, she'd left the door hanging open and gone about her business.

They had lived quietly in parallel, then—Bluma reading on the landing with her pillow, and her bubbe within, occupying herself with needlework or tidying. Often she would sit in front of the oblong mirror on her wall and make a silent accounting of the dissatisfactions she found in her face.

And then one day the door had swung open in the morning and almost immediately slammed shut again. When Bluma had gone to use the bathroom, her pillow had been moved back down onto her bed, and that had been that.

All the same, Bluma held the quiet certainty that she had shared something with her grandmother that no one else in the house had ever seen.

And this was correct.

Again: one knuckle, two taps.

"Bubbe?"

There was no answer.

The bedroom door was hung to swing inward, and with every creaking moment that Bluma spent pushing it, she still thought she might find her grandmother there, just behind the opening door.

But she didn't.

Her bubbe was gone.

The sky was heavy, and Yehuda Leib longed for the rain to come and relieve the pressure.

His mouth ached.

Issur had only gotten one good hit in—despite his superior size, he was really worth almost nothing in a fight—but as luck would have it, his fist had caught Yehuda Leib square on the lip, and it was beginning to swell.

Yehuda Leib was too wise to stick around once they'd been hauled apart—it didn't matter who was at fault when one of the combatants was Issur "God's Gift to Tupik" Frumkin and the other was a grubby, fatherless thief, and so he'd made himself scarce among the rooftops.

Up here, there was no one to glare—no one to wish he simply wasn't.

The time passed slowly. Feet and hooves trod the mud below. Fires were kindled, burned, went out. The dim gray sky began to darken.

The hour came and went for afternoon prayers.

It really was a shame. He had promised his mother that he would stay out of trouble.

But he'd had very little choice in the matter. There were a lot of things you could say about Yehuda Leib, but he *wasn't* a bastard. That much he knew.

He remembered his father, though his mother thought this was impossible.

The memory was warm, almost hot, and it smelled of wax and wood and sweat and wool.

It was a very good memory.

He had been a small boy, and his father had held him with one arm. It had been Yom Kippur, he thought, the holiest day of the year, because all around him he remembered clean white garments. His father's garment had been white, and over it he had worn his striped prayer shawl. Yehuda Leib remembered looking up at the raucous, colorful ceiling of the synagogue, painted with vines and figs, eagles, lions, and unicorns, red and blue and tawny and white, and then his father had pulled his attention down to the front of the room, and someone had blown the ram's horn, and there had been a great riot of supplication from the congregation, and he'd looked up, and there had been tears in his father's eyes, and he'd reached out and taken the edges of his father's beard softly in his fat little fists, and his father had smiled, and the tears had fallen onto his cheeks.

That was all he remembered.

Sometimes he thought the memory felt holy because of the synagogue, and sometimes he thought maybe it was the other way around.

He would have given anything to see his father's face again. He would've given the right eye out of his own head.

But it was impossible. Whenever he asked about him, his mother told Yehuda Leib that his father had died, and then she became very sad for a day or two.

After a while, Yehuda Leib learned to stop asking.

But he never learned to stop wondering.

"Rabbi!"

Instinctively, Yehuda Leib lay flat against the slope of the roof below.

He knew that voice. That was Moshe Dovid Frumkin. The last person Yehuda Leib wanted to see was Issur's father, the butcher, a man who wore blood as comfortably as others wore clothes.

"Rabbi," called Reb Frumkin again, and now Yehuda Leib heard the soft, round voice of the rabbi reaching out in response.

"Moshe Dovid," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Moshe Dovid Frumkin let out an aggrieved sigh, and Yehuda Leib wriggled around to see the two men talking in the street below.

"I trust you heard?" said Frumkin.

"About the fight?"

Moshe Dovid scoffed. "The attack, more like. Issur tells me that wild beast of a boy jumped on him out of nowhere. My fine new hat is ruined, my son's nose broken. . . ."

Yehuda Leib's guts squirmed at the injustice of Issur's story, but at the same time, he was pleased he'd managed to break Issur's nose.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Moshe Dovid," said the rabbi.

"You're always sorry," Frumkin said.

"Yes," said the rabbi. "I suppose I am."

The butcher stepped closer. "But the situation isn't getting any better, Rabbi. Something needs to be done."

The rabbi nodded. "And what do you suggest?"

"Well," said Moshe Dovid. "I caught up with that schlepper Yankl, and I asked him about Avimelekh."

Avimelekh. There was that name again. Yehuda Leib had almost forgotten it in all the excitement.

"He says," continued Frumkin, "that Avimelekh has racked up some heavy gambling debts. He's set on coming to Tupik today or tomorrow—before the Rebbe's wedding. Says he can get a good amount of money finding conscripts for the Tsar's army. Now, would it be such a terrible thing if we just let him have the boy?"

The rabbi tugged at his beard and nodded again slowly. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I think it would be."

Moshe Dovid sighed again, so loudly it was almost a word. "You can't keep protecting him like this."

"I don't see why not," said the rabbi.

"Because," said Frumkin, "it's just a matter of time. It's in his blood."

"What is?"

"You know what, Rabbi. And it's going to come out. Let Avimelekh take him off our hands."

"I think," said the rabbi, with a sigh of his own, "that it would be best for you to look to your own house, Moshe Dovid. The way I heard it told, it was *your* little wild beast who did the attacking. Good evening."

Yehuda Leib grinned.

At least someone was on his side.

But something was still bothering him.

Let Avimelekh take him off our hands.

It was growing dark. He should be getting home.

CHAPTER TWO

Crossing Over

Shulamis was bent over the fire when Yehuda Leib pushed through the front door, and she turned at the sound of his voice.

"Mama?"

Shulamis stood, consternation gathered around her shoulders like a heavy shawl.

"I heard what happened this morning."

She opened her mouth to scold, but there was a question burning in Yehuda Leib, and he blurted it out before she could begin.

"Mama," he said. "Who's Avimelekh?"

Shulamis stiffened.

Yehuda Leib did not know what he'd expected, but this was not it. Despite the popping of the fire and the rolling boil of the potato water, it felt as if all the sounds in their little house had fled in fear of the word he'd just pronounced.

"Where did you hear that name?"

Yehuda Leib swallowed hard. "From Yankl the schlepper. He said Avimelekh was in Zubinsk and then everyone—"

"In Zubinsk?"

"Yes," said Yehuda Leib. "And then Moshe Dovid Frumkin said—"

"Moshe Dovid?" said Shulamis. "Does he know?"

"Yes," said Yehuda Leib. "I overheard him saying that Avimelekh was coming here to Tupik because—"

"This isn't funny, Yehuda Leib," said Shulamis. "Who put you up to this?" She had begun to crack her knuckles, which was never a good sign.

"What?" said Yehuda Leib. "No one. Moshe Dovid said that this Avimelekh was going to be here today or tomorrow, because—"

"Today or tomorrow?"

"Mama," said Yehuda Leib with a lurch in his chest. "You're scaring me."

Shulamis stepped forward as if to take hold of her son, but whether to comfort or to warn never became clear.

At just this moment, there was a knocking at the door.

Shulamis froze.

After a long, still moment, the knocking came again.

"Yehuda Leib," whispered Shulamis. "Get under your bed, and no matter what happens, you don't make a sound, understand?"

Yehuda Leib's keen eyes were wide. "Yes, Mama," he said, and in a flash he was hidden.

Slowly, Shulamis smoothed herself. She took a deep breath, and, just as the knocking began again, she opened the door.

"Oh," said Shulamis, letting her breath go. "Oh, Rabbi."

"I apologize," said the rabbi's round voice, "for disturbing you."

"No, no," said Shulamis. "Not at all. Would you like to come in?"

"No," said the rabbi. "No, thank you. I just thought you ought

to be told: Avimelekh is in Zubinsk, and he could be here as soon as this evening."

"Yes," said Shulamis. "I heard."

"He's in debt again, Shulamis. And he thinks he can get himself clear by selling boys into the Tsar's army."

Shulamis sighed deeply. "Ah."

"Yes."

Now there was a silence—long, empty, immovable.

"Shulamis, I'm so sorry," said the rabbi softly.

"Thank you," said Yehuda Leib's mother, and then, again, softly, "Thank you."

"Of course," said the rabbi. "Keep safe."

"I'll try," said Shulamis. "Good night."

"Good night."

Gently, the door closed.

Yehuda Leib crawled out from under the bed.

His mother's face was as still as a death mask.

"Yehuda Leib," she said.

"Mama?" said Yehuda Leib.

"You have to go away."

"What?" Yehuda Leib felt his throat catch. His jaw was impossibly tight; his chin began to quiver. "Why?"

Shulamis shook her head so softly it was almost impossible to see. "Because he's coming."

"I can fight?"

Shulamis laughed like nothing was funny. "Not against him, you can't."

"Yes I can!" All of a sudden, Yehuda Leib found himself yelling.

His eyes were filled with tears. He felt helpless and frightened, as if he were little again. "Won't you even try to stop him?"

Shulamis turned away and wiped at her eyes. "If I thought it would change anything, I'd let him tear me limb from limb. But it won't." Slowly, she began to walk about the room, taking things from shelves and cupboards: a threadbare knapsack, a spare cap, a bowl, a cup, an extra shirt, a few potatoes. "If you can make it to Zubinsk, you should be able to lose him. Just get yourself as far away as you can."

Yehuda Leib swallowed. "Okay."

Carefully, Shulamis hung the knapsack on her son's shoulders and set to fastening his coat.

"Mama?" said Yehuda Leib.

Shulamis did not look up from her work. "Yes?"

"Who is he? Avimelekh?"

Shulamis sighed. "He's a very bad man. He hurts people, even when he doesn't mean to—and he means to more often than not."

Her voice was trembling; Yehuda Leib swallowed hard.

"If you want to stay the good young man you are—if you want to stay my son, Yehuda Leib—you keep yourself away from him."

He nodded. "I will."

Shulamis's right cheek bunched up as she struggled to keep the tension from her voice. "Don't you make any trouble."

Yehuda Leib shook his head. "I won't."

Shulamis pulled the front door open and stood back.

"Will you be all right?" said Yehuda Leib to his mother, and she sighed long and low before saying, "I will."

They both knew she was lying.

Outside, for the first time that year, fat white flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

Yehuda Leib took a deep breath, stepped out through the open door, and pulled it shut behind him.

Shulamis stood at the window, watching him walk away until she could see him no longer.

Only then did her eyes fall on the chair beside the door.

Tonight—of all nights—she had let him forget his warm red scarf.

It was not until he reached the cemetery on the hillside that Yehuda Leib began to consider what it would mean to flee into the forest at night. He was not wholly confident of the truth of the stories people told: of evil things among those trees, of accidents and mishaps, of long, snatching fingers and sharp, shearing teeth. He was, however, rapidly becoming sure that if he was going to find out, he would prefer to do so in the light of day.

Through the veil of falling snow, the low-hanging trees and leaning headstones met to create the impression of a mouthful of jagged teeth.

No. He would be far safer on this side of the cemetery tonight. He would hide himself somewhere in town, and when the morning came, he would make his way to Zubinsk.

Slowly, the town lay down to sleep; slowly, the eyes of Tupik began to shut.

Presently, things became still, only Yehuda Leib and the snow creeping on through the darkness.

And then, into the hush on the far side of midnight, a door swung open; Yehuda Leib saw light cutting through the snow and the dim.

Bluma. She had always been kind to him.

"You look cold."

Yehuda Leib nodded. "I am."

Bluma shook her head softly, as if this were a very stupid response. "Then why don't you go home?"

"Believe me," said Yehuda Leib, tramping across the snowy road to the door. "I'd love to."

Bluma sighed.

"What are you doing up so late?" said Yehuda Leib.

"Waiting," said Bluma.

Bluma's bubbe had not come home. Her father had gone walking the streets to look for her two separate times, but no one had seen her, and eventually, with no other good option, he'd gone to sleep—or at least to toss and turn in bed.

So Bluma did the only thing she could think to do:

She sat and waited.

"For?"

Bluma didn't seem to like this question, and she tossed her head and changed the subject. "I heard you started a fight with Issur Frumkin today."

Yehuda Leib sighed. "I didn't start it. I never start it."

Bluma rolled her eyes. "Of course not."

Now there was a short, empty silence.

"But did he at least deserve it?"

"Certainly."

Bluma chuckled.

"You didn't say what you were waiting for."

"No," said Bluma. "I didn't. But you didn't say where you were going."

"Well, you didn't ask."

"Where are you going, Yehuda Leib?"

"I don't know," said Yehuda Leib. "Away."

Bluma was standing just inside the door, the candle behind her throwing a warm flicker into the street; Yehuda Leib was standing just outside, the snowflakes on his coat melting away like dewy ghosts.

"Anyway, I can't stay here anymore."

Bluma's eyebrows fell. "Does your mother know about this?"

Yehuda Leib nodded. "It was my mother who sent me away."

Bluma's chin began to twitch, and for an agonizing moment, Yehuda Leib thought she might start to cry.

But instead, an idea seemed to march into her mind, her lips locking into a light, tight frown.

"What?" said Yehuda Leib.

"One second," said Bluma, and she ducked inside, returning quickly to thrust a large braided challah at him. "Here," she said. "Take this."

"What?" said Yehuda Leib.

"Take it," said Bluma. "And eat it sooner rather than later. It's already a few days old, and they go stale quickly."

It broke Bluma's heart to see Yehuda Leib's beautiful blue eyes widen; it was as if no one but his mother had ever given him food before, which was an unutterably sad thought.

"Thank you," said Yehuda Leib, and then, four or five more times, "Thank you," as he stuffed the challah into his little knapsack.

When he finally looked up again, he caught Bluma peering out into the darkness, searching.

"Well," said Yehuda Leib, "good night."

"Good night," said Bluma. "Stay safe."

Yehuda Leib shrugged as if to say, *What can I do?*

"I hope you get what you're waiting for," he said.

Bluma sighed. "Me too."

And, unfortunately, she would.

She came trudging out of the woods haltingly, snowdrifts on her stooped shoulders. She jostled the door as she crossed over the threshold, and in the front room where she'd fallen asleep, Bluma's mother moaned and rolled over.

Bluma's bubbe saw this, and, disappointed she hadn't managed to wake her daughter-in-law, she made a loud, rude noise with her tongue and tramped over to the staircase.

Up, as always.

Up, past her granddaughter, dozing, still dressed atop the bedclothes.

Endlessly, endlessly up.

She was tired—exhausted, really. As tired as she would ever get.

All she wanted to do was lie down and rest.

Arriving heavily at the top of the stairs, she found that someone had been in her room, and she made the rude noise again, this time to the universe at large.

With a weary shimmy, she shook what snow remained about her onto the floor, stumped over to the window, wheezed, coughed, and blew out the two dwindling candles that had been left burning on the sill.

Slowly, she turned back to prepare for bed in the gloom she felt entitled to.

And at this very moment, on the far side of the river crossing, a small bell began to ring.

If you arrived in Tupik at the end of a long day's journey and wished to continue on the next day, the only place for you to go would be back the way you came. Just beyond the far shore of the muddy river, the ground became first unpleasantly moist, and then impassably swampy, and to make matters worse, a series of precipitous drops and rocky rapids in the river downstream made it impractical to pilot a boat, a barge, or any other vessel out on the water.

Tupik was a dead end.

It might, then, be a surprise to learn that an old stonework ferry shack still crouched low on Tupik's riverbank. According to the town's founding charter, as long as the Jews of Tupik provided, at their own expense, a ferryman to work the crossing, they would be allowed to continue to live and trade in the little town by the river. Of course, the nobleman who had granted the charter had been dead for hundreds of years, and his descendants had long since lost track of the bargain, but to the denizens of Tupik—like the rest of their people—it was no small thing to abandon an ancient agreement.

In those days, the ferryman was a fellow named Mottke, a devoted souse who was rumored never once to have bathed.

The entirety of Mottke's responsibility consisted of sitting close to the ferry, waiting to hear the ringing of a small bell that could be pulled from the landing platform across the river. Of course, the bell never rang. But in the event that it did, Mottke's job was simple: he was to climb aboard the little ferry barge that sat tethered on the Tupik side of the river, take hold of the chain attached