

Just One Inch

Inspired by The True Story
Of My Ancestors

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Preface

We often speak of life in grand sweeps---decades, miles, and lifetimes. We measure our success by the mountains we climb and our failures by the vastness of our losses. But in the quiet, hidden machinery of the universe, life is actually a game of inches.

Just one inch—that fragile, invisible margin that spares a life without asking permission. The moment when a person is saved for reasons they cannot explain. An inch between stepping forward or staying still. An inch between a falling beam and the space beside it. It is the distance between a bullet that finds its mark and one that whistles harmlessly into the dark. It is the thickness of a floorboard that hides a family from the heavy boots of Bolsheviks or Nazis. It is the microscopic margin in a surgeon's theater that separates a future from a final breath. It is about the bewildering, humbling truth that a single inch can change everything: who we become, what we carry, and how we choose to go on.

History is full of moments where survival hangs on something so small it feels impossible to measure, let alone understand.

When former President Theodore Roosevelt was shot during a campaign stop in Milwaukee, the bullet should have entered his chest and pierced his lung. It didn't because it struck a 50-page folded speech in his breast pocket and a metal eyeglass case. Together, they slowed the bullet enough that it lodged in his chest muscle instead of killing him.

A bomb thrown at Archduke Franz Ferdinand bounced off the folded-down convertible roof and exploded behind the car instead of inside it. The angle of the car and the exact position of the roof created a tiny margin-- mere inches that prevented the bomb from landing in the passenger compartment. Had the bomb landed just a little differently, the Archduke and his

wife would have died then and there, and the later gunshot assassination (which sparked World War I) would never have occurred.

People call it many things-- fate, chance, luck, divine intervention. We call it luck when we are afraid. We call it fate when we are resigned. But for those who have stood on the precipice, we know it is something else entirely. It is a divine precision-- a walk guided by a Spirit that sees the end from the beginning. A whisper from the universe. A warning. A blessing. A burden. Whatever the name, the truth remains, the line between living and dying is often thinner than a thread, and none of us know when it will tighten or when it will hold.

The Torah teaches that while we are given the choice to choose life, we do not always see the invisible threads of the Master Planner at work. We think we are alone in our weariness, yet we are actually standing on the shoulders of giants who survived their own "one-inch" miracles so that we might exist.

God's plan is not a map we are permitted to read in advance. It is a path revealed one step at a time, often through the "terrible windows" of tragedy and the unexpected grace of a stranger's hand. To give up is to ignore the century of survival that was required just to bring us to this moment. To live is to honor the one-inch margin that destiny already planned.

In this book, someone survived because something so insignificant as one inch shifted the world just enough so a life can go on and another generation begins. This story reminds us that every breath is borrowed, every tomorrow uncertain, and every act of love or courage a defiance of the odds. If there is a message here, it is this-- life is fragile, but meaning is not. Even when the world turns on an inch, the human heart still reaches for purpose, connection, and hope. And sometimes, that is the greatest miracle of all.

For every survivor who has ever wondered, Why am I still here?—the answer is rarely

grand and never immediate. It reveals itself inch by inch, in the next moment, the next breath, the next small act of living. Purpose isn't lost; it's simply not visible yet. One doesn't need to understand everything now-- only to keep moving forward, even if it's... just one inch.

RACHEL

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 2026

A soft, insistent melody plays endlessly from the cell phone, relentlessly pulling Rachel Stein—sixty-five, retired, and bone-deep weary—out of fragile sleep. Her face is quietly etched with exhaustion, the delicate lines around her mouth tightening into a small, almost childlike pout. Her very long, wavy gray-white hair, braided carefully for the night, lies against her pillow like a pale river of silver.

Her extremely overweight nine-year-old Siamese cat, Beijing, jumps on the bed and lovingly rubs his body against Rachel's face.

“Good morning to you too, Beijing. I love you... you know that, right?” she murmurs. Beijing answers with a soft, knowing meow, then deliberately brushes his tail along Rachel's chin, as if offering comfort only he can give.

Rachel slowly sits up, her gaze drifting—almost helplessly—toward the photograph of her grandmother resting on the nightstand. The sadness in her eyes deepens, pooling quietly as she studies the familiar face frozen in time. She exhales a long, heavy sigh, silences the endlessly ringing cell phone, and rises with weary resolve before disappearing into the bathroom.

Rachel returns twenty-five minutes later, dressed in the crisp white uniform of a volunteer preparing for a day in a hospital—a long-sleeved blouse, loose white pants, and clean white tennis shoes. Her long, wavy gray-white hair, once braided for sleep, is now neatly coiled into a firm bun high at the back of her head, a small gesture of order and readiness.

Beijing hops gracefully onto one of the wooden kitchen chairs, watching her intently, as though he senses the quiet shift in her mood and purpose.

Rachel sets her cell phone on the counter and scrolls through her playlist until the familiar, buoyant music of the '60s and '70s begins to fill the kitchen, warming the quiet space with nostalgic energy. She opens the pantry door and reaches for her red apron hanging from its hook. As she ties the strings behind her waist, she walks to the refrigerator, retrieving a carton of eggs—only seven left—and a cool container of sour cream.

Beijing watches her with unwavering, almost theatrical anticipation, his eyes wide and hopeful. He lets out a pleading meow, as though reminding her that breakfast, in his opinion, should always begin with him.

“I know you want some of the sour cream, Baby, but you know what the vet said... you need to lose a few pounds.”

Beijing meows again, but with a louder, demanding tone.

“No. Don't argue with me. I'm putting my foot down because I love you.”

Beijing pleads with his eyes.

Rachel grabs an egg from the carton.

“How would you like your egg today... scrambled or sunny side up?”

Beijing, of course, doesn't understand.

“Okay, I'll make it scrambled as usual.”

She opens the bottom cabinet and retrieves a small frying pan, and sets it on the stove. A pat of butter slips into the pan and begins to melt with a soft hiss as she turns on the burner. While the butter spreads and bubbles, she cracks an egg into a small bowl, whisking it rapidly

until it froths, then pours the mixture into the warming pan. She crosses to the sink and picks up Beijing's bowl just as he hops down from the chair and pads eagerly to her side, his tail flicking with anticipation. When the scrambled egg is ready, she tilts the pan and lets the fluffy portion plop neatly into his bowl.

Beijing releases a low, satisfied meow, the kind that sounds almost like gratitude.

Rachel sets Beijing's bowl on the floor, then washes and dries her hands, feeling a small tinge of happiness now that she's moving into a task she loves. She pulls a rectangular baking pan and a large bowl from the lower cupboard and sets them on the table, the familiar rhythm of baking already easing her morning. From the upper cupboard, she gathers the ingredients—honey, flour, baking soda, baking powder, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, Kosher salt, almonds. Each item joins the growing collection on the table, not as a shield against sadness but as part of a warm, steady ritual she's come to rely on. She's making a honey cake for the nurses in the hospital today, and the thought brings a quiet sense of purpose that settles her more than anything else has this morning.

Rachel pulls the chair out with her foot and sits, drawing the bowl closer. She makes the honey cake the way her grandmother taught her. She measures the flour, the sugar, the spices, each scoop a small act of intention. The scent of cinnamon and nutmeg rises as she mixes, filling the kitchen with a quiet comfort that settles around her like a familiar blanket. Honey drips in a slow, golden ribbon, catching the light before disappearing into the batter. She stirs with a little more energy now, the rhythm grounding her, reminding her why she makes this cake—because the nurses look forward to it, because it brings a moment of sweetness into a place that needs it. When satisfied that the mixture is completely smooth,

she pours the batter into the baking pan before placing it in the oven.

Beijing finishes his breakfast and trots back to her side, brushing against her leg as if approving of the shift in her mood.

Rachel leaves the kitchen and walks to her bedroom while the honey cake bakes, the warm scent already drifting through the hallway. She slips into her light blue hospital jacket, with “Volunteer” neatly embroidered over the pocket—a small word that still gives her a sense of purpose every time she sees it. From the jacket’s pocket, she pulls out her red lanyard and lifts it over her head, her photo and name swinging into place against her chest, a quiet reminder of the work waiting for her.

An hour later, she walks down the hospital hallway carrying the neatly cellophane-wrapped honey cake, the warm sweetness trailing faintly behind her. She heads toward the nurses’ station. Two nurses look up and break into smiles the moment they see her.

“Do I spy one of your delicious honey cakes, Rachel?” asks a very pretty, slender nurse from the Philippines, her eyes lighting up.

“I hope so. No one can make it like she does,” the second nurse—blondish, intelligent-looking, and already leaning forward—adds with an eager grin.

Suddenly a calm woman’s voice blares on hospital speakers.

“Code blue, 4-2-3-5. Code blue, 4-2-3-5.”

The nurses snap to attention. Rachel doesn’t hesitate. She sets the wrapped honey cake on the counter and hurries after them, her steps quick and certain as they rush down the hall toward Room 4235.

Rachel stands near the doorway, listening to the voices filling the room. She watches the nurse from the Philippines place an oxygen mask over the elderly woman's face, her hands steady despite the urgency. The heart monitor shows a flat, unbroken line.

An elderly male physician rushes past Rachel and into the room and immediately takes command. The words exchanged between him and the nurses blur together, too fast and too soft for her to catch. The blondish nurse hands him the paddles.

“Clear!” he calls out, firm and loud, before pressing them to the patient's chest.

As the doctor delivers the second charge, Rachel's gaze drifts, her eyes fixed on the scene, but her mind slips somewhere far from the hospital room. In an instant, she is no longer standing in the doorway—she is back in a cemetery.

A thin thirty-four-year-old Rachel with long reddish-brown hair hanging softly on her shoulders, stands before one large double headstone, her face drawn tight with grief. Tears streak down her cheeks as she stares at the names of her parents carved in stone, the weight of that moment pressing into her chest just as sharply now as it did then.

Rachel stands in the cemetery beside her eighty-seven-year-old grandmother, Elizabeth, her brown eyes lowered and her pretty face lined with a lifetime of delicate wrinkles. Younger Rachel turns toward her and sees tears slipping down Elizabeth's cheeks, her expression filled with overwhelming shock and grief. The weight of it is unmistakable, settling between them in the cold, quiet air.

Elizabeth steps forward and gently places a small stone on the double headstone marked, “RUTH AND MAX STEIN, DIED TOGETHER ON DECEMBER 1980”. Her hand lingers there for a moment, trembling. She draws in a sharp breath, clutches her chest, and

collapses to the ground.

Younger Rachel's eyes widen in horror.

"Grandma!" she cries, dropping to her knees beside her.

Older Rachel's mind snaps back to the present, the memory dissolving as sound of the flatline in the hospital room comes into focus. She draws in a deep breath, slowly exhaling and shaking her head as death has taken another life.

The doctor and nurses step away sadly, their efforts futile. As they file out, Rachel turns to the nurse from the Philippines.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asks, her voice soft, but steady.

Rachel notices tears of compassion in the nurse's eyes -- no panic, no frustration, just quiet understanding.. The nurse touches Rachel's shoulder, gives a quiet, sympathetic shake of her head, and then continues down the hall with the others.

Later in the day after her hospital shift, Rachel enters a corner drugstore. A line of people, some preoccupied with their phones, forms in front of a sign, "PICK UP" at the Pharmacy. Rachel, still wearing her volunteer uniform, is two places away from the front of the queue. In the overhead paneled lights, Rachel's face appears drawn and tired with a mirage of wrinkles. She stands quietly, hands folded, as though holding herself together after a long, emotional day.

In front of her is a middle-aged African-American woman, wearing wire-rim glasses, with her long thin braids gathered neatly into a pony tail, and gigantic gold hoop earrings that sway as she shifts her weight. She's impeccably dressed, and very religious as evident by the

large rhinestone cross dangling around her neck.

The woman holds an adorable, fat-cheeked two-year-old boy on her hip. He clutches a teddy bear in one hand while he sucks his fingers on the other.

Rachel smiles at him and receives a smile of pearly white young teeth.

As the line steps forward in unison, the child drops his bear and lets out a sudden, piercing scream. The woman tries to soothe him as she steps ahead toward the pharmacist.

Rachel bends down, picks up the fallen teddy bear and holds it patiently, waiting for the right moment to return it.

“Umm, Lakeisha Sullivan. S-u-l-l- i-v-a-n.”

The pharmacist steps away from the counter and begins sorting through the plastic baskets filled with small paper bags.

The child squirms harder in his mother’s arms, kicking and twisting as if determined to escape. Rachel leans forward and offers him the teddy bear. His crying softens to a whimper as he grabs it with both hands. She turns to the woman with a warm smile.

“Looks like you have your hands full. My kids used to squirm like that.”

The woman lets out a quick laugh. “Ha! And this is mild. He’s like this when he doesn’t get enough sleep. You know how it is.”

Rachel’s face softens with a hint of regret. “Not really,” she says quietly. “I’ve taught thousands of children for forty years, but I never had one of my own.”

Lakeisha pauses just long enough for the words to land. A small flicker of empathy crosses her face before she lifts her chin and answers with a playful, weary sigh, “I dunno. After today—all day—I think I’d be game to put little Dijon here up for sale... maybe switch places

with you.”

Her tone is light, teasing, but there’s a thread of truth woven through it: exhaustion, love, and the kind of humor parents use to survive the long days.

The pharmacist returns and scans the barcode on a bag . He looks at Lakeshia.

“That’ll be forty-three eighty.”

Lakeisha has difficulty opening her purse with Dijon squirming.

“Let me find my wallet. Gimme a sec.”

Rachel reaches towards Dijon. “I can hold him for you, if you’d like.”

“He doesn’t always take to strangers, but…” She leans toward Rachel.

Rachel shifts Dijon carefully into her arms, settling his weight against her shoulder.

Lakeisha flashes a broad, grateful smile before diving back into her purse. She rummages frantically, then suddenly freezes and tilts her head back toward the ceiling.

“The kitchen table. It’s on the kitchen table.”

The pharmacist’s expression tightens. He doesn’t sigh, doesn’t speak—he simply stares, incredulous, as though this is the third time today someone has left their wallet in another zip code.

As Rachel balances Dijon on one hip, she removes a debit card from her purse.

“Have no fear, ‘Mastercard is here’,” she proclaims/

Lakeisha turns to Rachel with a look of surprise.

“No, no. I can’t.”

Rachel gives a small, reassuring half-smile as she hands Dijon back to Lakeisha.

“No problem. Don’t worry about it.”

The pharmacist swipes the card, his expression softening only slightly. Lakeisha watches him, a bemused look spreading across her face. She turns to Rachel.

“This is really... I mean, sometimes I wonder about us—humanity.” She shakes her head, still half-laughing to Rachel. “But it’s people like you...”

Rachel lets out a quiet breath, almost a chuckle. “Yeah, I wonder about us, too, sometimes.”

The pharmacist returns the credit card. He staples the receipt to Lakeisha’s bag, and hands it to her.

Lakeisha turns to Rachel. “Okay, so thanks... uh... “

“Rachel. Rachel Stein.”

“Really, really thanks, Rachel. And he’s still for sale if you’re interested.”

Rachel laughs.

Lakeshia addresses Dijon as she says, “Say ‘bye to the nice lady.”

“Bye-bye,” he says in that cute child-like way.

Rachel waves and mouths, “bye” to Lakeisha, then turns to the pharmacist.

“Hi, Burt. I need a refill of my migraine medicine . ”

Rachel exits the corner drugstore and steps into the crosswalk just as the pedestrian signal begins its countdown from 10. A few strides ahead, she spots Lakeisha walking with Dijon, their hands linked as they move toward the opposite curb. Dijon’s teddy bear slips from his grasp again, tumbling onto the crosswalk behind him.

Lakeisha, is unaware, focused on reaching the curb before the light changes. She keeps walking. Just as she steps onto the sidewalk, Dijon yanks his hand free and darts back into the

street, running straight toward the fallen bear.

His mother yells loudly, “Dijon, no! Come back here!”

Rachel’s eyes widen as an old, beat-up car swings around the corner far too fast. Instinct takes over. She lunges toward Dijon, scooping him up just as the car barrels past them. She pivots backward to get them both out of its path, but the momentum throws her off balance. Her foot slips. She goes down hard. The back of her head strikes the pavement with a sharp, jarring thud. The world tilts. Colors smear. The crosswalk lines ripple like heat waves. Sound stretches and warps—the distant honk of a horn, Lakeisha’s scream, Dijon’s muffled wail—all blending into a dizzying hum as everything begins to spin around her.

RACHEL GETS BAD NEWS

Lying in a hospital bed, Rachel's eyes open to indistinct chatter. Blurred figures focus into good-looking seventy-year-old Doctor Emeryk Kopinski of Polish ancestry and an Asian nurse, who talk indistinctly.

Doctor Kopinski turns to Rachel.

"Hey, there she is. How are you? I'm Doctor Emeryk Kopinski."

Rachel winces as she touches the bandage on her head.

"Like a drum... a massive one... is pounding in my head."

"Well, you banged your head pretty good, so that doesn't surprise me."

He leans over and uses a penlight to check her eyes.

"Follow my finger with your eyes without moving your head."

He moves an index finger to the right, then left as he watches her eye movement. He holds her hands.

"Squeeze my fingers."

She grips him tightly. He removes the blanket from her legs.

"Can you wiggle your toes?"

She wiggles the toes of both legs.

"Good. Good."

He sits on the edge of her bed.

“We did X-rays and an MRI. If all is good, I’ll give the thumbs up to discharge you.

In the meantime, let us know if you’re feeling any dizziness or nausea.”

“Uh, I will. Thank you, doctor.”

As the doctor strides toward the door, the nurse lays a warm, thin blanket over Rachel’s, the warmth echoing the compassion in her eyes.

“This should keep you warm. You know, you were lucky.”

Rachel sighs deeply and nods. “It was a close call.”

“When I was a teenager,” the Nurse adds, “I had a near-death experience, too.”

Rachel eyebrows rise. She looks intently at her.

“I went to church and questioned God why I was still alive.”

“Yes, I’m wondering the same thing.”

As the nurse leaves, Rachel touches the bandages on her head and scans the room. She double takes at the sight of a large rhinestone cross. It’s Lakeisha, who’s buried in her phone.

“Ms. Sullivan. Lakeisha?” A concerned expression overtakes her face. “Is Dijon okay?”

Lakeisha looks with a startled expression that turns to wonder.

“Oh my God...”

Lakeisha makes her way to the hospital bed and pats Rachel’s hand.

“He’s fine. He’s good. Thank God. And thanks to you. I mean, I joked about givin’ him away, but... “

Tears well in Lakeisha’s eyes as she stares and sniffles.

“I’m happy he’s okay. Real happy,” Rachel says as she manages a smile.

“My husband came and got him. He’d had enough proddin’ and pokin’ for one day. And probably you too?”

“Well... You know...”

Rachel’s face contorts in anguish as she touches her head.

“Rachel? Nurse. Should I get the nurse?”

“I’m okay. I’m fine...”

Lakeisha wears an incredulous expression.

Rachel continues, “It’s just that... I could feel the car whisk by me with just one inch separating us. It’s strange, but one inch has been lucky for me and my ancestors.”

“One inch?”

Rachel nods. “We... We were this close to dying.” She holds her fingers close together. “This close. Me and Dijon. And I... I’m thinking... Well actually, I’m not sure what I’m thinking.”

Rachel searches Lakeisha’s curious eyes.

“The truth is... I don’t want to burden you,” she says as she musters a smile again. “And anyway, it’s probably nothing.”

Lakeisha smiles as she pats Rachel’s hand again.

“Sorry, listenin’ to the superhero who just saved my kid’s life. I wouldn’t call that a burden.”

Rachel bites her lip, then after several long seconds- - “I’m thinking... Who would’ve cared if I died. Who?” She looks up at the ceiling to prevent a tear from falling. “Everyone in my family’s passed on. Everyone. It’s just me... Just me.”

Rachel's tears flow as Lakeisha has an empathetic expression. Lakeisha pulls a tissue from a box nearby and hands it to her.

“What about your friends?”

Rachel shakes her head ‘no’, and wipes her eyes.

“They moved away or died. All of them. Every last one of them.”

Rachel stares sadly into space, then at Lakeisha.

“And all this today has me thinking... exactly what is all of this about?”

Lakeisha's eyebrows rise in surprise.

“I mean, for 40 years my purpose was teaching. It gave meaning to my life. But, last week... Last week I retired. And that... along with the near miss today makes me question, why am I still alive? What is my purpose now?”

Rachel wipes tears from her cheeks as Lakeisha twirls the cross between her forefinger and thumb while she thinks.

“My auntie. When she was about your age, she had a stroke. Paralyzed one whole side of her body. I went to see her, and I was expectin’... I don’t know what I was expectin’, but nothin’ good.” She sighs. “I get there, and she’s sittin’ up in the bed with this huge smile, happy to see me. She says she’s okay because if she’s still alive, if she’s still standin’, it must mean God has another plan for her.”

Rachel looks with a furrowed brow as she ponders.

“I don’t know. For me. I don’t...”

Dr. Kopinski knocks on the door and approaches.

Lakeisha takes note of his serious look.

“I can come by a little later, if you’d like. Okay?”

“No, please, I’d like you to stay,” Rachel replies with pleading eyes.

Lakeisha nods and steps back to her chair.

Doctor Kopinski steps in closer to Rachel. “Well, I’m sorry to say, the MRI revealed a tumor,” he says sadly as he looks into Rachel’s eyes.

Lakeisha shakes her head in disbelief as Rachel stares at the Doctor with gaping mouth.

“What? I fell, and now I have a brain tumor?”

“From the size of it, apparently, you’ve had this for quite a while. Have you had any headaches, blurred vision, or dizziness?”

Rachel nods. “I’ve been getting migraines.”

“Well, my advice is to remove the tumor before it metastasizes and becomes inoperable.”

Rachel angrily shakes her head.

“I don’t want the operation. I just want to go home.”

Lakeisha’s eyebrows furrow, and Dr. Kopinski’s face shows his disappointment with her decision.

“This is not something to be taken lightly. It’s terminal. You understand, if we don’t operate, you will probably have only six months to a year at the most.”

“Six months... Six years... What does it matter? I have nothing to live for.”

“Why don’t you take a moment to give it more thought. I can come back later.”

Rachel stares out the window, doesn’t reply.

Dr. Kopinski shakes his head in bewilderment as he leaves.

Rachel looks at Lakeisha.

“I’d like to go for a walk. Clear my mind. Can you help me up?”

“Um... that was a nasty fall you took. You sure?”

“Barring it didn’t knock the last of the common sense out of my head... I’m sure.”

Rachel swings her legs to the side of the bed, then Lakeisha helps her stand. Rachel dons her volunteer jacket over her hospital gown, then slips her feet into hospital slippers.

“There. See... I’m fine.”

Rachel and Lakeisha walk to the end of the hall. They stop to read the large letters of a quote on the wall.

“I FOUND A FRUITFUL WORLD BECAUSE MY ANCESTORS PLANTED IT
FOR ME. LIKEWISE, I AM PLANTING IT FOR MY CHILDREN.

TALMUD TAANIT 23A.”

“That’s very profound, isn’t it?” Rachel asks. “Our ancestors struggled and sacrificed so much so we could have a better life, and then pass that world on to the next generation, and the next...”

A flicker of sadness crosses Rachel’s face. She turns to Lakeisha and says softly, “Mine did for me. But... I let them down.”

Lakeisha nods as Rachel’s lips begin to tremble.

Then through tears Rachel murmurs, “I’m the last leaf on my family tree. It’s a shame it all ends with me. My ancestors suffered... their lives were spared for what? After everything they went through, this is how our family ends?”

Rachel looks at the wall again, and sighs deeply.

“I never married. It always seemed like there was plenty of time. And there was, until there wasn’t.”

“Ah, you’re talkin’ the ‘M’ word, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Menopause. And it has pretty much guaranteed the family legacy ends with me. The last leaf. So, that’s why I think I’ve let my ancestors down.”

Lakeisha momentarily touches Rachel’s shoulder.

“I think you’re wrong,” she says, her voice warm but steady. “I’m sure they’re up there lookin’ down on how you made a difference in so many lives. Be proud of yourself. Look at what you’ve accomplished. You’ve molded the minds of hundreds of students. No doubt in my mind they’re proud.”

Rachel glances down. “I grew up on stories from my grandmother about my great grandfather. They struggled and sacrificed and yet persevered.”

After a second, Lakeisha adds, “I’d love to hear more ‘bout your ancestors.”

”I don’t know,” Rachel hesitates. “Well... if you’re sure you want to hear it.”

Lakeisha smiles as she nods.

“But it’s a long story. I’m not sure we have time for all of that. I mean...Dijon’s got to be asking for his mom.”

“I have time... and his dad’s takin’ care of him. Let’s sit. Yes. Let’s sit over there.”

She points toward a row of chairs against the wall.

“I want to hear the whole story. Don’t leave anything out.”

As the women sit, Lakeisha leans in with anticipation.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

AUGUST, 1897

It is the end of 1897, and Tsar Nikolay Aleksandrovich Romanov — Nicholas II, Emperor of All the Russias — sits on the throne of a vast empire. His early reign has brought new schools, literacy campaigns, and efforts to modernize a nation straddling two centuries. For the moment, Russia enjoys a rare stretch of calm, a brief season of optimism before the storms that lie ahead.

A large moon among incessant stars of a cloudless sky casts just enough light on a small charming rustic village of unpainted wooden houses with grass growing on the roofs. The smoke from their chimneys floats straight up on this windless night.

In the far distance, it's very dark, but in the moonlight we can just make out many horsemen, members of the Royal Guard, in red Russian Royal uniforms, wool hats, tall black boots, with their long sabers holstered at their sides. The sound of the many horses galloping is almost deafening. Besides the sound of their hooves, the whinnying and snorting of the horses can be heard. The night air is cold and damp with winter snow about to fall. It is so cold, in fact, that the horses' breaths can be seen. Dust flies everywhere from the dirt road as they swiftly gallop toward the village. It's obvious they're on an urgent mission. The wooden houses appear larger as they gallop closer.

The sound of the many cavalry horses galloping gets louder and louder.

As they near the village, happy Russian music is heard playing in one of the candlelit houses, and the smell of sourdough rye bread permeates the night air.

The music gets louder and louder as the horsemen approach one particular house.

Inside the unpainted wooden house, thirtyish Vladimir Kaminskaya wears peasant tunic clothes, has reddish hair that matches the color of his short mustache and short neatly trimmed beard, and wears wire-rim glasses. He sings as he plays Russian music on his Balalaika in a large candlelit room.

His twentyish wife, Svetlana, who has a small mole on her right cheek, wears an apron over her plain peasant skirt and blouse. She dances in front of the fireplace with their barefoot daughter, precocious four-year-old Elizabeth, who has reddish-brown hair, brown eyes, and wears a pink smock.

The cavalry slows down until finally stopping in front of the house filled with merriment.

One rider with a very long mustache jumps off his horse, with both boots landing in unison firmly on the dirt road. He swiftly approaches the door as another soldier holds onto the rider's reins. The rider walks with a purpose as he approaches the door of the house. He bangs on the door, then twirls the end of his mustache, and bangs again.

The music stops.

Little Elizabeth rushes to look out through the lace curtains in the window. Vladimir quickly follows.

Elizabeth's face lights up with excitement and a big smile at what she sees.

“Horsees”

Vladimir looks out the window. He is shocked at what he sees. His eyes widen in fear, and his jaw drops. He turns around, signals with a quivering finger over his mouth to

Svetlana and Elizabeth to be quiet. He grabs Elizabeth's arm, and scurries her to Svetlana.

Pounding on the door startles Elizabeth. She screams.

Vladimir shakes his head, afraid. Svetlana motions insisting he do.

Elizabeth notices her father's fear, starts to cry, then hides behind her mother. Svetlana picks her up, tries to comfort her.

The rusty door creaks as it opens slowly.

Vladimir is shocked to see the man at his door. He looks at the other men on horses behind, all look similar with long mustaches and long beards. He notices two riderless horses, then looks at the rider whose face is lit by the candlelight coming from inside.

The rider holds his chin high, a sign of his arrogance and pride.

“Are you Vladimir Kaminskaya?”

Vladimir nods nervously. He looks at the men on horses again.

“I am Sergei Abramevich of his Majesty's Royal Court. Tsar Nicolas II demands your presence. You are to come with us.”

Vladimir's body shakes in dreaded fear.

“But why? I have done nothing wrong.”

Svetlana rushes to Vladimir holding Elizabeth. She stands directly behind Vladimir and looks out to see all the riders.

The sight of Sergei frightens Elizabeth. She hugs her mother as she averts her eyes.

Sergei angrily demands, “Get on the horse. I have no time to explain. His Royal Highness awaits.”

“Vladimir, what's happening? Are you being arrested?”

“I don’t know, Svetlana. Go back inside.”

Svetlana stays at the door as she and Elizabeth watch Vladimir and Sergei mount the horses and gallop off.

VLADIMIR LEARNS HIS FATE

Vladimir, Sergei, and the horsemen ride under an arch to enter the red with yellow trimmed palace. Only the sound of the horses' hooves on the cobblestones is heard.

Vladimir sweats profusely as he follows Sergei through white gilded doors of the Great Throne Room revealing a long ornate rectangular room. The sound of people talking suddenly stops.

As Vladimir walks, he looks up at the three-tiered chandeliers and the white columns along the sides of the room. He notices several people looking at him as they walk along the second-floor balcony that surrounds the room.

Muffled voices are heard as Vladimir and Sergei walk closer towards the twenty-nine-year-old Tsar seated in the distance. Tsar Nicholas II, who wears a black uniform with a gold epaulette on each shoulder, light blue sash with lots of medals, sits on his red and gold throne. He speaks to his wife, the Tsarina seated next to him.

Sergei and Vladimir stop at the bottom of the red carpeted stairs leading to the Tsar. Sergei quickly bows. Vladimir copies the bow.

"Your Majesty," Sergei says as he backs up to join many other men in uniform at the side.

Vladimir fearfully stands alone in front of the first step to the throne. Thoughts go through his mind., "*What have I done? Am I going to be executed?*"

It is eerily quiet now.

Vladimir notices the wall behind the Tsar having a two-headed gold eagle on red tapestry, the Tsar's symbol of power. He has a closer look at the handsome Tsar with well-trimmed beard, thick mustache curved to his ears, and receding hairline. He eyes the Tsar's stunning German wife, Alexandra seated to the left of the Tsar holding their six-month baby daughter, Tatiana. Alexandra has reddish-brown hair, large blue eyes and wears an elaborately embroidered white lace dress, blue sash, pearl necklace with a diamond and pearl crown. The display of jewels is over-the-top exhibiting great wealth.

Vladimir gulps.

The Tsar furrows his brows as he takes note of Vladimir eyeing his wife.

The baby squirms and cries in the Tsarina's lap.

"Hush, Tatiana," Alexandra orders.

Vladimir notices a two-year-old daughter, Olga with blue eyes, light chestnut hair, short snubby nose, and is dressed like the Tsarina in an embroidered white lace dress. She sits on the floor next to her mother.

Alexandra looks to the plain-looking Irish Nanny, Margaretta on her left who speaks with a Limerick accent.

"Margaretta, take Olga and Tatiana to the nursery."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Nicholas impatiently watches the Nanny leave with the children. He looks sternly at Vladimir.

"You are Vladimir Kaminskaya?"

Vladimir nods his head slowly in a kind of bow.

“I am, Your Majesty.”

“I am told you are the only one in the village who knows how to read and write. Is that so?”

“Yes, Sire, in seven languages, French, English, Italian, Russian, German, Polish, and Yiddish.”

The Tsar’s posture straightens. He furrows his brows, looks displeased and speaks with a condescending tone.

“You are a Jew?”

Vladimir looks down, fearful of what might happen if he says “yes”. He has a big sigh before he looks up at the Tsar. In a soft voice he answers, “Yes, Sire.”

Vladimir forehead sweats profusely as he looks at Sergei, then nervously back at the Tsar.

“Your Majesty, is that a problem?”

The Tsar again speaks in a condescending tone.

“I thought my father, Tsar Alexander, expelled all the Jews during the Pogrom.”

Vladimir looks sadly down at the floor.

Nicholas studies Vladimir for a few silent seconds.

Vladimir raises his head, speaks with emotion in his voice.

“Your Majesty, have I done something wrong? Am I being accused of something?”

Nicholas looks at his wife, who smiles. The Tsar smiles back, relaxes his posture.

“Vladimir Kaminskaya, I have heard you are a good man, that you are a hard worker and do as you are told.”

Vladimir nods his head over and over nervously in agreement

The Tsar continues. "I have decided that you will be my scribe. You will write the legal documents and laws as I decree. You will also write my messages so the leaders of other countries who do not speak our language will understand what I am saying. You will also translate all replies and books I wish to read. Do you understand?"

Vladimir is relieved and smiles.

"Yes, Sire."

"You will always be available to me. You will live in a guest room at each palace with your wife and child, and you will be well-provided."

The Tsarina nods. "I hear your wife is a good cook."

Vladimir's eyebrows rise, surprised the Tsarina knows that.

"Yes, a great cook, Your Majesty. She makes the most delicious breaded cutlets."

"Well then," Tsar Nicholas chimes in, "she will cook alongside my chef, Pierre Cubat."

"She will be honored, Your Majesty."

Nicholas leans forward in his throne, looks sternly at him.

"You will be carefully watched at all times Vladimir Kaminskaya. You and your family will not leave this palace or its gardens for any reason unless I command it. Again, do you understand?"

Vladimir nods.

Tsar Nicholas motions Sergei to come forward.

"Sergei here, will show you to your quarters. We will start in the morning."

"Yes, Sire. Thank you."

Nicholas waves them away.

Vladimir and Sergei bow as they walk backwards a few steps, then turn around, and head for the door.

Vladimir leans closer to Sergei and whispers, “What happened to the last scribe?”

Sergei stops, looks at Vladimir. “He was executed for disobeying the Tsar.”

Vladimir’s eyes widen.

LIFE IN THE PALACE

PETERHOF PALACE, 1901-1907

Of the six palaces the Romanovs possess, the royal family chooses to divide their lives mainly among the Winter Palace, the Alexander Palace, and Peterhof. Wherever the Tsar resides, his household follows—and that includes Vladimir and his family, whose lives shift with every change of imperial residence.

Each palace runs like a small city of its own. Besides the scribe, more than six thousand servants keep the imperial residences functioning—maids, chefs, wine stewards, coachmen, chauffeurs, footmen, court runners, musicians, stablemen, kennel boys for the pets, veterinarians, a doctor, and mechanics for the endless carriages and the growing fleet of automobiles. Over the course of his reign, Nicholas II will own twenty-two cars, seventeen reserved for his entourage and five for the royal family. Four are Delaunay-Belleville limousines, though the Tsar himself prefers the open Cabriolets.

The Romanov servants live far better than most people in the empire. Housing and meals are provided, and those who grow old in service receive a pension, along with schooling for their children. The new scribe, Vladimir Kaminskaya, and his wife, Svetlana, will share in these privileges. While Svetlana works in the Imperial kitchen and Vladimir transcribes for the Tsar, their daughter Elizabeth will have access to the palace grounds, its gardens, and the company of the Romanov children. She will study beside them under the same tutors, growing up cultured, educated, and far removed from the life her parents once knew.

The palace maids are all foreign-born women who came to Russia with Alexandra and are paid from the Tsarina's private accounts. None are married, and Alexandra keeps them apart from the rest of the servants and from public view. They are easy to distinguish by their simple black gowns and the small ribbon bows they wear in their hair.

The Romanovs keep a select corps of Abyssinian Guards stationed outside the Tsar's private rooms. These elite Ethiopian soldiers were gifts from the Emperor of Ethiopia, and only these tall Christian Black men are permitted to open the doors for the Imperial couple. They wear black wool coats embroidered with gold double-headed eagles, short white jackets, crimson velvet vests, wide woolen trousers, and either a red turban or a velvet fez with a gold tassel. Among them stands Jim Hercules, a former American and British boxer whose imposing presence has become a quiet legend within the palace.

While Svetlana works in the Imperial kitchen and Vladimir transcribes for the Tsar, Elizabeth will have access to the palace grounds, its gardens, and the company of the Romanov children. She will be allowed to play alongside them and will study under the same tutors, growing up educated, cultured, and far more privileged than her parents ever imagined.

On June 26, 1899, the Tsar and a very pregnant Tsarina are rushed in a black six-horse carriage toward Peterhof Palace, escorted before and behind by ornately dressed royal guardsmen. The mustard-colored and white palace—Russia's answer to France's Versailles—rises above the Gulf of Finland in all its summer splendor. It is the Romanovs' favorite residence, a place of warmth, celebration, and escape from the formality of St. Petersburg. In the lower gardens, 173 fountains glitter in the sunlight, their gilded statues, spouting jets, and cascading water tumbling toward the sea in a spectacle unmatched anywhere in the empire.

“Quickly, take her to the bedroom,” Nicholas orders his servants.

The Abyssinian Guards open the doors as Tsarina Alexandra is carried into her bedroom. The room has the look of an English garden, its walls, upholstery, and curtains covered in a shiny chintz pattern of pink ribbons, green wreaths, and delicate flowers on a white background. Above the pillows, the wall is crowded with religious items and icons, and to the right of the bed stands a small private chapel, a quiet sanctuary for the deeply devout Tsarina.

Alexandra lies on the bed, the overhead drapes pulled back and tied with heavy gold tassels. Angela dabs a cool cloth across the Tsarina’s brow as she cries out in pain. Nicholas stands near the small chapel, watching anxiously, his hands clasped behind his back. Each time Alexandra screams, he winces and begins to pace, helpless to do anything but pray and wait.

Dr. Eugene Botkin rushes into the room and bows to the Tsar.

“Your Majesty,” he says, then immediately lifts the bedsheet to shield the Tsarina’s modesty as he slips beneath it to assist with the delivery.

An hour later, Dr. Botkin emerges from beneath the bedsheet and lifts the newborn for the Tsar to see.

“Congratulations, Your Majesty. You have a daughter.”

He hands the baby to Angela, who quickly cleans her and wraps her in a soft blanket. Angela then places the child into the arms of the excited Tsarina.

As Alexandra holds the baby’s tiny hand, she kisses her daughter again and again on the forehead. She looks up and smiles at Nicholas, who now sits beside them on the bed.

“Your Highness,” Dr. Botkin says as he nods to the Tsar, waiting for permission to withdraw.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Nicholas replies, returning the nod.

The Abyssinian Guards open the gilded door for the physician to leave.

Angela smiles as she curtsies and follows him out.

Nicholas leans in and kisses Alexandra gently on the forehead.

“Thank you, my love.”

Totally exhausted, Alexandra smiles proudly as she hands the baby to Nicholas.

“What shall we call her?” the Tsar asks looking affectionately into the baby’s eyes.

“Nicky, why not name her Maria after your mother?”

Nicholas nods as he gently rocks the newborn, who immediately falls sound asleep.

“Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna. Welcome to our family,” he whispers softly.

Jim Hercules opens the door, and Angela enters holding the hands of Olga, who is four, and Tatiana, who is two. The little girls break free and run to their parents at once. The Tsar lifts a hand, motioning for them to be quiet, then proudly bends to show them the sleeping baby in his arms.

Next to the palace, the royal kitchen is housed in a smaller building called Monplaisir. The Imperial Pantry is lined with blue-and-white glazed Dutch scenic tiles that cover the walls from floor to ceiling, a white fireplace glowing at its center, and pewter pans hanging neatly from wooden racks. The floor resembles a chessboard with its crisp pattern of black-and-white squares.

Eight-year-old Elizabeth stands on a chair beside the long wooden kitchen table, her white frilly dress puffing around her knees and a large red bow tied neatly into her braided hair. She watches with bright, eager eyes as Svetlana—wearing her customary white pinafore apron

over a black dress—gathers a bowl, flour, and honey, setting each item before her with practiced, gentle movements

“Lizzie, someday you’ll have a family of your own, so it is important for you to learn how to cook,” Svetlana says with a smile.

“I want to cook just like you, Mama.”

As Elizabeth beams, French Chef Pierre Cubat—clean-shaven, dark hair slicked back beneath his white chef’s hat, his double-breasted jacket crisp, his black-and-white patterned trousers immaculate, his apron spotless—walks past carrying a large roasted pig on a silver platter. He overhears the conversation and speaks with a French accent. He stops, plants one hand on his hip, and turns to look sternly at Elizabeth.

“What? You don’t like my cooking?”

“I do, but I like Mama’s better.”

Chef Cubat glances at Svetlana.

She only shrugs with a small smile before looking back at her daughter.

“Lizzie, Pierre is a famous chef.”

Cubat lifts his chin in pride as he sets the roasted pig on the table.

Svetlana continues, “You would do well to learn from both of us.”

“Yes, Mama.”

As Svetlana wipes her hands with a tea towel, she meets Chef Cubat’s eyes, and he nods approvingly.

“Watch, Lizzie. I’m going to show you how to make the most delicious honey cake that Pierre and I have created. The Romanovs love it.”

Pierre kisses the tips of his fingers, “*le pièce de resistance.*”

Svetlana grabs some flour and tosses it on the counter.

A Royal Waiter hurries in.

“They have another daughter,” he announces happily.

“That’s wonderful,” Svetlana says, turning to Cubat. “We should make a special dessert for tonight. What do you think, Pierre?”

“Yes,” he replies, “I think Clafouti aux Cerises.”

“And what is that?” Svetlana asks.

“It is a puffed French custard cake with cherries. I think it would be the perfect gift from us, since both the Tsar and Tsarina love cherries.”

“See, Lizzie, cooking is an expression of your love,” Svetlana says gently.

Over time, Elizabeth will return to the kitchen again and again, learning to cook in a style that becomes a blend of her mother’s warmth and Cubat’s precision. She has no way of knowing it now, but the lessons Svetlana teaches her—measuring by feel, stretching ingredients, making something comforting out of almost nothing—will one day become the very skills that help her survive.

That night the Romanovs celebrate the newborn at dinner.

The waiters at the Royal table are always men. They are chosen for their breeding, good looks, cleanliness, and are required to be tall. They always wear a white tie and gloves along with their formal suit. They, and the chefs, travel from palace to palace with the Romanovs.

The waiters bring the first course, which is barley soup. This is followed by fish, then a course of breaded cutlets with vegetables, potatoes, and black bread. As a vegetarian, Alexandra

has a vegetable casserole and salad. The final course is the Clafouti aux Cerises for dessert.

On August 12, 1904, eleven-year-old Elizabeth and nine-year-old Olga walk arm-in-arm along the dirt path leading toward the yellow palace. Olga, already shooting up in height and sporting the charming gap between her front teeth, towers protectively over Elizabeth. The beautifully manicured gardens of the Peterhof Palace unfurl around them—rows of clipped hedges, bursts of summer flowers, and the distant shimmer of fountains catching the morning sun.

Walking a few steps behind them are seven-year-old Tatiana, her reddish hair catching the light, and five-year-old Maria, round-cheeked and rosy, working a little harder to keep pace. The nanny, Margareta, follows with three-year-old Anastasia's small hand tucked securely in her own. Anastasia, a chubby blue-eyed child with short reddish hair and tiny blunt bangs, walks beside Margareta with determined little steps. Each girl is dressed in white, her braid finished with a pastel ribbon that echoes the color of her sash belt.

From somewhere deep inside the palace, the Tsarina screams—a raw, startling sound that slices through the quiet morning. Elizabeth and Olga stop at once, their hands locking together.

“Oh... my... God, Olga!” Elizabeth yells, her voice trembling.

They exchange a wide-eyed look before turning urgently toward the children.

Maria hides her face in Margareta's skirt, while Anastasia bursts into tears. Margareta lifts Anastasia into her arms and murmurs soft reassurances, trying to calm her.

Elizabeth steps forward with her arms outstretched.

“Tatiana, Maria, come here!” Olga calls out.

Tatiana and Maria run to them at once, pressing into Elizabeth and Olga in a tight,

protective group hug.

Olga continues, "It's okay. It's only Mama giving birth again. You should be used to Mama's screams by now."

She looks at Elizabeth, "I hope it's a boy this time, otherwise, we'll be hearing more of her screaming. She's just going to keep giving birth until they have an heir."

Inside the Palace bedroom, Alexandra sweats profusely trying to give birth.

She screams. "No, no, I can't. I can't do this!"

The doctor has a serious look as he comes out from under the bedsheet between the Tsarina's legs. He shakes his head at the Tsar.

"But you will, Lexy. I command it!", Nicholas orders.

Alexandra looks sternly at him. "You command it?"

She screams as she pushes the baby out, then falls back onto her pillow totally drained of energy.

The doctor bows as he places the newborn in Nicholas's arms. Nicholas's face breaks into a radiant, almost disbelieving smile.

"A son. A son. I have a son!"

He turns toward Alexandra, his eyes shining.

"Yes, Nicky. We have a son."

The bedroom doors are opened by two tall Abyssinian Guards as the children and Elizabeth fearfully look in.

Nicholas smiles proudly at his new baby and kisses its forehead. As he looks into the baby's eyes, it suddenly urinates into his face.

Alexandra covers her mouth to hide her laughter, then presses a hand to her heart at the tender sight.

“It’s okay,” Nicholas says with a laugh.

A female servant steps forward and hands the Tsar a towel. He wipes his face with one hand while cradling his son securely in the other. He looks toward the children still gathered in the doorway.

“Look, children, you have a brother.”

Elizabeth and Olga throw their arms around each other in delight, while the younger children jump up and down with joy.

The Tsar carries the baby as he passes the children, moving through one ornate room after another until he reaches the Grand Hall, where a large gathering awaits news of the newborn.

Nicholas rushes in as servants pull open the double doors.

Everyone bows in unison. Nicholas smiles proudly.

“It’s a boy! I have a son!”

He lifts the baby high.

“Hail Tsarevich Alexei!”

The hall erupts in cheers of “Ura!”

Later in the Palace Guest Room, Svetlana stands beside a small but ornate table, pouring tea into a glass from a samovar.

Vladimir sits at a small wooden desk in front of the window, writing in a journal with a quill he dips into an inkpot every few seconds.

Svetlana walks up behind Vladimir carefully not to spill the tea, and places it on the desk next to him. Leaning over to hug her cheek to his, a gold heart-shaped pendant on a black velvet choker emerges.

“What are you writing, Vladimir?”

He stops writing and looks up at her.

“I’m writing a reminder to inform the Tsar the population has doubled, resulting in overcrowding with destitute living conditions.”

Svetlana nods slowly in understanding. She turns to the window and watches Elizabeth, a proud smile softening her face.

“She has become a beautiful young woman, has she not?”

Vladimir looks out the window as well, watching the children appear to age before his eyes as they run through a labyrinth of tall hedges in a game of tag.

Eight-year-old Alexei, with blue eyes and brown hair, wears dark trousers and a white sailor shirt with a matching hat as he holds onto Olga’s hand while they walk. Olga, now with wavy shoulder-length hair, carries a book tucked against her side, having become an avid reader.

Their handsome French tutor, Pierre Gilliard, supervises them.

Elizabeth, now nineteen, her reddish-brown hair braided down her back, wears a dark olive-green vest over a lighter olive-green blouse and skirt. She laughs as she runs with her hands stretched out, fingers wiggling to grab Alexei.

Margaretta and Pierre Gilliard watch as Elizabeth chases the happily screaming heir to the throne around a fountain.

The fountain in the formal garden is surrounded by manicured hedges and brilliantly

colored flowers designed by Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Le Blond. Their dogs bark as they race alongside the children, while their cats prowl through the thick clusters of flower bushes.

“I’m the big, bad wolf, and I’m going to get you,” she tells Alexei.

Alexei giggles.

“Watch out, Alexei,” Pierre Gilliard warns. “Lizzie’s right behind you.”

Alexei screams like a girl and excitedly lets go of Olga’s hand. He grins as he runs away, with the tutor frantically chasing after him.

Elizabeth joins Olga as they walk on.

Each Romanov girl now wears a knee-length dark blue jumper with white polka dots, their hair loose and cut just past the shoulders, and tied back with a large white bow.

They are followed by fifteen-year-old Tatiana, who looks like a younger version of the Tsarina; thirteen-year-old Maria, who constantly glances around to see if anyone is watching; and eleven-year-old mischievous Anastasia, who promptly trips Maria. As they approach the flower gardens, Olga sits with her back against a tree, opening her book to read.

Teenaged Elizabeth and Maria smile and link arms as they stroll through the maze of flower beds. The other children pick flowers here and there and chase a King Charles Cocker Spaniel. A French Bulldog, a black Pomeranian, and several kittens and cats scamper after them. Elizabeth lies down on the lawn, watching the clouds drift overhead. Maria settles beside her on her side and reties the bow at the end of Elizabeth’s long braid.

“What a glorious day this is,” Elizabeth tells her.

She points up at the sky. “Look, Maria. That one looks like your papa.”

Maria rolls onto her back and follows her gaze.

“Yes, I can see his curly mustache.”

They giggle as Maria rolls onto her stomach and looks at Elizabeth.

“Lizzie, can you keep a secret?”

Elizabeth rolls onto her side to face her, propping one hand beneath her chin like a pillow, a warm smile spreading across her face.

“Of course I can.”

Maria looks over and smiles at Pierre, who stands beneath a nearby tree watching them. She keeps her eyes on him as she speaks.

“Pierre and I kissed.”

“You did not! You’re only thirteen! Your father would kill you.”

Maria turns back to Elizabeth with a mischievous, dreamy smile.

“Well... in my dreams I did. But I’d like to.”

Elizabeth watches her go, a soft, wistful smile touching her lips.

“In my dreams,” Elizabeth replies, “I’d like to live a nice, uncomplicated life with my true love, and have a family as wonderful as yours.”

“I hope you do, because you deserve it,” Maria says as she gets up, smiles broadly, and walks briskly toward Pierre.

Anastasia approaches with a fistful of flowers, her eyes fixed on Maria laughing with Pierre beneath a nearby tree.

“She’s such a flirt,” Anastasia says. “Watch—she’s going to tilt her head, play with her braid, lick her lips, and then smile.”

Maria does exactly that.

“You sound jealous, Nastasya,” Elizabeth teases.

Anastasia turns to her with a perfectly serious expression... and then both girls dissolve into giggles.

Later, at the Grand Cascade of the palace, Elizabeth and the royal children walk to the railing overlooking the gilded statues, the cascading palatial waters, and the water jets soaring skyward. They settle onto a cement bench as a handsome young musician, Boris, plays soft, lilting music on his balalaika.

Elizabeth’s face glows with a beautiful smile, clearly smitten. She imitates Maria’s flirtatious ritual—tilting her head, touching her hair, and letting a shy, hopeful smile form as she watches him.

Boris walks closer to Elizabeth, smiling as he sings, his voice warm and directed unmistakably toward her. When he finishes the song, the last notes drift softly over the water.

“That was beautiful, Boris,” Elizabeth says, her smile bright and a little breathless.

The Tsarina steps out from the palace. “Come, everyone. Time for tea.”

The children burst into excited chatter and race toward the palace. Elizabeth lingers, walking slowly, her gaze drifting back toward Boris before she finally turns to follow the others.

Olga looks from Elizabeth to her mother, worry tightening her expression. “Mama, please. She’s such a good friend.”

“I let you socialize with her, Olga,” the Tsarina replies, calm but immovable, “but the staff and their children are not permitted to dine with us.”

“But, Mama...”

“I’m sorry. You have to respect the rules.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Olga turns back to Elizabeth with sorrow in her eyes.

Elizabeth gives her a small, reassuring smile and mouths, It’s okay. Then she turns away, her gaze drifting to Boris as he walks off across the terrace, the music still echoing faintly in her mind.

Nicholas always joins the family for tea, and today the table is set with honey cake and fresh fruit.

“This cake is delicious, Mama,” Maria says.

“I agree,” Olga adds.

Nicholas leans toward the waiter and murmurs for him to summon Pierre Cubat.

Cubat arrives within two minutes of traveling in the tunnel that connects the kitchen in Montplaisir to the palace. He enters with the quiet confidence of a man who knows he is valued in the imperial household. He bows first to the Tsarina, then to Nicholas, then to the children in order of rank.

He stands with his hands behind his back, chin up, and nods to the Tsar. He is ready to take any of the Tsar’s criticism.

“You wished to see me, Your Majesty?” he asks, his voice steady and pleasant.

“The honey cake is exceptional today, Pierre. My compliments,” Nicholas says.

Pierre bows again, a hint of pride softening his features.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. It is always an honor, but I cannot take all the credit. It was Svetlana’s idea to change the honey to wildflower and caramelize it.”

“Tell Svetlana we are pleased,” Alexandra says as she takes another mouthful of the cake.

“Yes, your Highness,” Cubat says.

As he straightens, his eyes flick briefly—almost imperceptibly—toward Maria, who sits up a little taller, her cheeks warming.

From the doorway, where she has paused on her way past the tea room, Elizabeth witnesses the small exchange. She lingers only a second before moving on, reminded once more of the invisible line that separates her world from theirs.

REVOLUTION

February - March, 1917

From 1904-1905 Russia fights a war with Japan. Russia's war with Japan is a conflict the imperial government expects to win quickly and decisively. Instead, the opposite unfolds. Russian forces suffer catastrophic losses on land and sea. The fall of Port Arthur and the destruction of the Baltic Fleet shock the empire. Newspapers across Europe describe the defeat as unprecedented for a major European power.

The crushing and humiliating defeat contributes to civil unrest among the Soviet people, and spreads throughout the Soviet empire. The humiliation reverberates far beyond the battlefield as food shortages, inflation, and military casualties fuel public anger. Workers strike in major cities; peasants revolt in the countryside. Revolutionary groups—long simmering beneath the surface—gain momentum and followers.

Inside the palace, the atmosphere shifts. Nicholas faces criticism from ministers, generals, and even members of the court. The Tsarina worries about the children's safety as unrest grows near the capital. Servants whisper about protests and strikes; guards become more vigilant. Elizabeth, positioned between the royal family and the staff, senses the tension from both sides.

Elizabeth's world becomes more precarious, as class boundaries harden and suspicion grows. Maria and Olga begin to notice the strain on their parents, even if they don't fully understand it. Boris, Pierre Cubat, and other staff members may feel the pressure of rising

unrest more directly. The children's carefree days at Peterhof begin to contrast sharply with the

In the spring of 1917 a large crowd of furious Russian men, women, and children wearing long coats to the ankles, men wearing hats, and women wearing babushkas carry flags and signs as they demonstrate in the streets of St. Petersburg. Their shouts fill the air like thunder.

Led by Father Georgy Gapon, thousands of workers and their families move through the streets of St. Petersburg toward the Winter Palace singing the national anthem as snow swirls around them. They carry icons, portraits of the Tsar, and petitions for better wages, safer working conditions, and a voice in their own government. Some people protest because of the lack of bread, women demand equal rights, and some textile workers demand higher wages because of the rising prices of food and goods. Their procession is peaceful, solemn, and full of hope. Their goal is simple: to present a petition directly to Nicholas II. They believe the Tsar will listen to them, protect them, and help them. Many even carry his portrait as a sign of loyalty.

But the next day, having received no response from the palace, some people feel the Tsar doesn't care about them and they break store windows and loot while others attack and beat police officers. During the next two days, workers in factories and shops throughout the capital go on strike and are joined by students and teachers.

"Down with the war!", all the men shout.

"*Daite Khleb*. Give us more bread!" the women shout.

"Down with the Tsar!!" all men, women, and children demand.

With Germany advancing and taking over Europe, Tsar Nicholas fears the Germans will

invade Russia. His suspicions prove correct when Germany declares war on Russia, and it plunges Russia into chaos.

Nicholas stands tall as his valet fastens the last pieces of his Cossack uniform, the dark fabric and polished buttons catching the morning light. Across the room, Alexandra kneels in the small bedroom chapel, her head bowed, lips moving in silent prayer. When she finishes, she rises slowly, makes the sign of the cross, and steps toward him with worry clouding her eyes.

“Nikki, promise me you won’t fight with the men.”

“I’m going to the battlefield, Alix, but rest assured, I won’t be fighting. This war will be over soon.”

“I hope so. I have a bad feeling.” Her voice softens. “I will pray for your safe return, my love.”

She kisses him gently, then turns back into the chapel to light a candle, her silhouette framed by the flickering glow.

At the doorway, small footsteps shuffle. Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia stand clustered together, still in their morning dresses, unsure whether they’re allowed to enter.

Nicholas notices them and smiles gently.

“Come here, my darlings.”

They rush forward, surrounding him. Olga tries to be brave, but her eyes shine. Tatiana straightens his collar with careful hands. Maria clings to his arm.

Anastasia blurts, “Papa, don’t let the Japanese get you!”—earning a soft, pained laugh from both parents.

Nicholas kneels so he’s level with them. “I will return to you. All of you. And I expect

you to take good care of Mama while I'm away."

"We will, Papa," Olga promises, her voice trembling.

Alexandra steps from the chapel, her face composed but pale. She gathers the children close as Nicholas rises.

He gives one last look at his family—his wife framed by candlelight, his daughters pressed against her skirts—before turning toward the door. The children watch him go, their small hands waving until he disappears down the corridor.

The palace feels larger, quieter, and somehow colder the moment he is gone.

Inside the Monplaisir kitchen of the Palace, twenty-four-year-old Elizabeth slices loaves of bread. Chef Cubat stuffs and rolls cabbage. Svetlana stirs vegetables boiling on the stove. They hear the loud roar of the protestors, rush to the window. They watch the angry crowd try to pull the iron gates open as they repeat their loud chants.

"Why are they rioting?" asks Elizabeth

"They feel Nicholas doesn't care about them because he's spending money on a war that nobody wants," Chef Cubat answers.

Svetlana adds, "And they're starving as a result. He should take care of the people!"

A few seconds later she adds, "Vladimir warned the Tsar this would happen. If we weren't working in the palace, we'd join their protest."

Elizabeth eyebrows arch in surprise. She looks at her mother.

"So, you side with the Bolsheviks?"

"You don't understand because you've grown up with this life of luxury... living in all the palaces... eating fine food... and being well educated. Look how nicely you're dressed."

“ But, what’s wrong with living a life of luxury?”

“We are part of the working class, Lizzie. I think if Vladimir was never recruited by the Tsar, you would understand their anger.”

Svetlana looks worried. “ I hope Vladimir comes home soon.”

They walk back to their tasks.

Svetlana continues, “I feel sorry for the children. They don’t even have a piece of bread to eat while they see the wealthy Romanovs...,“ she points, “...gorging on all this food.”

Elizabeth starts to slice another piece of bread. She stops, looks at Chef Cubat.

“Pierre, do we have extra loaves?”

Elizabeth and Svetlana each carry two large baskets filled with sliced bread. They walk slowly toward the palace gates, where an angry crowd surges and shouts, pulling at the iron bars.

Guards struggle to hold the line, using the spear-tips of their rifles to push back grasping hands. One guard spots the girls approaching.

“Be careful. Don’t go near them!” he warns.

Svetlana swallows hard. Elizabeth gives a steady nod.

As they draw closer, the crowd notices the baskets. The shouting falters. The pushing stops. A hush spreads outward like a ripple. Fathers lift their children higher onto their shoulders to keep them safe, small faces peering over the sea of adults.

Elizabeth steps forward, her voice clear and firm. “For the children.”

The crowd, tense moments before, now stands in a strange, heavy quiet. People look at one another, then back at the girls, and many begin to nod—slowly, gratefully.

“If you have a child here, step forward,” Elizabeth yells loudly.

The command rolls over the crowd, and a quiet shift moves through the mass of people. Those with children are gently ushered forward, the crowd parting to let them approach the gates. Fathers lift their little ones down from their shoulders and stand protectively behind them, hands resting on small backs.

Elizabeth and Svetlana step closer, the heavy baskets balanced against their hips. One by one, they begin handing slices of bread to the children lined along the iron bars—thin faces, wide eyes, tiny hands reaching through the gaps.

The earlier shouting has vanished. Only the soft rustle of clothing and the murmured thanks of grateful parents fill the cold air as the girls continue their quiet, steady work.

At the battlefield, Nicholas is a striking figure, seated proudly atop a magnificent white horse. His long, belted Cossack fur coat moves with the wind, the sword at his hip gleaming, and his tall Cossack hat giving him the unmistakable bearing of an emperor leading his men. He rides at the head of a troop of the Imperial Army, every soldier behind him watching their Tsar with a mixture of awe and reassurance.

Behind him, Vladimir follows on a sturdy brown horse. His own belted Cossack coat is thick but not thick enough; he shivers visibly beneath his Ushanka hat, breath fogging in the cold air as he struggles to match Nicholas's steady composure.

The contrast between them—Nicholas regal and composed, Vladimir tense and chilled—underscores the weight of the moment and the expectations placed upon the Tsar.

The horses' breaths can be seen in the freezing air, each exhale a pale cloud that drifts upward as light snowflakes settle on their manes. The wind cuts across the open landscape, carrying the distant rumble of artillery and the metallic scent of cold iron.

At the crest of a hill, Nicholas and his troop approach a lone figure. A General stands beside his horse, his long, belted trench coat dusted with snow, his cap pulled low against the wind. He doesn't turn at the sound of hooves. His gaze is fixed downward, heavy and unmoving. Nicholas reins in his white horse beside him. Vladimir pulls up behind, shivering visibly as he tries to steady his brown horse.

The General finally looks up, his face drawn and somber, then gestures toward the field below—an unspoken warning in his eyes.

Nicholas and Vladimir dismount, their boots hit the frozen ground. Nicholas remains composed, his face set in a stoic mask, but beside him Vladimir stares in horror, his mouth falling open as he takes in the vast expanse below—a field stretching endlessly, scattered with fallen soldiers. Snow drifts over some of the bodies, already stiff with cold, softening the scene without hiding its scale.

Each breath from the men forms a thin frost in the air as they speak.

“How many men did we lose?” Nicholas asks, his voice low but steady.

The General turns toward him, his expression hollow. “About two hundred thousand, Your Majesty.”

The number hangs in the frozen air, heavier than the snow-laden clouds above.

Nicholas shakes his head slowly, sorrow tightening his features.

“Gather the remaining men, and march on.”

The General steps forward, his voice strained. “But, Your Majesty... we are outnumbered, and we are running out of ammunition. Some men are fighting without shoes. Some without weapons.”

Nicholas's jaw tightens. "Have them take the boots and rifles from the dead soldiers."

The General lowers his eyes, the order landing like a blow. Vladimir looks from Nicholas to the field below, horrified.

The wind sweeps across the frozen landscape, carrying the weight of the Tsar's words. Among the officers, a quiet unease settles—an understanding that this war is slipping beyond their control.

In the months that follow, decisions like this one, combined with repeated defeats in a war the Russian people never wanted, begin to erode the army's spirit. Morale falters. Confidence in the Tsar's leadership weakens. And far from the battlefield, unrest grows louder in the streets of Russia.

Nicholas signals with a sweep of his arm, and the column begins to move. The horses descend the hill at a slow, deliberate pace, their hooves striking the frozen ground with sharp, echoing clacks. As they enter the field, the silence becomes heavier than the cold itself. The snow falls lightly, settling over uniforms and equipment, softening the harsh outlines without hiding the devastation.

Nicholas raises his arm again. The troop halts.

He dismounts beside several fallen soldiers, his boots crunching over the thin crust of ice. The General follows immediately. Vladimir hesitates a heartbeat before sliding off his horse, his breath catching as he takes in the grim scene up close. He walks a few steps behind the Tsar, his eyes darting from one still form to another, the enormity of the loss pressing down on him.

The field stretches endlessly, a frozen testament to the cost of the war. The cold air stings their faces, and even the wind seems to move more quietly here.

Wounded soldiers move through the field in a dazed, unsteady drift, their eyes unfocused, their steps slow and uneven. and more like men pulled back from the edge of something unimaginable. As Nicholas passes, they bow their heads out of habit, but the respect is hollow. The moment he walks beyond earshot, their expressions harden, and low curses follow in his wake—quiet, bitter, and full of blame.

Wounded soldiers drift through the field in a slow, disoriented shuffle, their movements unsteady, their eyes vacant. They look less like an army than men pulled back from the edge of something unbearable. As Nicholas walks past, they bow their heads out of habit, but the gesture is hollow. The moment he is out of earshot, their expressions harden, and low curses follow him—quiet, bitter, and full of blame.

Nicholas hears none of it, but the atmosphere around him is unmistakable. He surveys the muddy, frozen field, the fallen soldiers scattered across it in every direction, like a terrible, unending horizon. His face tightens and he lowers his gaze, the weight of the losses pressing heavily on him.

Vladimir trails behind, taking in the scene with wide, horrified eyes. The General walks beside him, stiff and silent, waiting for the Tsar's next command even as despair settles over the men like the falling snow.

Men wearing Red Cross armbands move slowly through the field, scanning the ground with practiced, weary eyes. They step carefully over frozen earth and abandoned equipment, calling out softly to check for signs of life. When they find a wounded soldier, they signal to one another and hurry over with a portable canvas cot. With quiet coordination, they lift the man and carry him toward a waiting horse-drawn cart, where other injured men lie bundled beneath

blankets.

The cart creaks as it shifts under the weight of another survivor.

Steam rises from the horses' nostrils as they stand in the cold, stamping their hooves impatiently.

Around them, the battlefield feels suspended between silence and suffering—Red Cross workers moving with urgency, wounded men drifting like ghosts, and the Tsar standing amid it all, taking in the cost of the war he leads.

As the Tsar walks among the fallen, he notices the terrible injuries suffered by his men—faces disfigured, bodies broken in ways no human should endure. Each sight strikes him harder than the last. He slows, his breath catching, the cold air stinging his eyes.

Nicholas bows his head, grief tightening his chest as his eyes fill with tears. These were his soldiers—men who trusted him, men who believed they were fighting for their homeland. Now they lay scattered across the frozen field, silent and still.

The snow continues to fall, soft and indifferent, settling over the devastation like a shroud.

A teenage courier gallops toward them, his horse kicking up frozen clumps of earth. He reins in sharply, reaches into his satchel, and leans down to hand a folded telegram to Vladimir. Then he waits, breath steaming in the cold, eyes fixed ahead in rigid discipline.

Vladimir scans the message, his brow tightening with every line. He looks up, pale, and hurries toward the Tsar.

“Your Majesty,” he says, voice unsteady, “it says the people are uprising in Petrograd and are demanding an end to the war. Women are also demanding you feed the children bread.

Commander Khabalov wants to know your orders.”

Nicholas stands very still, the wind tugging at his coat. Behind him, the wounded shuffle like shadows; ahead of him, the frozen field stretches endlessly. The weight of the telegram seems to settle on his shoulders as heavily as the snow.

“Tell him to use all necessary force!”, he replies angrily.

The Tsar starts to walk back to his horse.

Vladimir looks down at the telegram sadly, then looks up at the Tsar.

“But, Sire, these people are hungry. You would kill them just because they are demanding bread?”

Nicholas stops, turns around, and angrily pokes his index finger into Vladimir’s chest.

Vladimir gulps. His eyes widen as fears he is about to be shot.

“You will write what I said!”

Vladimir looks dejected, but nods frantically over and over. His shoulders collapse inward. He nods frantically—once, twice, again and again—his face drained of color, his spirit sinking under the weight of the order.

Around them, the wind whistles across the battlefield, carrying with it the first faint echo of a truth no one dares speak aloud: the Tsar is losing not only the war, but the loyalty of the men who follow him.

Back in St. Petersburg, an older courier rides hard behind the platoon, his horse lathered and trembling by the time they reach the square. Soldiers stand in formation with rifles raised toward the crowd, their breath fogging in the icy air. The shouting from the people swells and breaks like waves against the iron gates.

The courier swings off his horse before it has even stopped moving. Boots striking the cobblestones, he pushes past the line of soldiers and rushes straight to General Sergey Khabalov—the stern, wiry Commander-in-Chief of the Petrograd Military District. Khabalov stands rigidly, hands clasped behind his back, his sharp eyes fixed on the unrest before him.

“Telegram for you, sir,” the courier says, breathless.

Khabalov snatches it, breaks the seal, and reads. His eyebrows lift—just slightly, but enough to betray the weight of the message. The wind tugs at the edges of the paper as he reads it again, slower this time, jaw tightening.

Behind him, the soldiers shift uneasily. Ahead of him, the crowd roars for bread, for peace, for the Tsar to hear them.

Khabalov folds the telegram with deliberate precision, his face unreadable now. General Khabalov studies the telegram again, his jaw tightening. He turns a sharp, questioning look toward the courier.

“Are you certain this is what the Tsar commands?”

The boy straightens, nervous but firm, and nods.

Khabalov exhales once through his nose, a thin cloud of frost drifting into the cold air. He turns to face his soldiers—rows of tense men with rifles already raised toward the restless crowd.

“Men,” he calls out, his voice carrying across the square, “the Tsar has ordered us to use force.”

A ripple of unease moves through the ranks. The crowd, sensing the shift, grows quieter. Khabalov hesitates only a heartbeat—just long enough for doubt to flicker in his eyes—before he steels himself.

“Fire. Shoot them all!!”

The events in Petrograd ignite immediate outrage across the empire. News spreads quickly that unarmed civilians—men, women, and children—have been killed in the chaos. Though the details vary from witness to witness, the public places responsibility squarely on Tsar Nicholas. His order to “use all necessary force,” delivered from the battlefield, becomes the symbol of a ruler out of touch with his people’s suffering.

The shock is swift and widespread. Newspapers and political groups seize on the moment, declaring that the Tsar has lost the moral right to govern. Calls for his abdication rise almost overnight, echoing through factories, barracks, and university halls.

This uprising becomes a turning point. It marks the beginning of the Romanov dynasty’s unraveling and accelerates the momentum of revolutionary movements already simmering beneath the surface. Among them, the Bolsheviks gain new supporters who see the old order as incapable of reform.

On March 2, 1917, Nicholas is jolted awake in the middle of the night, the rhythmic clatter of the Imperial Train suddenly feeling louder, more urgent. Still in his imperial bathrobe, he steps into the narrow corridor and makes his way to the ornate salon car that serves as his mobile office. The lamps inside cast a warm glow over the gilded trim, the polished wood, the velvet upholstery—luxury at odds with the chaos consuming his empire.

Vladimir follows closely behind, his plain robe hastily tied, his hair disheveled. He slips on his glasses as they enter, blinking at the brightness. The air feels tense, as though the train itself senses the gravity of what is coming.

Minister of War, Alexander Guchkov, with glasses, a bushy mustache ending in a finely trimmed short beard, and wearing a suit and tie, stands waiting, rigid and pale, a sealed document in his hand. On either side of him stand two generals so alike in build and bearing they look carved from the same mold, their uniforms immaculate despite the hour.

“What is so important, Minister Guchkov, that you disturb me at this hour?” Nicholas snaps, his voice sharp with exhaustion and anger.

. Guchkov does not flinch. He waves a folded document—its edges creased from being handled too many times.

“Sign this.”

Nicholas gestures to hand it to Vladimir, which he does.

As Vladimir reads, the color drains from his face.

Guchkov looks around at the ornately decorated salon car with thick upholstered walls and Art Nouveau furniture. He scoffs.

Vladimir stares at the Tsar a few seconds before speaking sadly.

Nicholas’s eyes narrow. “What is it?”

“Sire, by signing this, you agree to abdicate.”

The impatient Minister snatches the letter from Vladimir and shoves it into the Tsar’s chest.

“Sign this, or I will kill you here and now!”

The words hang in the air like a blow. Vladimir stiffens behind the Tsar, breath catching. The two generals remain motionless, their faces carved in stone, but their presence alone makes the message unmistakable: this is not a request.

Nicholas stares at the document, then at the men before him—his ministers, his officers, his empire collapsing in their eyes.

“On whose authority?” he demands, though his voice is quieter now.

Guchkov meets his gaze without wavering.

“On the authority of the Duma... and the army. The situation in Petrograd has become untenable. The people will not accept your rule any longer.”

The motionless train offers no sound at all, leaving the silence between them to thicken.

THE KAMINSKAYAS MUST FLEE

October 25, 1917

The Provisional Government collapses within months. Lenin and the Bolsheviks seize key buildings in Petrograd, overthrow the government within two days, and proclaim Soviet rule. By late 1917, Lenin forms a new administration and renames his movement the Russian Communist Party, marking the start of a new political era.

Bolshevik Russia, later renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), becomes the world's first Marxist state. Since Lenin is against the war with Germany, he immediately takes Russia out of the war and makes peace with Germany.

On March 15, 1917 hundreds of Bolsheviks on horseback surge toward Alexander Palace, their voices rising in fierce shouts as they wave their swords overhead. The thunder of hooves echoes across the palace grounds, signaling that the unrest in Petrograd has now reached the very doorstep of the imperial family.

Bolshevik #1 yells, "Down with the Tsar!"

Bolshevik #2 yells, "Let's kill him!"

Bolshevik #3 yells "And everyone in the palace!"

Svetlana and Chef Cubat work side by side in the bright kitchen of the Winter Palace, steam rising from pots and the scent of fresh bread filling the air. The clatter of utensils and the low hum of conversation are suddenly shattered as Vladimir bursts through the doorway, breathless, hair disheveled, panic written across his face. He braces himself against the

doorframe, gasping.

“Lenin and his Bolsheviks have declared themselves the new government,” he manages, voice cracking. “Bolsheviks are on their way! Quick, Svetlana—we must go! Where’s Lizzie?”

Svetlana freezes, a wooden spoon still in her hand.

Chef Cubat looks up sharply.

The kitchen, moments ago warm and bustling, falls into stunned silence.

Vladimir’s urgency fills the room like a sudden gust of cold wind. “Svetlana—Lizzie! Where is she?”

The palace walls seem to tighten around them, the distant rumble of unrest creeping closer.

Vladimir, Svetlana, and Elizabeth slip out the side entrance of the palace, moving as quickly and quietly as they can. Behind them, the Winter Palace erupts with chaos—shouts echo through the corridors, and the sharp crack of gunfire reverberates through the walls. The three of them flinch but keep running, their breath visible in the cold air.

Bolshevik forces pour into the palace, their boots pounding against the marble floors as they fan out through the grand halls. Rooms are torn apart in minutes. Priceless Romanov artifacts—porcelain, tapestries, gilded frames—are smashed or thrown aside in the frenzy. Across the city, other imperial residences are seized as well, some set ablaze as symbols of the old regime.

Outside, the sky glows with the distant orange flicker of fires, and the once-silent palace grounds tremble with the sound of revolution closing in.

“Why must we go? Why do they want to kill us?” Elizabeth frantically asks Vladimir.

“No time for questions,” Vladimir answers, “We need to go. Quickly, this way.

As they race along the dirt road beside the forest, Elizabeth hears gunshots echo behind them. She startles, glancing over her shoulder—and her breath catches.

“Papa, horses!”

Vladimir looks back and sees the riders closing in, their silhouettes growing larger with every pounding hoofbeat.

“Run!” he shouts.

The horsemen are too close. With no time to think, Vladimir shoves Svetlana and Elizabeth off the road and toward the trees. They stumble, fall hard, then scramble back to their feet and dash into the forest, branches whipping past them as they look back in terror at Vladimir still on the road.

Vladimir freezes as the horseman charges straight at him. He jerks backward, loses his footing, and drops hard onto the ground. The horse skids to a stop just in front of him sending dust flying. It rears, hooves shifting in the air, a sharp bray ringing out as its shadow falls over him.

Elizabeth covers her mouth to prevent herself from screaming. Svetlana tries to run to her husband, but Elizabeth pulls her back, shakes her head “no”.

Vladimir’s eyes widen as the horse’s hoof swings down toward him. He squeezes his eyes shut, bracing for impact. The hoof slams into the dirt beside his head, missing him by JUST ONE INCH. inch. His eyes snap open. Vladimir rolls quickly off the road, scrambling out of the horse’s path.

Back in the hospital, Rachel winces. She closes her eyes as she pinches the top of her nose together.

“Are you all right?” Lakeisha asks with a worried expression.

“It’s another migraine.”

“Let’s go back.”

“I’ll be okay.” She sighs. “Anyway, that was the first time one inch made a difference.”

“Wow,” Lakeisha exclaims, “It’s amazing how somethin’ so small can be so important.”

“Yes,” Rachel agrees, “There is a saying, ‘A mere pebble can change the course of a river’.”

Lakeisha nods her understanding.

“Where was I? Oh, yes.” Rachel continues her story.

The Bolshevik points his pistol at Vladimir. Before he can fire, Elizabeth bursts out of the bushes.

“No! Don’t shoot him!”

Boris jerks, startled, then stares at her. “Elizabeth?”

She stops short, stunned. “Boris?” Her eyes flash with anger.

Boris keeps the pistol trained on Vladimir, jaw tight, breath unsteady.

Elizabeth steps forward, voice breaking.

“Boris, stop. He’s my father. Put the gun down... please, I’m begging you.”

Boris’s grip falters. His eyes flick from Vladimir to Elizabeth, confusion and pain tightening his face. For a moment he looks as if he might lower the weapon—then his hand tenses again, caught between duty and the girl he once cared for.

Boris shakes his head, torn. He glances back at his men, then at Elizabeth, his expression tightening with a decision he doesn't want to make.

“Run as fast as you can,” he says, voice low and urgent. “And don't look back.”

He fires a shot into the air, turns his horse around, and gallops off.

When he reaches the others, another rider pulls alongside him.

“What did you shoot?” the Lead Bolsheviks asks.

“I saw someone run into the woods,” Boris says.

“Did you kill 'em?”

“No. The trees were in the way.”

The new rider narrows his eyes. “That's not what I saw. I saw him talking to Lizzie.

Then she and an older man—had to be her father—ran into the woods, and Boris fired into the air.”

Boris shoots him a hard look.

“Who's Lizzie?” the Lead Bolshevik asks.

“Just a girl,” Boris mutters.

“She's not just a girl,” the rider snaps. “She and her parents work for the Tsar.”

The Lead Bolshevik glares at Boris, fury rising. “And you let them get away? Traitor!”

He yanks his gun from his holster and fires.

The shot hits Boris in the chest.. His eyes widen in shock. Two more shots ring out, and Boris tumbles from his horse.

The Bolsheviks turn their mounts and head back toward the woods to search for the Kaminskayas.

Meanwhile, the Kaminskayas wade through the forest, stepping over dense undergrowth , fallen branches, and skirting toppled trees and rocks making their way down the ravine on the other side.

Svetlana stops, breathing hard. “I’m tired. My feet hurt.”

Vladimir nods. “Okay, we’ll rest.”

They sit under a group of tall pine trees. Vladimir kneels, gently slips off Svetlana’s shoes, and rubs her aching feet while she exhales in relief.

Svetlana leans back against a tree, still catching her breath. “Where are we going, Vladimir? We have no home. What is your plan?”

“To my brother Moyshe’s farm...” Vladimir says.

He looks at Elizabeth.

“...in the Pale. It’s where Jews are allowed to live. You’ll love Moyshe, Lizzie. He has a wonderful sense of humor. And a farm—oy, such a farm. Plenty of room for us to build a home. And animals. So many animals.”

Elizabeth looks up at him. “How far is it, Papa?”

“It should take another three or four days to get there. Five maybe. Okay, six or seven at the most.”

He glances around the forest and points. “We need to keep going this direction.”

He looks up at the sun, hesitates, then points a different way. “No—this way. We follow the setting sun until we reach the river. Then we follow the river and head north. Now come, let’s go.”

Svetlana quickly slips her shoes back on.

As the Kaminskayas walk, they hear children laughing, the creak of wooden wheels, and the sounds of horses neighing, snorting, and braying. They push through the last line of trees and step into a clearing.

A small caravan moves slowly across the open space—horse-drawn wagons and carts piled with belongings, a few people riding bicycles, others pushing wheelbarrows loaded with household items. Children walk beside their parents, some skipping to keep up. Several women wear babushkas, others shawls wrapped tightly around their shoulders.

The Kaminskayas swiftly walk toward the caravan. Svetlana and Elizabeth smile and nod to the people they pass while Vladimir speaks with three men, then shakes their hands. The family falls in with the others, everyone walking in silence, worn down to the bone.

A six-year-old girl with a pretty smile, large brown eyes, and curly brown hair walks up alongside Elizabeth. She carries a white rabbit.

“Would you like to hold Latke?”

“Yes, sure. I would love to hold him.”

The girl laughs, hands her the rabbit.

“Latke’s a girl, silly.”

“Yes, how silly of me. My name’s Lizzie, short for Elizabeth. What’s your name?”

“I’m Misha.”

They continue walking with Elizabeth stroking Latke.

“Latke is very smart. She will come to you if you call her.”

The sun is about to set, so the caravan comes to a stop. The men gather twigs and fallen branches for a fire while the women begin preparing food.

Elizabeth hands Latke back to Misha.

As Misha kisses Latke between the ears, several children run past her carrying handkerchiefs and scraps of cloth. Elizabeth and Svetlana watch as the children spread them over the tall grass in the nearby field.

“What are they doing?” Elizabeth asks Misha.

“They do this every night,” Misha says. “The cloth collects the morning dew. Then you wring it out, and you have water.”

Elizabeth smiles. “Of course.”

Everyone in the caravan sits around the large campfire, eating and murmuring to one another in tired, unintelligible chatter.

A middle-aged, heavysset woman wearing a small babushka notices Vladimir and his family huddled near the fire with no food, stealing glances at the others’ food. She looks at her husband. He gives a small, approving nod.

Anya smiles gently, ladles soup from her kettle into three bowls, and she and her husband carry them over to the Kaminskayas.

“Thank you,” Svetlana says, “That is very kind of you.”

The woman sits next to them as they devour their soup while her husband goes back to their wagon.

“I’m Anya, and that loveable man over there is my husband Avraam. We are from Petrograd. My husband and I are going to Riga and then sail to Finland.

Vladimir nods as he continues slurping his soup.

“We are headed west to my brother-in-law’s farm in the Pale.”

Svetlana notices Anya smile at Elizabeth.

“Do you have any children?” Svetlana asks.

Anya shakes her head, her expression falling. “I did, but they were killed during the demonstrations.”

Svetlana and Elizabeth exchange a startled look, then turn back to her.

“I’m so sorry,” Svetlana says softly.

“Yes, well... I blame the Tsar,” Anya replies.

Vladimir glances at Svetlana and presses a finger to his lips, signaling her to stay silent. She nods.

Anya gathers the empty soup bowls from each of them.

“You can sleep under our wagon,” she says. “It’ll protect you from the night dampness. We’ll give you some blankets.”

“Most kind of you. Spasibo,” Vladimir says.

As night settles in, Avraam begins to play his violin. Others join in with an accordion, a bandura, and a balalaika. The camp comes alive with singing, dancing, and laughter. Men pass around bottles of vodka, their voices rising with the music.

The next day, the caravan moves in a single line along a curved dirt road. A young scout rides ahead on his horse.

He hears horses and men’s voices approaching. He stops abruptly and dismounts, then edges forward and peers through the bushes around the bend. His eyes widen when he spots a troop of soldiers marching straight toward the caravan. He swings back onto his horse and gallops toward the others.

He alerts everyone as he rides from the front to the end of the caravan. He repeats over and over to everyone.

“Soldiers are heading right toward us. We cannot continue!”

Vladimir frantically scans the nearby forest, then turns to his family.

“Come. We’ll go through the forest.”

All around them, people abandon their wagons and scramble for cover. Most dive into the tall rye—five feet high and thick enough to hide whole families. Many others follow Vladimir’s lead, including Misha clutching Latke tightly to her chest.

The caravan scatters in every direction. Those with horse-drawn carts unfasten the reins in a rush, freeing their horses. They mount up or run beside them, following the scout as he leads the flight away from the approaching soldiers.

The Kaminskayas crouch low beneath the bushes, barely breathing as the soldiers march past on the road. Boots thud in rhythm, metal clinks, voices bark orders—close enough that Elizabeth can see the dust rising around their legs.

Then the sounds erupt behind them—shouts, terrified screams, and a burst of gunfire. With each shot, Elizabeth flinches violently. She clamps her hands over her ears, squeezes her eyes shut, and shudders, her whole body tightening with every crack of a rifle.

Vladimir pulls her closer, keeping them all pressed deep into the shadows of the undergrowth while the chaos echoes through the fields.

The Kaminskayas wait a long time after the final shot fades into silence. No voices. No footsteps. Nothing but the wind moving through the branches. They look at one another; Vladimir gives a small, steady nod.

They rise slowly and begin to walk, each step cautious, each breath held tight in their chests.

A rustle breaks the quiet behind them—leaves shifting, twigs snapping under a weight that is not theirs.

They freeze with eyes wide in dreaded fear. Vladimir slowly lifts his hands. Svetlana and Elizabeth mirror him, their movements stiff and trembling. All three swallow hard at the same moment, the sound loud in the stillness.

The Kaminskayas wait a few quiet seconds, hearts pounding, then slowly turn, bracing for the worst.

No soldiers. No scout. No one at all—except... a rabbit.

Svetlana and Vladimir nearly collapse with relief.

“It’s Latke!” Elizabeth cries. “Come here, Latke.”

Latke hops toward her without hesitation. Elizabeth scoops the rabbit into her arms and looks back through the trees, hoping—just hoping—to see Misha appear behind her.

But...no one comes.

Her smile fades. She presses her cheek to Latke’s fur, holding the rabbit close as fear for Misha settles heavily in her chest.

The Kaminskayas continue silently walking with Elizabeth hugging Latke every few steps. They cross a road, enter the forest on the other side.

After they walk for miles, Vladimir stops, looks around.

“We’ll camp here for the night.”

Svetlana drops to the ground totally fatigued. They all take off their shoes, rub their sore feet.

“The river should be close,” Vladimir announces.

He looks seriously at Svetlana and Elizabeth.

“If anything, God forbid, happens to separate us...”

Elizabeth looks worriedly at her mother.

Vladimir continues, “ ... ask anyone in the village where Moyshe lives. They will direct you to his farm.”

“What are we going to do for food, Vladimir? I’m hungry,” Svetlana says.

“We will eat what the land provides. Insects, plants, moss...”

Vladimir doesn’t finish his sentence. Elizabeth looks up, sees him staring at Latke.

Her lip quivers knowing what’s about to happen. Tears flow down her cheeks as she hugs Latke dearly. She lowers her head, slowly extends Latke to him, then closes her eyes.

As Vladimir snaps the rabbit’s neck, Elizabeth’s body shudders.

“Get me a nice branch to use as a spit, Lizzie, and then remove the leaves.”

While she dejectedly looks for the perfect branch, Vladimir skins the rabbit and gathers some of the fur to use as tinder. Then he searches and finds two rocks. It takes almost thirty exhausting minutes of banging the rocks together to form a spark, but he finally succeeds. Elizabeth hands him the branch, and he hooks the rabbit.

Vladimir looks at Elizabeth staring at Latke being cooked on a spit of twigs over a small campfire. He pulls off a hot piece of meat and offers it to Elizabeth, but she refuses.

“Lizzie, I’m sorry. But you understand, we have to eat.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“I know you’re hungry. I honestly don’t know how long it will be to Moyshe’s farm.

This may be are only real meal until we get there. You will need strength for the journey. Please, have some.”

Elizabeth nods and takes her share of Latke. She eats each bite very, very slowly, and then has a hard time swallowing.

Vladimir looks at the dejected Elizabeth.

“I’m sorry, Lizzie.”

“I understand, Papa.”

“There are many things we can find to eat.” Vladimir says as they keep warm by the fire. “We will find insects like grasshoppers, snails, locusts, and crickets. They are usually around rotten tree logs, stumps of trees, and on the undersides of leaves.”

He walks over and finds a leaf. He brings it to show them.

“See, here is one. Try it.”

Elizabeth shakes her head. “No thank you, Papa, I’m full.”

“There is also moss and ferns. There are different varieties of edible moss. One is gray with red tips that look like flowers from a distance, another grows on trunks and branches of oak trees. And in higher elevations where it’s cold, there is a chestnut-colored moss.”

He looks around for some, but sees none.

“But there are also poisonous things like white and yellow berries, mushrooms, thorny plants. So, we need to be careful.”

“How do you know so much about this?” Elizabeth asks.

“I read.”

“Nah, you see?” Svetlana says to Elizabeth. “That’s why the Tsar chose him to become

his scribe.”

Vladimir stares at the fire.

“I know life is hard right now. Just remember that when something bad happens, there is also good nearby. We just have to take a moment to appreciate what we have and be grateful. It helps to get over the emotion of the bad moments.”

Svetlana nods. “Yes. Right now we have each other and I am grateful for that.”

“Let’s gather branches and leaves to cover ourselves.”

They cover themselves and fall asleep.

They awaken to a warm, beautiful morning. The Kaminskayas leave the campfire smoldering behind them and continue walking through the quiet forest. As they move, Svetlana reaches up to retie the babushka over her head. Some time passes before they hear distant voices, and all three immediately crouch in fear. Vladimir raises a trembling finger to his lips, silently commanding his family to stay still.

A young Bolshevik kneels and places his palm lightly over the ashes.

“The embers are warm. They’re nearby.”

The first man studies the ground for tracks, scanning the trees with sharp, searching eyes.

“This way,” he says.

The two Bolsheviks spot movement and fire in their direction, the shots cracking through the quiet forest.

The Kaminskayas panic and run.

Svetlana’s skirt snags on a low branch. She pulls at it desperately, her breath catching as fear rises in her throat.

“Vladimir, I’m stuck!”

Vladimir and Elizabeth quickly turn around, look back.

Svetlana hears the sharp click of a gun being cocked. She turns her head and sees the Bolshevik aiming directly at her, terror flooding her face.

“Please, I beg you, don’t!”

He spits at her in contempt.

Vladimir and Elizabeth watch in frozen shock as the Bolshevik fires at close range.

Svetlana collapses, her bloody babushka slipping over her face as she falls.

Elizabeth’s scream tears through the trees. “Mama!”

Two other Bolsheviks in the forest—one tall, the other short—stop and run toward the sound of Elizabeth’s scream.

Elizabeth tries to rush back to her mother, but Vladimir grabs her arm and pulls her toward him. She struggles against him, desperate to break free.

“No, Lizzie. We can’t stop. They’ll kill us, too.”

“But, Mama! We can’t leave her!”

“There’s nothing we can do. Now run, Lizzie! Run!”

As Vladimir and Elizabeth desperately run away, the Bolshevik shoots Svetlana one more time.

The two Men run up to the Young Bolshevik. He points with his chin, “They’re over there.”

The two Bolsheviks give chase.

The Young Bolshevik bends over and snatches the velvet choker with heart-shaped

pendant from Svetlana's neck, and pockets it.

He opens his fly and urinates on her.

Vladimir and Elizabeth desperately run as the Bolsheviks fire around the trees.

They dead end at a high river bank and look down at the forty-five- foot wide, deep river below.

Vladimir fearfully looks back at the men approaching.

“Do you think you can hold your breath under water until you get to the other side, Lizzie?”

“I will try, Papa.”

The Bolsheviks aim again, but trees are in their way.

Vladimir pockets his glasses, grabs Elizabeth's hand. They jump into the river.

The soldiers quickly reach the river bank, and shoot at them.

As Elizabeth and Vladimir swim underwater, bullets zip past. One bullet just misses Elizabeth by JUST ONE INCH. Her eyes widen in fear as she panics. She stops swimming for a moment, then adrenaline helps her swim faster.

Back in the hospital corridor in 2009, Lakeshia touches her heart.

“So, umm, that was the second time one inch saved an ancestor?”

Rachel nods over and over. “Yes, my grandmother, Lizzie.”

Rachel stares into space, then smiles. She looks at Lakeisha.

“I am alive because of that one inch. Just one inch... That's all.”

Lakeisha nods her understanding.

“So, then what happened?”

Rachel continues the story, “On the other side of the river...”

Vladimir and Elizabeth burst up through the surface, gasping for air. They cling to the low-hanging branches along the bank, holding themselves steady so the swift current doesn't sweep them away. Only their faces remain above the waterline as they struggle to stay hidden.

The Bolsheviks don't see them. They continue to shoot into the river two more times.

The tall Bolshevik lifts his binoculars and scans the river while the short one watches a large branch drift past.

“Where are you? Come on,” the tall Bolshevik mutters. “You can't get away from us.” Only the rush of the river and the rustling of the trees answer him.

Vladimir feels Elizabeth trembling beside him and turns. She is crying silently.

“Are you okay? You're not shot?”

Elizabeth shakes her head. “They killed Mama. Why, Papa? I don't understand. Mama's dead. Why?”

Vladimir looks down sadly, then pulls Elizabeth close, her face pressed into his shoulder as she cries. He cups the back of her head, holding her tight. After a moment, he gently lifts her chin with one hand and looks into her eyes. He glances toward the Bolsheviks on the riverbank, then back at her, tears running down his cheeks. “Give me your skirt, Lizzie.”

Elizabeth furrows her brows, confused. “My skirt? Why?”

“Because they're not going to give up until they're certain we're both dead.”

Elizabeth holds her breath, removes her skirt under water. She comes up, holds onto a branch with one hand, her skirt with the other. She hands the skirt to him.

“When you’re sure they’re gone...” He points with his chin, “...go that way following the river until it turns to the left. No, to the right. Yes. It turns to the right, Lizzie. Got it?”

“But you’re coming with me, right?”

He doesn’t answer.

She looks at him fearfully realizing what he’s about to do.

“Papa, please. Don’t do this. Don’t leave me! Please, Papa!”

“Listen to me. You can do this, Lizzie. You’re a strong, young woman. Then follow the sun as it sets in the west. The west, Lizzie.”

He reaches his pant pocket underwater for his wet wallet.

“Give this wallet to your uncle Moyshe, and tell him to get you a ticket to America to stay with your cousin Galina and her husband.”

His eyes search hers.

“I do this for you so you will have a chance at life. A better, safer life. Get married, Lizzie. Have lots of children. I know you’ll make me proud.”

She shakes her head “no”. She’s hysterical now.

“Papa, no! Please. I need you! Papa! I beg you. Please don’t do this! I love you.”

She clings to him tightly refusing to let go. He pushes her back, and stares into her eyes.

“My love will be with you wherever you are.”

He kisses her tenderly on the forehead, then stares again.

He breaks a branch, and lets the current float him away. As he floats he uses the branch to hold Elizabeth’s skirt at water level.

The Bolsheviks see what looks like two bodies drifting in the current.

“There they are!” the Short Bolshevik shouts.

Elizabeth flinches a four shots crack across the river.

Her eyes widen in shock when she sees the water turn red around the floating shapes. .
With trembling lips, she mouths, “Papa”. She holds one hand over her mouth to keep from crying out, her breath breaking into quiet, panicked sobs. She averts her eyes to the sky shaking her head in disbelief, then looks back at her father..

Vladimir is struck again, still clinging to her bullet-torn skirt.

“We got ’em. Now we can go,” the tall Bolshevik declares.

Elizabeth tucks her father’s wallet inside her blouse, pressing it against her chest as she watches the soldiers disappear into the trees. She lowers her head, shaking it more and more slowly until a long, heavy sigh escapes her.

Wearing only her long-sleeved blouse, petticoat, and boots, she slips in the mud as she struggles to climb out of the river. She grabs at branches for support, pulling herself upward inch by inch until she finally reaches the top of the bank. With an expression of overwhelming shock, she drops to her knees and looks back toward the river, her face hollow with grief. Her hands tremble as she wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands. She lowers herself onto her back, utterly exhausted and drained. She wipes her right eye with the back of her right hand, then her left with her left hand, and turns her gaze toward the river once more. She exhales a long, heavy sigh.

She lies there for a long time, staring up at the sky while the sound of the river fills her ears. The shock settles deeper and deeper into her expression as the truth takes shape inside her—everything she has ever known is gone. Family. Friends. Her entire world. Slowly, she

pushes herself upright and drops to her knees, looking back toward the river with aching sadness. Her lips quiver as she wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I will make you proud. Very proud, Papa. I promise you.”

Elizabeth sniffs back her tears and forces herself to stand. She carries on despite the deep hollow ache in her chest, refusing to look back again. With her head lowered, she shuffles along the riverbank, each step heavy and reluctant. The warm summer sun slowly dries her clothes as she walks. She listens to the birds singing overhead and stops now and then to sit and rest. Here and there she stoops to pick dandelions—just as her father taught her—and eats them quietly. She sips water from the river, and every time her eyes fall on its surface, she is reminded of him all over again.

After walking for several hours, she notices the river turns right. She looks up at the sun for direction, and then at the forest where she will soon enter.

It is almost nightfall now, and she finds soft grass to lie on. She covers herself with nearby branches. When she closes her eyes, she sees her mother shot over and over.

“Why?” She screams to God. “Why do they want to kill us? What did we do wrong?”

Elizabeth’s eyes fight to stay open, but every rustle in the darkness makes her flinch. She listens hard, terrified the noises might be Bolsheviks searching for her. The sound lulls her, and she drifts into an uneasy sleep.

She has no way of knowing the hardship ahead. Everything familiar has been torn from her, and the path before her will demand every bit of courage and resilience she possesses if she is to survive.

ELIZABETH STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE

The sound of birds singing awakens Elizabeth the next morning. For a moment she lies still, unsure where she is, until the memories of yesterday strike her all at once. Her chest tightens, and she presses a hand against it as if to hold herself together. She watches a small bird hop along the fallen leaves nearby, its simple movements strangely comforting.

She rises and shuffles toward the riverbank to drink as much as she can, then rips off her sleeve and soaks it in the cold water before heading toward the forest. As she steps beneath the trees, she notices yellow berries growing on a low branch. She rushes toward them and is inches away from grabbing a handful when she hears her father's voice in her mind: "There are also poisonous things like white and yellow berries. So, we need to be careful."

She looks sadly at the berries, then turns away and continues walking. Fallen leaves crunch under her boots with every step. The deeper she goes, the darker and colder it becomes, and she crosses her arms tightly, rubbing them for warmth. Her breath comes out in small, shaky puffs as the forest closes around her. She wishes she could hear her father's footsteps behind her, just once more.

She soon finds thick moss growing on the trunks of many trees. Hunger overwhelms her, and she tears off handfuls, stuffing them into her mouth until she nearly gags. When she can't swallow another bite, she gathers more and tucks it into her waistband for later.

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to steady her breathing. The forest

feels larger and darker now, every shadow stretching toward her. She forces herself to keep moving, placing one foot in front of the other. She steps over and around fallen trees, broken branches, thick plants, and deep holes.

Nearing a narrow dirt road, she hears horses neighing and instantly drops to the ground, not realizing she has fallen into muddy water. She presses herself flat, holding her breath as the horses and riders pass only a short distance away. When the last hoofbeat fades, she slowly rises, soaked and shivering, with mosquitos swarming her. She swats at them again and again, trying to brush them off her face and arms.

Elizabeth walks to the road and cautiously checks both directions before crossing. As she hobbles forward, she scratches her legs and neck over and over, the bites burning and itching beneath her skin. She stops to rest and notices a patch of mud nearby. Remembering what her father once told her about soothing bites, she scoops some up and gently smears it over the worst of the itching before continuing on.

Just before sunset she gathers leaves and branches to construct her bed and lays the torn sleeve out beside her. She curls beneath the branches, but she can't sleep. Every time she moves, the makeshift covering rustles, and the itching on her legs and neck flares again. She scratches and shifts all night, unable to get comfortable. The sounds of owls calling and wolves howling in the distance keep her awake, but in a strange way, they also keep her company.

Elizabeth rises with the rising sun. Her fitful night has taken a toll on her, leaving her body heavy and her eyes burning with fatigue. She checks the sleeve and is disheartened to find it bone dry, even though the chilly morning air is damp with dew. She tucks the sleeve into her

waistband, finds a spot, lifts her skirt, and squats to urinate. When she starts walking again, she yawns continuously, her eyes struggling to stay open. Her steps are heavy and slow.

As she pushes deeper into the forest, a quiet fear settles over her. The trees seem taller in the morning light, their shadows stretching long across her path. Every rustle makes her flinch, and the silence between the sounds feels even louder. Loneliness presses against her chest, sharp and aching, and for a moment she wishes she could hear her mother's and father's voices guiding her. But she keeps moving. She has to. Determination rises in her like a small, stubborn flame, pushing her forward one tired step at a time.

Her stomach rumbles from hunger as she scans the surroundings for something to eat. Empty-handed, she keeps walking, her thoughts drifting as her legs grow weaker. Before she realizes it, she slips into a daydream, her mind reaching for something warm and familiar.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I would love some more tea, and if you please, another slice of my mother's honey cake.”

Suddenly, twigs snap. Startled, reality returns. She stops abruptly, her heart pounding as the fear of Bolsheviks surges through her. Her body shakes in dreaded terror as she slowly turns toward the sound and watches... a deer sprint away. She exhales loudly in relief and continues walking.

The scare leaves her trembling long after the deer disappears. Her legs feel weak, and her breath comes in short, uneven bursts. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand, angry at herself for being so frightened, but the fear clings to her like the morning damp. The forest suddenly feels too big, too quiet, too full of places for danger to hide. Loneliness presses in

again, sharper than before, and she wishes she could hear her mother's and father's voices telling her she's safe.

But she isn't safe. She knows that. And knowing it makes her straighten her back and force her feet to move. Each step is slow and heavy, but she keeps going, whispering to herself that she must not stop. Not now. Not ever. Determination flickers inside her—small, tired, but still burning—as she pushes deeper into the forest.

She climbs to the top of a hill and looks upward at the sun, grateful for its warm respite after the damp, shadowed forest below. She turns to look eastward and notices smoke rising from many structures in the distance. *I wonder what the Bolsheviks are burning*, she thinks. She lifts her hand toward the sun, pointing out which way is west. The great expanse of forest covering the hills she must cross seems overwhelming. She sighs heavily.

Turning westward, she mumbles to herself, "I wonder how much further it is to Moyshe's farm." She sighs heavily as she thinks, *Maybe another day or two.*

As she carefully tries to navigate down the hill, her tired legs wobble beneath her. She slips on the damp earth and slides downward on her stomach, unable to stop herself. When she reaches the bottom, she lies still, dazed for a moment and too stunned to move.

As she slowly sits up, the discomfort makes her grimace. She looks down and notices her petticoat stained and damp with blood. Her hands tremble as she lifts the fabric, revealing a deep, painful cut along her thigh. She removes the ribbon from her braid, wraps the torn sleeve around the wound as a bandage, and ties the ribbon tightly to hold it in place.

She gingerly stands and tries to walk, but after two steps she stops to pick up a thin branch. She snaps off the smaller twigs and uses it as a cane. With painful, uneven steps she

continues forward, moaning and grunting as she forces herself on. Her braid loosens and begins to unravel as she limps.

Weak and exhausted, her steps become smaller and slower. Her body is hunched over, her eyes opening and closing in long, heavy blinks. When she pauses to rest them, her body sways, and she's about to drop. She gingerly lowers herself to the ground and sits with her back against a tree for support. Struggling to keep her eyes open again, she slips into sleep almost instantly, long before nightfall.

During the night, Elizabeth sleeps fitfully. She twists and murmurs, her voice thin and trembling. "Why, Papa. Why?"

The sound of growling awakens her. Frozen in fear, she blinks into the darkness and sees a pack of wolves circling around her. She is too weak to move, her body pressed against the tree as if it might protect her. The wolves inch closer, their low snarls rumbling through the night as they bare their teeth.

Suddenly, there is a very loud, bellowing roar. The wolves quickly turn around and see a large Eurasian brown bear rising onto its hind legs. The lead wolf inches forward with a bold snarl, but the bear bellows again and swings its massive paw, knocking the wolf aside. The wolf hits a tree and falls still. The rest of the pack scatters immediately with the bear charging after them into the darkness.

Elizabeth sees the faint shapes of her mother and father in the distance, their arms lifted as if urging her to come to them. She barely manages to rise and limps toward them in the dark, her heart aching with hope. But as she moves closer, the images begin to fade, growing dimmer and

dimmer until they disappear altogether. She stops and looks around in confusion, her face falling as she realizes they are gone.

The chilly air from a strong wind makes her shiver. She stops beside a large rock and huddles against it, trying to shield herself and find a little warmth. She watches the trees sway violently in the gusts, their leaves drifting down like snowflakes. Her head bows, and she slips swiftly into sleep.

A ray of sunshine warms her face and slowly pulls her from sleep. Elizabeth blinks, disoriented, still curled beside the rock where she huddled through the night. Her body aches as she stretches, the stiffness in her leg reminding her of the wound beneath the makeshift bandage. She pushes herself upright with effort, steadies her weight on the branch, and begins to walk on.

Finally, she emerges from the forest and spots a stump nearby. She hurries to it and lowers herself onto the rough surface, grateful for the chance to rest. When she pulls off her boot, she notices a swollen, bloody blister on her heel. As she sets her foot down, she sees a large, ugly beetle crawling beside her. Its legs flail frantically as she picks it up. She contorts her face, not wanting to eat it, but hunger presses harder than disgust, and she forces herself to swallow it. She swallows hard, gagging at the bitter taste, but manages to keep it down.

A flock of geese glides across the dim, overcast sky, their cries drifting down to her. Elizabeth looks up, and the sight of them stirs something deep and aching inside her. She squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head as tears spill down her cheeks.

“Papa, I can’t do this anymore. I’m so tired... and hungry... and thirsty.”

Suddenly, a ray of sunshine breaks through the clouds and spills across the expanse of fields ahead. Elizabeth stops crying and wipes her tears with the bottom of her petticoat. She

squints hardly trusting what she sees... there in the distance is...a cabbage field. She blinks hard, over and over, making sure she isn't imagining it. Then she quickly searches the ground for a leaf, covers her blister, pulls on her boot, and rises with new energy. She breaks into an eager, stumbling run toward the field.

Elizabeth plops down in the cabbage patch, surrounded by broad green leaves. She tears into one after another, devouring them with desperate speed. As she eats, a soft rain begins to fall. She tilts her face upward, smiling through the drops.

“Thank you, Papa.”

She rolls several cabbage leaves into a makeshift cup and holds it out to the sky. Rainwater pools inside, and she drinks it down in quick, eager swallows—one, two, three cupfuls—while the raindrops run down her cheeks.

She stands, lifts her arms, and twirls in wide circles. She giggles as her hair and clothes grow heavy with rain, water streaming down her sleeves and skirt. Suddenly the rain stops. She slows to a halt, closes her eyes, and tilts her chin upward, letting the warm sunlight fall across her face. She exhales a long, trembling breath of relief.

She lies down among the cabbage leaves, her body finally loosening after days of fear and hunger. A gentle smile softens her face — the first she has felt in what seems like forever — a small, quiet reflection of her contentment. Within moments, she drifts into sleep.

Elizabeth awakens and eats a breakfast of fresh cabbage, savoring each crisp bite. She gathers several large leaves and spreads them across her lap until they form a full, rustling layer. Then she tucks the end of her petticoat into her waistband to hold them in place, creating a little cradle of green across her knees.

She walks along a dirt road, passing fields of wheat, rye, and round bales of hay scattered across the countryside. She continues for hours, her steps slow but steady, carried now by a renewed strength and determination she hasn't felt in days. The warm sun settles on her shoulders as she walks, brightening the road ahead and lifting her spirits with its gentle promise of better days to come.

Elizabeth stops at a bale of hay as the sun begins to set. She sits against it and slowly eats a dinner of more cabbage. Then she opens her father's wallet and studies a photo of herself as a baby with her parents. Her lips quiver. Tears roll down her cheeks as she traces her parents' faces with her index finger, longing for the warmth of their arms around her.

Elizabeth lies down and looks at the clouds drifting between the myriad of twinkling stars. Her voice catches as she lifts a trembling hand and points toward the sky. "Look, Maria... that one looks like my Papa." Her eyes fill. A single tear slips down the side of her face as she watches the cloud slowly float away. She fights to keep her eyes open, but the day's weariness settles over her, and at last she drifts into a peaceful sleep.

The following morning, she drags her feet as she slowly walks along the dirt road under the hot sun. Sweat beads on her forehead and trickles down her temples. She wipes her brow with her arm, then tears a thin strip from her already-torn sleeve and ties it around her head. She slips one of the broad cabbage leaves beneath the cloth, securing it like a small hat. Its cool, wide surface shades her eyes as she continues down the long, sun-baked road.

Suddenly, there in the distance is a peasant man and woman harvesting wheat. She smiles broadly as she excitedly sprints toward them, her little cabbage hat bouncing with each step. "Hello. Do you know where I can find Moyshe Kaminskaya's farm?"

They look her up and down with gaping mouths, astonished to see her disheveled hair full of hay sticking out from beneath the cabbage hat, her bloodshot eyes, dirty face, torn blouse, petticoat stuffed with cabbage leaves, and exposed legs, one of them bandaged.

Elizabeth notices the way they stare at her. She quickly lowers her petticoat to cover her legs causing several cabbage leaves tumble to the ground. The man and woman exchange a confused glance, unsure what to make of this strange young woman standing before them. Not knowing what to say, they simply point toward a nearby pasture.

“Spasibo,” she says with a small smile.

Elizabeth rushes forward until she sees a man in the distance. A jolt of resolve and excitement shoots through her. She can hardly believe she has finally found him. She runs on, oblivious to her pain.

Since she fled the palace, a dirty, thinner Elizabeth finally approaches fortyish Moyshe, with his reddish beard and mustache and glasses like Vladimir, wearing a vyshyvanka shirt, belt, baggy pants, boots, and cap as he spreads hay for his cows.

When she stops in front of him, there is a silent moment as her body trembles and her lips quiver. He stares at her, confusion tightening his brow, then a faint, uncertain recognition beginning to surface beneath it.

“Are you Moyshe Kaminskaya?”

“*Da*. And you are?”

“Elizabeth.”

As she looks into his eyes, she tries to appear energetic, but her face betrays her exhaustion.

“I am your brother’s daughter, your niece. My parents and I escaped from the Bolshevik Revolution.”

Moyshe’s eyes widen. He instinctively looks past her, searching the pasture and the road behind her, hoping to see them.

“Where are your parents?”

Elizabeth hesitates to say the words.

“They shot my mother,” she slowly says in a very soft voice.

Moyshe’s face pales with shock as he stares at her.

“And... my brother?”

Elizabeth cries, the sound breaking out of her. She looks down, bites her lip, struggling to steady herself.

“Papa sacrificed his life for me.”

Moyshe collapses to his knees. His hands shake as he removes his glasses, and he begins to cry.

Elizabeth’s body shakes as she also sinks to her knees beside him.

For a long moment, they kneel there in the hay, both of them shaking, their tears falling to the ground between them. At last, Moyshe reaches out with an unsteady hand and gently touches her shoulder, as if to be sure she is real.

Elizabeth leans into his touch, then throws her arms around him, clinging to him like a lifeline.

He wraps his arms around her, pulling her close, his chest heaving against hers. “Bozhe moi...” he whispers. “My brother’s child...”

He closes his eyes, holding her tighter. “You’re safe now.”

As he climbs on, he looks at her and smiles. She smiles back, relieved her ordeal is over, and exhales a long, satisfied breath. The weight she has carried since fleeing the palace finally begins to lift.

He flicks the reins for the chestnut draft horse to go.

PEASANT LIFE ON THE FARM

Elizabeth and Moyshe ride down a dirt road past an orchard of assorted fruit trees, their branches bare but promising spring. The air smells of earth and hay. On the left, a fenced field opens to draft horses in various shades of brown grazing alongside three gray-whites.

“How many horses do you have?” she asks in a soft, raspy voice.

“Right now, six, with a foal on the way,” he says, a hint of pride warming his tone.

Elizabeth hears cows mooing and sheep baying. She looks to the right and notices brown cows and a herd of black and white sheep fenced in together. A very furry Ovcharka dog lies nearby, panting as he watches over them.

Moyshe notices Elizabeth looking at the dog.

“That Karik. Everyone and everything have purpose. He boss of cows and sheep. Think he run whole farm.”

Moyshe whistles to the dog. Karik’s ears perk up, and he springs to his feet. The Ovcharka begins herding the cows and sheep toward the barn with quick, purposeful trots.

“That a boy,” Moyshe calls out. “Good dog.”

As they approach the farmhouse, Elizabeth notices a vegetable garden as they approach the farmhouse, rows of tomatoes, peppers, and lettuce growing behind a small picket fence to keep the animals out. The soil is dark and rich, the plants sturdy despite the early season.

“We have almost everything we need,” Moyshe says. “We go into village once a month.

Trade for what we don't grow."

"Trade? You don't have any money?"

"I have lots of money, but not needed to buy here. If I don't grow cabbage and wife need for cabbage soup, we trade milk or eggs to someone who need. If people no have anything to trade, they pay us kopecks."

Near the garden, clothes hang in the sun to dry, mostly children's clothing fluttering in the breeze.

"How many children do you have?"

"Three boys and one girl. Wonderful children. You'll see."

Moyshe pulls on the reins, stopping the horse in front of an old two-story, weather-worn wooden house with grass growing on its roof. A horned goat with a long beard stands on the roof, happily munching his lunch.

"*Ey na loshad*," he says, making the horse stop. Then, looking up at the goat, he calls, "Sasha! Get down! Always on roof, that one."

The goat obeys.

Elizabeth smiles as she looks around, comforted by the simple charm of the place. Two long handmade wooden benches sit along the front of the house, with baskets stacked beside them and strings of onions hanging to dry. Barrels stand ready to catch rainwater from the eaves. Leaning against the exterior wall of the barn is a wooden wagon wheel and a homemade wooden pitchfork. An axe rests on a tree stump beside a large pile of firewood stacked neatly to the left of the barn. The barn doors stand open, and as they ride by, Elizabeth notices a mound of hay inside. She watches Karik herd the cows into the barn. After all she has been through, the quiet

order of it feels like a blessing.

To the right of the house is an old wooden outhouse.

“Is that the toilet?”

“*Da*. Sorry. We don’t have any running water here.”

Elizabeth nods, taking it in. It is a small shock after the palace and the life she once knew, but she accepts it without complaint.

Moyshe helps Elizabeth down from the wagon. They are immediately greeted by curious goats, geese, quacking ducks, and flocks of Pavlovskaja and Orloff chickens clucking everywhere as they roam freely.

She remembers her father mentioning the animals.

“My father wasn’t kidding about your animals. You have so many.”

“*Da*. Their shit makes good fertilizer you can smell.”

She laughs, which feels good.

Moyshe glances over with a small smile, pleased to hear it.

As Moyshe enters, he kisses his index finger and then touches the mezuzah on the right side of the doorpost. Elizabeth copies him.

The first thing she sees inside the house are silver trays, dishes, cups, pots, and pans arranged on open shelves or hanging from hooks along the walls. Kerosene hurricane lamps sit wherever there is space, and a samovar rests on a small table in the corner.

Then she sees four small children playing with a piglet on the floor of the large living–dining–kitchen room. A woman wearing a traditional embroidered Sarafan and a black floral shawl—red, blue, and yellow flowers with green leaves, finished with black fringe—stirs a pot in

the fireplace. She tastes the hot liquid from a wooden spoon, then adds a twig of thyme. On the mantel above her is a menorah between two brass candle holders. Elizabeth takes it all in, struck by how different this is from the palace, yet surprised by the warmth she feels in the simple, bustling room.

Everyone stops and looks at Elizabeth. The woman stares at her with astonishment, and the children shrink behind their mother, frightened by the sight of a stranger in their home.

“This is wife, Katya. Ivan, twelve. Rebecca, nine. Mikhail, seven. And Dmitri, four,” Moyshe proudly informs Elizabeth. Then, to all of them, he adds with the same pride, “This my niece, Elizabe

Katya’s face softens. She walks over with the children cowering behind her holding onto her apron. She kisses Elizabeth on both cheeks.

“She stinks,” Ivan blurts out.

Katya looks sternly at him.

“Ivan, that is for you to think, but not to say. Think of how she must feel.”

Katya removes her shawl and covers Elizabeth.

“Welcome. Welcome.”

“She hungry, Katya. Give her some *tyurya*.”

“*Da. Da.* Come, sit,” Katya says, motioning to a chair by the table.

Moyshe and Elizabeth sit at the table as the children go back to playing with the piglet, though they keep eyeing Elizabeth.

Katya prepares a bowl and places it in front of Elizabeth along with homemade bread.

Starving, Elizabeth quickly devours the soup, dipping the bread to sop up every drop.

“Where are your parents? Did they not come with you?” Katya asks.

Elizabeth stops eating, looks sadly at the bowl.

In a very soft voice, Elizabeth answers, “My parents were killed by Bolsheviks as we fled.

Katya puts her hand over her mouth in disbelief. She shakes her head.

Elizabeth has a far-away look as she rests an elbow on the table and chews her thumbnail.

Moyshe sees this and waves a finger at Katya not to say another word.

Katya gives her another bowl of *tyurya*.

“Let’s not talk about this now. You eat,” Moyshe urges.

A rooster awakens Elizabeth the next bright morning. She looks at herself in the full-length mirror in her bedroom and stares at how her reflection has changed. She once wore the most fashionable dresses, always with a ribbon tied to her long, braided hair. Now her hair is pinned in a bun, and she wears an apron over her blouse with a simple skirt, boots, and always a scarf and shawl. She looks like a peasant girl. Gone are the corsets, petticoats, and frilly blouses. A pang of loss tightens her chest, but beneath it she feels a small, steady acceptance of the life she has stepped into.

Her days on Moyshe’s farm are spent helping with the chores, as well as showing Katya how to cook many things her mother taught her, like stuffed cabbage, vol-au-vents, kurnik, and especially honey cake, her favorite.

She smiles broadly at Katya as they milk the cows.

“Do you miss the palace?” Katya asks.

“Every time I think of it. But this is my new home for now, and I love you all.”

Katya gives her a thoughtful look, saying nothing more as they continue their work side by side.

As she fills a metal bottle with the milk, she looks at her weathered hands, then wipes the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve. She watches Moyshe and the boys shear the sheep. She gets a rake, walks over, and cleans the stalls, her shoulders aching in ways they never had before. Then she collects the eggs while the children feed the chickens. She also washes clothes in a very large metal tub as the ducks, chickens, and geese watch, their heads tilting with every splash. The work is nothing like the life she once knew, yet she feels a quiet strength growing in her, a steadiness she never expected to find here.

After dinner, Elizabeth hands plates of freshly baked honey cake to everyone sitting around the fireplace. Faces light up as they eat.

“Ah. This is good!” Katya says with an open mouthful of cake.

Elizabeth sits next to her.

“I have good memories of my mother teaching me how to make this honey cake.”

Katya chews as she says, “I will show you how to preserve fruit, maybe add them to the cake.”

“Katya trades her kompot in the village for supplies,” Moyshe adds. “You can trade your honey cake for what you need.”

“Great. I need some new clothes.”

She looks at Katya, who nods.

Elizabeth goes to bed exhausted every night, but she doesn't mind. In fact, she loves it. As they all sit around the fireplace, Elizabeth rests her head on Katya's shoulder. She feels safe with this new family; good people who love her.

Once a month they go to the nearby village where they trade supplies and share gossip, their only source of news. The village has more than thirty wooden houses, a tavern, several

small shops, and a synagogue, all surrounded by wide fields of crops. Near the center of town is an open area filled with stalls selling fruits, vegetables, and anything else a family might need to buy or trade. Off to the right is the section for trading animals—horses, cows, goats, and pigs. Off to the left is the area for farm machinery and tools.

Almost every female villager has long hair, and almost every male has either a beard, mustache, or both. The young men wear pretty much the same outfit: a long, belted embroidered tunic, and loose pants tucked into black boots, while the older men wear a long-sleeved shirt, vest, and baggy pants with boots. There is one main rabbi in the village who is the authority on all matters as they pertain to the Torah. Every man has a job specializing in some type of profession. For example, there is Mortichai, the butcher, Morris the tailor, Oleg, the blacksmith, and Yuri, the baker. The woman's role, by tradition, is to stay home, cook, clean, and tend to the children.

During the cold winter, their mode of transportation is a three-horse sleigh with saddle and shaft bells jingling loudly. The gray-white stallions have their manes braided with red ribbon. Elizabeth has fun throwing snowballs with the children, and she helps Moyshe feed the larger animals and bring in the newly chopped firewood. She milks the cows inside the barn and is amazed as she watches the mare give birth. Katya teaches her how to sew and knit, and in turn, Elizabeth teaches Katya how to embroider. Many winter months are spent indoors with the two of them at the spinning wheel, knitting beautifully embroidered shawls from the sheep's wool. Most of the shawls will be traded, as they have become popular and sought after by the villagers.

On their next trip to the village, Katya and Moyshe bring jars of compote, eggs, corn, turnips, lettuce, and knitted shawls to trade. Katya hopes to find material to sew new clothes for the children, rabbit or fox fur to add as trim on their coats, and make sharik hats for the family.

Moyshe hopes to find coyote fur so Katya can make him a soft warm coat. And Elizabeth hopes to trade honey cakes and kurnik for a nice new blouse and skirt. Besides the shawls, her honey cakes have become a favorite in the village, and Elizabeth soon realizes that she can pretty much get what she wants by selling them.

Everyone in the village trades goods outdoors like a flea market, with horse-drawn wagons and carts lined up beside one another, filled with food, clothes, and tools. Small wooden shops have tables set outside, and some people trade or sell goods from their wheelbarrows. Elizabeth stands next to Katya in front of a wooden table full of clothes. She holds up a pretty white cotton blouse and a long blue velvet skirt.

“These should fit. What do you think, Katya?”

Katya nods and smiles at the seller.

“We will give you a delicious honey cake with kompot for both.”

The seller hesitates.

“Come now,” Katya says. “You know it’s a good deal, and I assure you the honey cake is delicious.”

The seller nods.

ELIZABETH MUST FLEE AGAIN

It is March 1918, one year since the Kaminskayas fled the palace. There is talk in the village of Lenin, and the end of Russia's participation in World War I. It is a time to celebrate. On the next visit into town, everyone dresses in native costume, and there are all kinds of food. There is also plenty of vodka, whiskey, and kvass for those who don't drink alcohol.

Several men try to outdrink each other, and there is arm wrestling as the women cheer. Some men, young and old, compete in horseback riding events. Others shoot at targets with bow and arrow, and some take turns firing their pistols. There are even rifle contests, with the winner's prize in each competition being a kiss from Elizabeth, the most beautiful young woman in the village.

Almost every man woos her, but one in particular—Grigori Nikolaevsky, a handsome young man in his thirties—cannot take his eyes off her. And she has noticed. Grigori is tall, with a thin mustache and sideburns, gorgeous large blue eyes, and a strong, well-built physique. Everyone dances, eats, and laughs, including Elizabeth.

During Sabbath service in the village synagogue, Grigori and Elizabeth smile at each other from across the room, the men on one side and the women on the other. Maxim Turoskeov, the village doctor, is also interested in wooing Elizabeth and takes note of their quiet exchange. Annoyed, he fixes a hard stare on Grigori. Grigori notices and narrows his eyes in return.

After service, Grigori and Elizabeth stand in line for the communal buffet where

everyone in the village has brought something to share.

“Try my kugel,” Elizabeth urges him.

“It looks good, Lizzie,” he says as he scoops a generous portion from the dish and lets it fall onto his plate.

Maxim reaches over Grigori and takes an even larger portion for himself.

As Elizabeth and Grigori find a place to sit at a picnic table, Maxim hurries over and slips onto the bench beside Elizabeth, which annoys Grigori. Grigori is forced to sit across from her. Elizabeth feels a warm flutter of embarrassment at being the center of their attention, but she also enjoys it, and the amusement in her eyes makes both men lean in a little closer.

“You are a wonderful cook, Lizzie,” Maxim says. “This is the best kugel I’ve ever tasted. A man would be lucky to have you as his wife.”

Grigori stops eating and stares at him. “I understand Lidiya is also a good cook. I’m sure you would find her to be a worthy wife.”

“Lidiya?” Elizabeth asks, looking at Maxim.

“Yes, Maxim’s girlfriend,” Grigori replies.

Maxim turns his head toward Elizabeth. “Ex-girlfriend,” he corrects. “You know, Lizzie, as a physician, I make a good living. Whoever would be my wife will not want for anything.”

“Well, money isn’t everything,” Grigori interrupts. “That’s what I say. Love is more important.”

“Yes, of course,” Maxim says. “I would never marry someone I didn’t love.”

“I agree,” Elizabeth says. “Love is very important.”

Elizabeth looks from one man to the other and realizes there is a rivalry brewing between

the two men.

“But why are we talking about marriage?” she asks lightly. “Let’s just enjoy our day.”

They continue eating quietly, Grigori and Maxim staring each other down across the table.

Moyshe walks over. “Lizzie, if you’re finished...”

“Yes, Moyshe.”

“It’s time to go.”

“Of course,” she says, rising from the bench.

“Let me take your empty plate,” Maxim offers.

“Thank you, Maxim,” she says.

“Of course. You will find me a polite and thoughtful man.”

Grigori scoffs under his breath. He rises from the table and leaves his plate where it is so he can escort Elizabeth to Moyshe’s wagon.

Maxim watches them walk away, anger tightening his jaw. He tosses the plates into a wooden crate with the other used dishes.

Over the course of time, Grigori and Elizabeth strike a close friendship. As a gentleman, Maxim backs off. Not surprisingly, and to Moyshe’s delight, Grigori begins to frequent the farm during the ensuing weeks simply to be near Elizabeth. He volunteers to help Moyshe with whatever needs doing. On trading days in the village, Grigori follows Elizabeth around like a loyal puppy, carrying her items for her and staying close at her side.

While Grigori, Moyshe, and his sons plow a field, Katya and Elizabeth bring lunch. The men stop. Rebecca pours cool water over their hands, and they wipe them on a towel she has

draped over her arm. The air is warm with the scent of freshly turned earth, and the horses stand quietly nearby, their flanks darkened with sweat. They all walk to the orchard for a picnic at a large table beneath an apple tree, where the shade is dappled and the breeze carries the faint sweetness of early blossoms. As Elizabeth hands Grigori his lunch, their fingers brush, and Katya notices the way the two look at each other. She smiles at Moyshe. He nods his approval.

“He fine young man,” Moyshe tells Katya as they watch the young couple walk away.

“A good match for a husband,” Katya adds.

Grigori and Elizabeth stroll through the orchard, the grass soft beneath their feet and the warm scent of apples lingering in the air. Sunlight filters through the branches in shifting patches, and the faint buzz of bees drifts between the trees. They stop beside another apple tree. Grigori reaches up, twists two apples from a low branch, and hands one to Elizabeth. They sit beneath the shade, the bark rough against their backs, and eat in comfortable silence for a moment.

“Moyshe told me he’s your uncle,” Grigori says quietly.

Elizabeth nods.

“Where are your parents?”

“They were killed while we were fleeing the Bolsheviks.”

“Fleeing? From where? Why?”

“The palace.”

“You lived in the palace?”

“Yes. My father is...was Nicholas’s scribe, and my mother was one of the Tsar’s chefs. I grew up with the royal children. They were my only friends.”

“No. Oh no.” He rises to his feet and begins to pace beneath the branches, the fallen apples crunching softly under his boots. “Do you know what this means?”

She shakes her head.

“There is a price on your head, Lizzie.”

“But why? I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“There is talk that Lenin has ordered anyone associated with the Romanovs be killed.”

“But I don’t understand why. I have nothing to do with politics.”

“It doesn’t matter. You lived with the Romanovs, and the Communist Party doesn’t want any symbol of the autocracy left. They want to eliminate all traces of the old regime and any possible witnesses to the Romanov execution.”

“Their execution? What execution?”

“You didn’t know?”

She shakes her head sadly, the shock hollowing her expression.

“They were executed in July.”

“What? All of them?” Her voice thins. He stares at her, unable to soften the truth.

“Olga...?” She waits, but he still says nothing. “And Maria?” she asks, her face paling.

“All of them. Even their dogs. And if they killed their dogs, they wouldn’t think twice about killing you.”

It takes her a moment to process this. Her eyes well up, the orchard blurring around her. A breeze stirs the branches overhead, scattering a few pale blossoms at her feet.

Grigori begins pacing again, boots pressing onto the fallen apples with a soft, uneven crunch.

“Lizzie, don’t tell anyone what you have told me.”

She nods slowly.

“Promise?”

She looks at him. “Yes, I promise.”

Grigori remains friends with Elizabeth and continues helping Moyshe now and then, but from that day forward he begins to visit the farm less and less.

Unfortunately, he can't hold his liquor. Seven months later, while celebrating his friend Yakov's birthday in the local tavern, Grigori gets drunk.

“Elizabeth's some woman, huh?” Yakov says, slinging an arm around Grigori's shoulders. “Bet she's wonderful to be close to.”

“I wouldn't know,” Grigori mutters, thoroughly inebriated.

“What, you haven't been with her?” Yakov asks, incredulous.

“I can't.”

“What do you mean, you can't? Something wrong with you?”

“No,” Grigori says, pushing his friend's arm away. “I'll be killed.”

“Killed? Who's going to kill you?” Yakov scoffs. “Moyshe?”

“No, the Bolsheviks.”

The men look at each other, the tavern noise dimming around them.

“The Bolsheviks? Why would they care about you and Elizabeth?”

“Because she lived in the palace.”

“Elizabeth lived with the Romanovs?”

The men look at each other again and shake their heads.

“You know what that means?”

“Yes, Yakov, I know what that means.”

“There is a price on her head, Grigori.”

“Yes, Yakov, and that's why I can't be involved with her. I love her, but we would always be looking over our shoulder. I don't want that kind of life. So I'm just going to be

friends with her, nothing more.”

“She’ll bring the Bolsheviks down on us,” Yakov says, his voice dropping. “They will not only arrest her, but they’ll burn our village. No, Grigori, she needs to go, or we will all suffer.”

Grigori takes a half-empty bottle of vodka from the table and stumbles over a chair before walking out the door with it. Yakov watches him go, then turns to the other men. They all shake their heads.

It’s a beautiful, crisp day in December 1918, one month after World War I ended, five months after the Romanovs were executed, and only one day after Grigori told Yakov about Elizabeth. The air is sharp and clean, each breath rising in pale clouds. Frost silvers the grass, and the white birch trees stand straight and bright against the hard blue winter sky.

Moyshe is busy chopping down white birch trees at the edge of the forest near his farm, the steady rhythm of his axe echoing through the cold morning. Ivan gathers the cut pieces and loads them onto the wagon, his gloved hands stiff from the chill. The scent of fresh sap drifts through the air, mingling with the earthy smell of frozen soil.

Grigori rides swiftly toward them, his horse snorting and tossing its head as he urges it faster. The animal lets out a sharp neigh when he snaps the reins.

“Papa, isn’t that Grigori?” Ivan asks.

Moyshe stops chopping, rests the axe over his shoulder, and watches Grigori race toward them.

“Yakov is on his way to report Elizabeth to the Bolsheviks,” Grigori blurts out as he

swings off the horse, nearly stumbling.

“How he find out?”

“I might have mentioned it to him.”

“You did what?” Moyshe shouts, throwing the axe to the ground.

“I was drunk and told him about Elizabeth living with the Romanovs. I think Yakov believes it’s better to tell them before they find out and attack everyone in the village.”

“You know what you done, Grigori? Your loose tongue now threaten her life.”

Moyshe turns to his son. “Come, Ivan.”

Ivan follows as Moyshe rushes toward the wagon. He climbs up quickly, then looks back at Grigori.

“You have betrayed her, Grigori,” Moyshe reprimands. “For that, I no forgive you. Maybe Lizzie will, because she has kind soul, but she will be very hurt. Do not speak to me ever again, Grigori Nikolaevsky.”

Moyshe snaps the reins, urging the horse into a hard gallop toward the house. Grigori mounts his own horse and follows.

Katya, Elizabeth, and ten-year-old Rebecca are inside the barn hand-milking the cows, while eight-year-old Mikhail and five-year-old Dimitri toss feed for the small animals. The warm smell of hay and milk fills the air, and the soft clucking of chickens drifts in from outside.

Moyshe jumps off the wagon just as Karik corrals the sheep toward their pen.

“Good job, Karik,” Ivan calls to him.

Grigori dismounts and ties his horse’s reins to a post.

Karik runs over and follows Moyshe as he rushes into the barn and finds Elizabeth.

“Lizzie, Grigori told his friend your story,” Moyshe says, his face tight with fear, “and now Bolsheviks come soon.”

“I still don’t understand why they are pursuing me. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“It not just you, Lizzie. They vow to kill everyone associated with Tsar. Now, come. We need get you to America.”

Katya and Elizabeth stare at him in horror as they jump to their feet, knocking over the stools and spilling the milk across the straw-covered floor.

“How? How will you get her out?” Katya demands.

“No time for talk. Better you don’t know in case Bolsheviks question you.”

“I take her to train while you stay, take care of farm.”

He looks at Elizabeth. “Now quick, Lizzie, grab your things.”

Elizabeth moves quickly. She wipes her hands on her apron, steps over the spilled milk, and rushes toward Moyshe.

“What do I do?” she asks, breath catching.

“Get your coat and small things you need,” Moyshe says. “Only what you carry. No more.”

Katya grabs Elizabeth’s arm. “Go, Lizzie. Go now.”

Rebecca stares wide-eyed, clutching the cow’s halter.

Mikhail and Dimitri freeze where they stand, feed still in their hands.

Elizabeth runs toward the house, skirts brushing the straw as she passes.

Katya follows close behind her, already calling out instructions.

Maxim drives up in his little horse and buggy just as Elizabeth rushes out of the barn

with everyone following. He slows the horse, watching as Grigori steps toward her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Lizzie,” Grigori says as she walks past him, tears streaming down her face.

Everyone watches Grigori pleading.

“You know I would never have said anything, but I was drunk. I was drunk, Lizzie. Please forgive me.”

Elizabeth stops, removes her white apron, and turns around. Her tears shine on her cheeks, but her voice is steady.

“I forgive you, Grigori, because you did not do it on purpose. But the damage is done, and now I am like a hunted animal, and I must leave the country. We can never be together again, and it is breaking my heart, and that is what I cannot forgive. Goodbye, Grigori.”

He looks down dejectedly as she rushes inside the house. The men stare at each other with clenched fists.

“Go stand by horses,” Moyshe tells them.

Moyshe turns to Katya. “I go unload wagon.”

Katya nods and hurries inside the house with the children close behind. She moves quickly, grabbing food and packing it into two large, tightly woven baskets with sturdy handles.

As the men separate, Elizabeth runs upstairs to the bedroom with the children close behind. She swiftly packs her things as they watch in frightened silence. She dons her long black coat and the rabbit-fur hat Katya made for her. She closes the suitcase, glances around the room one last time, and gives the children a small, reassuring smile.

Raised voices drift in from outside. Elizabeth moves the lace curtain aside.

Grigori and Maxim are arguing.

“You’re a drunken fool, Grigori. You’re not good enough for her.”

“You think you’re better than I am?”

“Of course I am. I don’t get drunk and blab secrets—especially about the woman I love.”

“She doesn’t love you,” Grigori snaps.

“Well, she sure doesn’t love you now.”

Grigori punches Maxim in the face, and the two of them start grappling like children.

“Stop it!” Moyshe yells.

But they ignore him.

Katya grabs a bucket, fills it with water from the well, and rushes toward the fighting men. She throws the water over both of them.

They freeze, sputtering, their anger shocked out of them.

Elizabeth struggles down the narrow staircase with her suitcase, the children following close behind her.

Moyshe rushes into the farmhouse and finds Katya preparing food. He takes Elizabeth’s suitcase from her and carries it to the small writing table. He pulls out a sheet of paper and writes: Elizabeth Kaminskaya, daughter of Moyshe and Katya Kaminskaya. Then he opens the drawer and takes out Vladimir’s worn leather wallet.

Elizabeth goes to the fireplace and lifts the old photograph of herself as a child with her parents. Her eyes fill as she slips the photo into her pocket. She feels her safe world collapsing around her.

Moyshe sees her trembling and goes to her, wrapping his arms around her.

“Fleeing like this reminds me of when my parents and I had to flee. I miss them so much,” Elizabeth says softly.

“I know, Lizzie. I know.” He pauses, his voice thick. “But now, we look to future.”

He gently pulls her back and places both hands on her shoulders.

“From now on, if questioned, we say you are our daughter.”

He shows her the paper, then tucks it into Vladimir’s wallet.

“Why?” she asks.

“If think you orphan, they not let you leave country. Okay?”

Elizabeth nods, swallowing hard.

He picks up the suitcase. Everyone follows him outside.

Elizabeth sees Grigori standing by his horse and Maxim near his buggy.

“Lizzie, please. I’m so sorry,” Grigori begs.

Maxim scoffs and shakes his head.

Elizabeth ignores Grigori as she walks with Moyshe toward the wagon.

“You’re pathetic,” Maxim yells at Grigori.

Moyshe puts Elizabeth’s suitcase in the wagon. He climbs up and gathers the horse’s reins.

Katya steps forward, removes her shawl, and gently places it over Elizabeth’s head. She smiles softly, then strokes Elizabeth’s cheek with a seriousness that makes the moment feel final.

“Oh no, Katya. I couldn’t take your favorite shawl.”

“I want you to have it.”

Elizabeth reaches out and holds Katya’s hands, looking straight into her eyes.

“I will cherish it always. You’ve been like a mother to me.”

Katya cups Elizabeth’s face in both hands and smiles through her tears as she gazes at her.

“Send us a telegram when you get to America.”

“I will. And I promise I will write you a letter every day.”

Katya nods as her eyes well. She removes her hands from Elizabeth’s face to wipe a tear away with the edge of her apron.

Elizabeth looks at the children. She gets on her knees down at their level, and motions for a group hug. They rush over.

“I love you all, you know that. You’ve become like my sister and brothers. I will miss you, terribly.”

She looks over at the piglet.

“Even little Schnitzel.”

Schnitzel snorts.

Elizabeth stands as tears flow down everyone’s cheeks.

Katya moves in closer and hands Elizabeth the large basket of food.

“Here, for your journey. There’s about a week’s worth of food with your delicious honey cake, plus some cheese, compote, several sandwiches, fruit, and water.”

“*Spasibo*. Thank you for everything.”

Katya places another basket in the wagon.

“Here’s some food for you, too, Moyshe.”

“Thank you, Katya,” Moyshe says. “I’ll be back in a week.”

Elizabeth turns to Katya. “I will never forget you.”

Katya kisses her on each cheek before pulling her into a tight embrace, then forces herself to let go.

“Goodbye, everyone.”

Moyshe urges the chestnut horse forward.

“Goodbye, Lizzie!” Maxim calls.

“Goodbye, Maxim!” she calls back.

Grigori rides up alongside the wagon.

“Let me at least accompany you and make sure you are safe.”

“Enough, Grigori! I never want to see you again. Go back to the village where you belong!” Elizabeth yells, her anger so sharp it startles everyone.

Grigori looks down, crushed, then turns his horse and rides away. He gallops past Maxim.

“Hope you’re happy, big mouth. She’s gone now because of you.”

“Well, at least she didn’t end up with you!” Maxim shouts back.

Moyshe shakes his head and glances at Elizabeth. “They both idiots. We go now,” he says as he urges the horse forward.

Elizabeth waves to Katya and the children, who wave back through their tears. She sees Maxim lifting his hand, and she gives him a small nod.

Karik barks loudly as he runs after the wagon.

“Moyshe, wait, please.”

Moyshe rolls his eyes, anxious to get going, but he stops the horse.

Elizabeth jumps off the wagon as Karik rushes to her. She drops to her knees and hugs him as he licks her face over and over.

“Goodbye, my dear friend.”

She looks at Katya and the children. “Keep them safe, Karik,” she says as tears roll down her cheeks.

She climbs back into the wagon and waves again to Katya and the children.

Karik runs with the children behind the cart. Schnitzel squeals as he follows. The children run until they cannot run anymore, then stop and wave until the wagon disappears from sight.

After two days, stopping only to eat, relieve themselves in the bushes, and sleep, Moyshe and Elizabeth finally arrive at the train ticket office.

They enter with Moyshe carrying Elizabeth’s suitcase and Elizabeth carrying her basket of food. A large round clock hangs on the wall behind him. Elizabeth stares at it, puzzled. She has never seen a clock before; she never had to think about time.

Moyshe and Elizabeth walk up to a pudgy clerk with a walrus mustache sitting behind a wooden counter, eating pryaniki (gingerbread cookies).

Moyshe slides Elizabeth’s papers toward him.

“I need passage to America for my daughter. Third class.”

Elizabeth glances at Moyshe and smiles at being called his daughter.

The clerk slowly licks his fingers, then looks sternly at Moyshe as he slides the papers back toward him.

“Sorry, all ships are full.”

Moyshe snatches the papers and storms away, but Elizabeth doesn’t move. He stops and looks back at her.

She stands rooted, staring at the clerk as he takes another bite of his pryaniki, chewing with his mouth open.

Moyshe exhales sharply, shakes his head, and walks back to stand beside her.

Elizabeth looks down dejectedly, sighs heavily, then slowly lifts her head.

“I see you are a man who appreciates good food.”

She sets her basket on the counter and lifts the cloth covering the food. She breaks off a piece of the honey cake.

“I can assure you this will be the best honey cake you will ever taste.”

She places the piece of cake on the counter in front of him.

The clerk looks at it. He smacks his lips, then wipes his fingers on his vest. He takes a bite of the cake and closes his eyes as he savors it. A slow smile spreads across his face. He opens his eyes and looks at the basket.

“What else do you have?”

“Aravi,” Moyshe mutters angrily.

Elizabeth takes out another item.

“Kompot.”

The clerk smiles.

Elizabeth holds back the three-liter jar.

“Please, Sir. I’d like to go to America.”

Silence hangs for a moment as he eyes the honey cake and the kompot. He glances down at his ledger.

“The Hellig Olav departs from Kristiania. You will need to take the train to Tallinn, then

ferry across. Is that okay?"

Elizabeth looks at Moyshe, who nods over and over.

She smiles broadly and hands the clerk the rest of the honey cake and the kompot.

"That will be three hundred twenty rubles for the train, ferry, and ship, third class."

Moyshe takes Vladimir's wallet from his pocket. He counts the rubles and slides the money, along with Elizabeth's papers, toward the clerk.

The clerk takes them and copies the information onto a contract. He slides the contract to Elizabeth to be signed. She signs happily and slides it back. The clerk stamps it.

"We have a train leaving in thirty minutes on platform two."

Moyshe and Elizabeth smile at each other.

They walk to the nearby platform, Moyshe carrying Elizabeth's suitcase in one hand and the basket in the other.

Elizabeth and Moyshe watch as a black steam train slowly pulls up and comes to a stop.

Elizabeth grips the edge of her basket as the black steam train hisses to a stop. A rush of heat and smoke rolls over the platform. Her heart pounds with a strange mix of excitement and fear. She has never seen anything so large, so loud, so alive.

Moyshe glances at her. "Is good, Lizzie. Is just train."

But she barely hears him. Her stomach twists. She thinks of Katya's shawl, the children's arms around her, Karik's barking fading behind the wagon. For a moment, she feels as if she has left her whole life on that dirt road.

Then the conductor steps down and calls out the destination. America feels suddenly real—close enough to touch, terrifying enough to steal her breath.

Elizabeth inhales, straightens her back, and nods to Moyshe.

“I’m ready,” she says, though her voice trembles.

On the platform, she shows her contract to the conductor, who points to the last car of the ten-car train since only first-class passengers ride in the front cars, where they enjoy a luxurious dining compartment. The porter takes the suitcase and basket up the train’s steps and sets them on the floor before stepping back out.

As they stand in front of the train, Elizabeth kisses Moyshe on each cheek. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices a woman in a mink coat smoking a cigarette from a long holder, a small purse dangling from her wrist. The sight startles her. She begins to realize just how long she has been away from society.

“Lizzie, I know your parents look down with pride,” Moyshe says.

Elizabeth’s eyes begin to well. She smiles, clenching her lips together to keep from crying.

“You strong, Lizzie. I know... you will take care of yourself. You will survive just like you did in forest.”

He hands her a folded, faded piece of paper.

“This is cousin Galinda’s address in New York. I will send her telegram of your arrival.”

Elizabeth nods.

He pulls a wallet from his pocket and places it in her hands.

“Here is your father’s wallet. I’ve added some money to help pay for what you need.”

Elizabeth clutches the wallet to her heart. Tears slowly spill down her cheeks. She wipes one away with her index finger

“Thank you with all my heart for taking care of me, Moyshe, but I can’t accept your money. You’ve done so much for me already.”

“We are family, Lizzie. You are my brother’s daughter, but you are like my own flesh and blood. It gives me pleasure to help you, but I also do this for my brother.”

She has an expression of overwhelming shock as she realizes that, like her father, she will never see him again. She cries uncontrollably.

“I will never forget you, Moyshe. You have...”

The loud conductor’s whistle cuts through her words. They stare at each other, then fall into a tight embrace, neither one wanting to let go.

Elizabeth boards the train.

Moyshe hands her the suitcase and basket. He waves goodbye over and over.

She blows him a kiss, goes inside.

Elizabeth finds a seat near an open window and quickly leans out the window. She waves to Moyshe.

The train’s whistle blows just before the train chugs away.

Moyshe stands on the platform, growing smaller with every second, his hand still raised in a final wave. When he disappears entirely, a hollow ache opens inside her, deeper than anything she has ever felt. She ducks back inside and closes the window, as the train’s increased speed has generated wind. She sinks back into her seat, leans her head against the window, and thinks about Moyshe and Katya. Her tears blurring him into a dark, wavering shape. She clutches the shawl as if it were a lifeline.

Back at the train station, three Bolshevik riders corner Moyshe and interrogate him.

Suddenly, a crack of gunfire shatters the air as a bullet tears through Moyshe's chest, stealing his life in a heartbeat.

Ignoring the body sprawled in the dirt, one rider points a gloved hand at the smoke in the horizon. With a collective shout, the trio spur their horses into a frantic gallop, eyes fixed solely on the retreating train.

One Bolshevik rides alongside the rear of the train. Dust kicks up around the horse's hooves as he stands tall in the stirrups. He maneuvers, crouching unsteadily onto his horse's back, and balances precariously on the saddle. He eyes the train's back platform waiting for the right moment to jump.

But just as he prepares to leap, the train traverses a high-altitude bridge, leaving him staring down into a dizzying abyss between two cliffs. The Bolshevik retreats to the saddle and spurs his horse forward. As the horse races across the treacherous bridge, its shoe trips on an iron rail sending the horse and Bolshevik into the gorge.

The two remaining Bolsheviks carefully traverse the bridge, avoiding the danger that claimed their companion. They gallop off again once they reach the other end to chase the now distant, unseen train.

Elizabeth truly leaves her old life. The farm, the family, the men who loved her—everything is behind her now. The road ahead is uncertain, dangerous, and lonely, but she is moving forward because she must. Tears flow heavily down her cheeks again as she feels the sadness of losing her second set of parents. As she embarks on this new adventure, she is forced to gather her courage once again. She is all alone for a second time, left to face whatever the future brings her way.

ELIZABETH FINDS TRUE LOVE

Elizabeth presses onward in her solo journey with a renewed sense of purpose. It is the first time she has ever ridden a train, and she sits quietly, taking in the passing world beyond the window. Fields stretch endlessly in shades of green and gold— corn standing tall like sentinels swaying in the breeze, golden wheat rippling like water, rows of cabbage tucked neatly into the earth. The sight stirs memories she wishes she could forget—her desperate struggle to reach Moyshe’s farm, the fear, the exhaustion, the stubborn hope that kept her moving.

She spots brown cattle grazing, so much like Moyshe’s herd, and horses of various breeds scattered across the pastures, some accompanied by their playful colts. The peacefulness of it all feels almost unreal, a quiet world she is passing through but not yet part of. And still, she watches, letting the beauty and the ache of it settle inside her like a reminder of what she has lost—and what she still hopes to find.

She is startled every time the train’s whistle blows, and again whenever another train suddenly rushes past in the opposite direction. Everything outside flashes by so quickly it feels unreal.

She shares the third-class car with all sorts of travelers: people who smoke, doze off and snore, eat noisily in front of her; a child eyeing her basket; men noticing she’s alone; and passengers who talk and talk without pause. Some cough. Some spit.

She sits on the hard, uncomfortable wooden seat with barely any leg room and unwraps

one of the sandwiches and savors the simple comfort of the meal, grateful for Katya's thoughtfulness. Hours slip by on the long journey to Tallinn, the steady chug-chug of the engine becoming a gentle rhythm that soothes her tired mind. Eventually, the motion of the train lulls her into sleep, her head resting lightly against the cool glass as the countryside drifts by unnoticed.

Suddenly, the train's piercing whistle and the abrupt slowing of the cars jolt her awake. The train shudders once, then comes to a complete, jarring halt. Passengers rise from their seats, craning to see out the windows, murmuring in confusion. Within moments, the reason becomes clear—large rocks from the mountainside have tumbled across the tracks, blocking the way forward. She watches a few passengers step down from the train and walk toward the engine to get a closer look.

After a long, murmured discussion, several of the men roll up their sleeves and begin working together to clear the rocks, straining against the weight as they heave them aside one by one. Using shovels, it takes hours for the brakemen to clear the tracks. Sweat darkens their shirts as they work steadily, chipping away at the stubborn pile of fallen rock. Passengers watch from the windows or stand nearby, waiting anxiously for the path to open again.

Then, as the train descends the mountain, the landscape shifts once more. Everything becomes green again, lush with vegetation, as if the world has suddenly come back to life.

It is a long ride with many stops. People get on and off the train—Russians, Lithuanians, one Finnish passenger, several Polish travelers, then more and more Estonians, along with one American and a passenger from Yugoslavia. At one stop, three musicians appear on the platform and play a tuba, trumpet, and accordion as new passengers climb aboard.

As the train nears Tallinn, Elizabeth notices houses appearing more frequently, clustered closer and closer together. Soon, buildings rise beside the tracks, many still scarred with bullet holes from the war. As they approach the bustling city, the landscape fills with movement—more people, more cars, more noise—everything growing livelier with each passing moment.

After what seems like an eternity, the train finally pulls into the Tallinn terminal. Elizabeth dons her hat and coat, then drapes Katya's shawl over her shoulders. Grabbing her suitcase and basket, she steps off the train with a rush of exhilaration.

The station is alive with sound—the echo of footsteps on the platform, the hiss of steam, the murmur of voices blending with the distant clang of metal. As she walks past several other trains, her eyes catch the Estonian Coat of Arms on a nearby wall: a gold shield bearing three blue lions. She pauses for a moment, taking it in. Something about it feels bold and reassuring, as if the emblem itself is welcoming her into a new chapter of her life.

She walks over to the information booth.

“Excuse me,” she says in Russian. “Can you please direct me to the ferry for Kristiania?”

“Certainly,” the lady replies. “Here is a map. You must walk down this road to the pier. It is not a long walk, but you will have to hurry. The ship is leaving in thirty minutes.”

“There was a landslide...” Elizabeth begins.

“Yes, we are aware,” the woman interrupts. “That is why the ferry has delayed its departure. They're waiting for the passengers from the train. Now hurry.”

“*Spasibo*,” Elizabeth says, and she runs outside.

It begins to rain very lightly, and she quickly removes her rabbit-fur hat so it won't be

ruined. As she hurries toward the dock, the damp air cool against her hair, she spots a large ship in the distance and slows for just a heartbeat, marveling at its size. This will be her first ferry, her first cruise, the first time she has ever traveled over open water.

The rain grows steadier as she approaches, soaking through her coat and shawl. By the time she reaches the ferry, she is drenched, breathless, and trembling with a mix of excitement and exhaustion.

At the dock, she approaches the ferry's black Agent, a man with very white, bushy lambchops who wears a yellow hooded rain jacket with the hood up. He stands beside the gangplank, calmly smoking a pipe as the rain patters around him.

"Is this the ferry to Kristiania?"

"Aye, 'tis."

He notices her gaze drifting upward, fearfully studying the two tall white masts stark against the dark, cloud-heavy sky.

"Don't worry about the sails, luv. She'll get you there."

"I've never been on a ship before."

As she offers a nervous smile and shows him her stamped contract, they hear the sound of horses approaching and look at their direction. They see the two Bolsheviks gallop towards them.

"Hurry, get on board!" the agent yells.

He blows his whistle alerting several Estonians with rifles to appear. They quickly form a shield standing in front of the pier.

The Bolsheviks see Elizabeth running up the gangplank.

They fire at her. Their bullets hit the ship just as she goes inside.

The Estonians shoot and kill both Bolsheviks.

Elizabeth, emotionally drained and out of breath, rushes toward a crew member who is crouched behind chairs.

“Where is my cabin, please?”

The crew member points to the staircase leading to the bottom of the ferry.

Elizabeth quickly descends the staircase searching for her cabin. A young woman whose cleavage bulges over the edge of her blouse walks by.

“Excuse me,” Elizabeth says politely. “I can’t seem to find my cabin.”

“What number are you looking for?”

“Cabin 109.”

“That’s my cabin. I’m Ingrid. Follow me.”

Elizabeth follows her and stops in the doorway before stepping inside. Having grown up in large, gilded rooms, the tiny, bare, closet-sized cabin—with only four narrow bunkbeds—feels startlingly cramped. Two other women sit together on the lower bunks, dressed in bright, revealing clothing that immediately catches Elizabeth off guard. The contrast between her sheltered upbringing and this crowded little cabin hits her all at once.

“Well, it’s just for one night, so it’ll have to do,” Elizabeth says, lifting her chin.

“It’ll have to do?” one of the women repeats. “Who are you, the queen?”

“That be Freja, and that be Josefina,” Ingrid says, pointing to each in turn. She looks at Elizabeth. “Your first time, honey?”

“Yes. I’ve never sailed before.”

“Well then, I’ll take the upper bunk in case you have to run to the loo during the night.”

“What is the loo?”

Josefine laughs and mimics her, “What is the loo?”

“Leave her be, Josefine,” Ingrid reprimands gently. She turns back to Elizabeth. “It’s the WC, *le toilette*. It’s down the corridor to your right.”

Elizabeth puts her things on the lower bunk.

“Since it’s your first time, best to lie in bed so you don’t get seasick. A storm’s on the way, so we’ll be rocking all night.”

“Thank you. I’ll do just that.”

As the ship sets sail, Elizabeth quickly lies down.

“I’ll wager she blows within the hour,” Freja says. “If I win, I get your new garter.”

“Okay, and I’ll wager my garter against your bustier that she upchucks after an hour,” Josefine replies.

“No, I think it’ll be sooner,” Freja says, nodding with confidence.

Ingrid joins the two women on the opposite lower bunk. They all watch Elizabeth with open curiosity. The ferry rocks up and down, then side to side, then up and down again.

After just thirty-two minutes, Elizabeth sits up. She presses a hand over her mouth.

Freja laughs. “There she blows.” She holds out her hand toward Josefine. “The garter, please.”

Ingrid looks at Elizabeth. “You don’t look so good.”

Elizabeth nods slowly, trying desperately to keep from upchucking.

“Is there a doctor on board?” she manages.

“You can go to sickbay,” Ingrid replies. “Ask a crew member where it’s at.”

As Elizabeth walks down the hallway, she notices several other seasick passengers waiting in line outside the doctor’s office. She takes a pail from a small stack by the door and sits on the floor with her back against the wall, clutching it just in case.

A tall, young, handsome man—no more than twenty—struggles to keep his balance as he makes his way toward the doctor’s office. The ferry sways violently, and he accidentally bumps into Elizabeth’s leg. He speaks English with a German accent.

“Oh, excuse me. I don’t have my sea legs yet.”

Elizabeth manages a half-smile.

“Oh, excuse me. I don’t have my sea legs yet. I’ve sailed the Baltic Sea many times, but this is the first time I’ve felt sick.”

Elizabeth is too nauseous to respond. She manages only a faint, strained half-smile.

The ship rocks fiercely. He presses a hand over his mouth, grabs a pail, and sits down beside her.

At the Kristiania pier the next morning, Elizabeth is overjoyed to disembark the ferry—so happy, in fact, that she refuses to look back at the ship for even a moment. She swings her basket lightly at her side and grips her suitcase as she joins the stream of passengers moving along the long wooden dock toward the SS *Hellig Olav*. Every now and then a motorcar whisks past on the road running parallel to the pier, its engine sputtering sharply in the cool morning air.

In the distance, Elizabeth notices many ships docked along the waterfront. Some are loading cargo, others unloading, cranes creaking as crates swing through the morning air. She

tries to catch a glimpse of which ship might be hers, squinting past the crowds and masts. So focused on the bustling harbor, she doesn't watch where she's going. Without realizing it, she steps off the dock and straight onto the road.

She doesn't notice the two 1917 motorcars speeding toward her. The first one whips past so closely that the rush of air literally knocks her off her feet. She loses her balance and falls backward onto her *derrière*. Her suitcase flies from her hand, the latch snapping open and spewing her clothes across the street.

Both cars screech to a sudden stop. A tall, handsome man in a brown suit, a white scarf draped elegantly around his neck, throws open his door and rushes toward her.

“Are you okay?”

Elizabeth doesn't answer. She's too startled, too embarrassed, too focused on gathering her scattered clothes from the dusty road. She keeps picking them up with trembling hands.

He gathers the fallen garments, offering them back to her.

“Do you speak English?”

Elizabeth looks up. Their eyes lock—his a deep, steady brown—and a small smile touches her lips.

“My father taught me five languages,” she says. “English was one of them.”

Recognition flashes across his face. “You're the girl from the doctor's office.”

“That was you?”

“Yes.” He searches her face, his voice dropping. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she breathes. “I don't think so.”

“Good. We're in a hurry—we have to catch the *Hellig Olav*.”

“The *Hellig Olav*?”

He nods, momentarily caught by the warmth of her smile. “I also have to catch that ship,” she adds.

“Then come, ride with us. It’s the least we can do.”

“Yes,” she says, the relief evident. “Thank you.”

He offers his hand, pulling her up and guiding her toward the idling vehicle. Inside, the car is spacious and smells of polished wood and expensive leather. Elizabeth slides onto the plush seat, and Nathan settles in beside her. Opposite them sits an elderly couple, watching with quiet curiosity.

“I’m Nathan,” he says, regaining his breath. “Nathan Leiberman. And this is my father, Heinrich...”

Heinrich Leiberman, in his sixties, his face framed by a thick, curly beard and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. He wears a sharp brown three-piece suit and a matching tie; as their eyes meet, he tips his hat in a silent, formal greeting.

Nathan gestures toward the woman beside him. Ida, in her fifties, her frame thin and strikingly fragile, is dressed modestly in a long-sleeved blouse and a skirt that reaches her ankles, and a small, elegant hat perched atop her head.

“...and my mother, Ida.”

"No English," Ida says, her voice thick with the soft lilt of a Yiddish accent.

Elizabeth doesn't skip a beat. "It's a pleasure to meet you," she replies, switching seamlessly into Yiddish. "I'm Elizabeth Kaminskaya, but you can call me Lizzie. All my friends do."

The car surges forward, racing toward the docks. Nathan is silent, his gaze fixed on her with an intensity he can't quite hide. Elizabeth watches the city blur past the window before turning back to find him still staring. She doesn't look away; instead, she offers a small, knowing smile, leaning into the warmth of his attention.

The ship's horn blares, a deep, bone-rattling blast that echoes across the harbor.

"We must be the last ones," Heinrich worries, his brow furrowing as he checks his pocket watch.

"Yes, Papa, but we made it." Nathan turns back to Elizabeth, his voice softening. "Are you also sailing second-class?"

"No," she says, a brief shadow crossing her expression. "I'm in third-class."

Nathan's eyebrows lift in genuine surprise. "You seem far too refined for third-class."

Elizabeth opens her mouth to reply—perhaps to offer a witty retort or a modest explanation—but the car screeches to a halt. Before she can speak, the car door is flung open and the frantic energy at the check-in tables swallows their conversation.

Porters quickly unload two steamer trunks, two hat boxes, and four medium-sized suitcases onto a cart. They roll it to the side of the table. As the driver hands Elizabeth her suitcase and basket, Elizabeth looks at Nathan and his parents.

"Thank you."

Nathan and his parents smile as they nod.

Elizabeth walks over to the sign for Third Class and hands her contract to the elderly female agent in the ship's uniform.

"Third class?" the female agent asks, not even looking at Elizabeth.

“Yes,” Elizabeth replies.

The woman finds Elizabeth’s paperwork and hands her a large manila envelope.

“Put your money, jewelry, and any important papers in here,” she orders rudely.

“Sorry?” Elizabeth asks. “This is everything I have. You seem like a very nice person, but I’d rather hold onto everything.”

“Madam, if you do not allow me to lock away your valuables, I can assure you the other passengers will leave you with nothing by the time we dock.”

Nathan overhears the conversation and walks over.

“Lizzie, you can trust the ship to hold it for you. It has your name and contract number on it. No one else can get in. It will be locked up in the ship’s safe and you will get it back just before we land in New York. Look, see? We’re doing the same,” he says as he puts his money inside his envelope.

“Yes, Nathan. I trust what you say. Thank you.”

Nathan walks back to his parents, but looks back and smiles at her. Elizabeth puts everything inside the envelope, seals it, and hands it back.

“You will be sharing a stateroom with a family of three and another single woman,” the agent states flatly.

Elizabeth nods in understanding as the female agent stamps her contract and hands it back.

Since third-class passengers must carry their own bags, Elizabeth picks up her suitcase and basket and carries them to the third-class gangway. As she is about to step onto it, she stops and looks up. She is amazed at how large the ship is, even larger than the ferry. She

immediately smells the smoke coming from its smokestacks, and hopes she won't be seasick again.

Built between 1902 and 1903, the *Hellig Olav* and her sister ships, the *Frederick VIII* and *United States*, cut an impressive figure at 500 feet long. While her fifteen-knot speed can't compete with the fastest liners on the Atlantic, she boasts modern comforts like electricity and refrigeration. In the upper decks, the dining rooms span the full width of the ship, encased in walls of polished oak and mahogany. First and second-class passengers enjoy their own smoking rooms and private lounges, surrounded by the finest craftsmanship of the era.

Third class, while lacking the polished mahogany of the upper decks, offers surprisingly spacious staterooms. Each cabin features twin-sized iron bunk beds for up to six passengers, and these rooms are almost always filled to capacity. Unlike the dark, dank communal quarters found on other steamships of the era, the *Hellig Olav* provides a touch of dignity. Fresh water is readily available, and Scandinavian meals are served on long tables covered in clean cloths. For a third-class traveler in 1903, these accommodations are a rare luxury.

During the journey, Elizabeth soon learns that she is not alone in her misery. The vastness of the Atlantic does little to steady the ship, and the constant, rhythmic rolling brings on a wave of seasickness that sweeps through the third-class cabins. Just as she feared on the ferry, the movement is relentless, leaving many passengers huddled in their bunks.

However, the swaying of the ship is only the beginning of the danger. In the cramped, humid quarters of the lower decks, Elizabeth discovers that the "luxury" of the *Hellig Olav* cannot fully keep out the grim realities of steerage life. Despite the efforts toward cleanliness, the close proximity of so many travelers makes it easy for lice to spread through the

bedding. Worse still is the constant coughing that echoes through the hallways, a chilling reminder that diseases like tuberculosis, cholera, and even typhus thrive in the stale, shared air of the deep hull.

The Leibermans receive a cordial greeting from a middle-aged male agent in ship attire.

“Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to the SS Hellig Olav.”

Heinrich hands him their papers.

“Second class,” the agent says to the porter.

The porter rolls the cart to the ship, where it is quickly loaded. “After going up the gangway, the host will have a crewmember direct you to your cabin.”

Nathan can’t take his eyes off Elizabeth as he watches her head for the gangway leading down to the bottom of the ship.

She struggles to balance her suitcase and basket, nearly tripping as she moves through the crowd. He watches her with a tight chest, wishing he could help her carry the load.

“This is your cabin number,” the male agent at the table tells Heinrich. “After going up the second-class gangway, the host will have a crewmember direct you to your cabin where your luggage will be waiting. Here is a map of the ship.”

“Papa, can I see the map?” Nathan asks, reaching for the paper.

Nathan unfolds the map, his finger tracing the steel boundaries between the decks. He studies the service stairs and the quiet corners where the second-class promenade meets the restricted zones. A plan begins to form in his mind. He doesn't want to go down into the cramped, dark hull of third-class. Instead, he looks for a way to bring Elizabeth up into the light

of the second-class deck where they can talk in secret. He folds the map tightly and tucks it into his jacket, his eyes already searching for a spot where she could slip past the guards.

The agent continues his routine. "...And a brochure about meal times and other information that will answer any questions you may have, such as how to get a newspaper or send a telegram. Here is tonight's dinner menu and the ship's newsletter listing all the activities on board."

Nathan isn't listening. His focus is entirely on the girl disappearing toward the lower decks.

"Lizzie!" he yells, his voice cutting through the dockside chatter. "Lizzie, wait! Come back!"

Elizabeth stops at the foot of her gangway and turns around. She walks back to the pier, her expression a mix of surprise and curiosity.

Nathan leans in, speaking softly so his parents and the nearby officials won't hear his plan.

"Lizzie, I have an idea. There is a staircase from your deck to where we are on the second-class deck. You see here?"

He unfolds the map with a snap and points to a narrow set of lines tucked away from the main corridors.

"You belong in second-class with us. If you meet me at the top of your staircase after breakfast tomorrow, I'll get you in." He winks and offers a confident smile. "Okay?"

"I promise I'll try," she says, her voice a mix of nerves and excitement.

She enters the gangway again, disappearing into the belly of the ship, as Nathan returns

to the table. He watches her until she is out of sight, a secret mission already beginning to take shape in his mind.

Once onboard, Elizabeth walks to the rail to look at the view. Even though third-class is near the bottom of the ship, she is still awed by the height of the deck above the water. On the pier, Heinrich gathers all their papers together.

“Right this way,” a crewmember says, extending his elbow to help Ida onto the gangway.

“No English,” she tells him, her voice quiet but firm.

As the Leibermans climb the upward-sloping second-class gangway, Nathan looks down and catches Elizabeth’s eye. He waves to her, a bright spot against the backdrop of the massive ship. From her position below, she can hear the faint, elegant strains of a string quartet already playing for the boarding passengers above. She waves back, watching him ascend toward the soft, golden glow of the electric lamps illuminating the upper deck entrance.

A host greets the Leibermans as they step foot onto the ship. “Welcome aboard.”

Heinrich shows him their paperwork.

“Your cabin is down the hall this way to your right.”

The host addresses the crewmember still holding Ida’s hand. “Cabin 1102.” “1102,” the crewmember repeats, adjusting his grip to lead the way.

“Kindly follow this gentleman,” the host says.

Suddenly, the mechanical groan of the ship’s anchor being pulled up echoes through the hull, the sound nearly deafening.

“Let’s watch the ship sail,” Nathan suggests to his parents.

“What?” Heinrich asks, the noise of the heavy chains drowning out his son's voice.

“Let’s go over here to the rail,” Nathan says loudly, gesturing toward the open deck.

“Okay,” Heinrich says, nodding as he follows Nathan’s lead.

Nathan leads his parents to the edge of the second-class promenade, his eyes immediately searching the lower decks.

The thunderous rattle of the anchor chains fills the air as the massive ship begins its first slow, heavy movement away from the pier. Nathan leans over the polished railing, his gaze scanning the line of third-class passengers huddled far below. He ignores the waving crowds on the dock, focused entirely on finding a single face among the hundreds of strangers. Finally, he spots her—Elizabeth, still standing at her own railing, looking small against the vastness of the steel hull. He raises his hand high, a silent signal across the distance that he hasn't forgotten his promise for tomorrow.

“Madam,” a crewmember says, standing directly behind her.

Elizabeth turns around, pulled away from the view.

He points toward the narrow staircase that will take her down into the third-class section.

Elizabeth pauses, her hand still gripping the cold iron of the railing. She casts one last look upward, her eyes searching for Nathan’s silhouette against the sky. She finds him still there, leaning out as if he could reach down across the distance between the decks. With a small, lingering wave and a heart full of his promise for tomorrow, she finally turns away and begins her descent into the shadows of the ship.

Elizabeth has a very difficult time managing the steep, narrow stairs while carrying both her suitcase and her basket. The heavy fabric of her long skirt catches under her feet, making every step a struggle. Though the corridor is crowded, no one offers to lend a hand. With a huff

of frustration, she reaches down and hikes up her skirt just enough to clear the steps so she doesn't trip.

The men waiting on the landing below are delighted by the sudden flash of her legs. Their whistles and lingering stares don't go unnoticed.

Elizabeth feels their eyes on her and a sudden, sharp fear for her safety knots in her stomach. She quickly drops her hem and tightening her grip on her belongings, her heart hammering against her ribs as she descends further into the dim light of the third-class deck. Elizabeth hurries past the men, her eyes fixed on the numbers painted on the narrow cabin doors.

The air down here is heavy and stagnant with the faint scent of coal smoke from the engines and no circulation to ease the heat of hundreds of passengers breathing in unison. Babies cry out in the gloom while the sounds of coughing, the scent of tobacco smoke, and a low murmur of voices fill the air. All around her, some passengers tremble at the ship's first heavy movements, their heads bowed as they pray for a safe passage.

Elizabeth is used to smiling and nodding at people, as she was taught that proper people do. Instead, she is met with cold glares, with heads turning away, or she is simply ignored. She notices that the men continue to ogle her as she walks by, their gazes lingering. The women take note of her beauty and seem to pull away in jealousy, their expressions hardening. To shield herself, Elizabeth pulls Katya's shawl tight, covering her head and face as much as possible. The fabric becomes her security blanket, a layer of protection she vows never to take off.

She finally finds her door and pushes it open, hoping to find a moment of peace inside. Elizabeth walks inside the stateroom and puts her things down on the only empty bed, which is below the other single woman. A young couple with two small children occupy the other bunk

beds. The children run around chasing each other, their laughter echoing in the cramped space. The air feels thick and heavy already, and she knows she cannot stay down here for long. She decides to go back up to the third-class deck for fresh air and to watch the ship sail.

Standing by the rail, she is greeted with the most spectacular sunset in the distance as seagulls glide effortlessly alongside the ship. She inhales the crisp, salt-tinged ocean air and watches as small tugboats labor to guide the massive vessel through the channel. The wind picks up, tugging at her clothes, and she clutches Katya's shawl closer to her face. It has been a long and arduous journey, and in the quiet of the fading light, she reminisces about Moyshe. She thinks of Katya, the children, and the farm, wondering how they are faring in the world she left behind.

The ship's horn blares once more, a mournful sound as they pass the breakwater and meet the open sea. The calm of the channel vanishes instantly as the wind howls, whipping the ocean into white crests on the massive waves. The deck tilts beneath her as the ship begins to rock and pitch against the deep water. Feeling the familiar, unsettling roll in her stomach, she decides to head back down to the safety of her bunk.

Elizabeth walks over to the long tables and benches to find her dinner. Uniformed waiters serve the third-class passengers a meal of chewy boiled meat, undercooked vegetables, and stewed fruit. The bread is dense, and the water is served in simple tin cups. Despite the tasteless and meager portions, a wave of excitement ripples through the room. For many of these poor people, this simple plate is far more than they ever received at home. Elizabeth watches as they eat with a desperate sort of gratitude, the sound of clinking silverware filling the air.

It doesn't take long before the sea claims its first victims; dinner is soon upchucked by a chorus of first-time travelers. As the stench becomes unbearable, Elizabeth pulls Katya's shawl tight over her nose to filter the sour air. It is even colder now. With nothing left to occupy her, she retreats to her bunk, huddling under both her heavy coat and the borrowed shawl. The distant, lonely strain of a harmonica lulls her to sleep.

The next morning Elizabeth goes to breakfast where the third-class passengers are given coffee or tea, and bread.

She slips into her one "nice" outfit—the crisp white blouse and royal blue velvet skirt she bartered for with honey cakes. Draping Katya's shawl over her shoulders, she follows Nathan's instructions and climbs the staircase. At the top, she waits by the rope barrier, the thin line of hemp that separates the world of third class from the second-class deck.

Nathan's face lights up the moment he spots her. He's dressed in a neat sweater-vest over a crisp shirt, his high-waisted trousers accented by the steady, silver glint of a pocket watch chain.

He casts a quick, cautious glance around the deck; finding it empty, he slips the latch and lets the rope fall. He offers his hand with a smile. She takes it eagerly, stepping across the threshold onto the second-class deck.

Before re-securing the barrier, Nathan catches her hand and presses a light kiss to her knuckles.

“I was afraid you wouldn't show up,” he admits.

“Why?” she asks, meeting his eyes. “I always keep my promises.”

“Shall we?” Nathan asks, offering his elbow with a nod toward the heavy doors leading

to the Promenade.

Elizabeth hesitates. “Are you sure I’m allowed?”

He lets his gaze sweep over her—the rich blue of the velvet, the crisp white of the blouse.

“You’ll fit right in,” he assures her.

Beaming, Elizabeth tucks her hand into the crook of his arm. Her smile is so wide it brings out the deep dimples in her cheeks, and a fresh, bright glimmer dances in her eyes.

Elizabeth gazes at the surrounding luxury, the polished wood and brass stirring memories of the palaces she once called home. For a moment, the ship’s grandeur feels like a ghost of her past life.

As they stroll the second-class promenade, they trade polite nods with the other passengers. Whether passing couples mid-stride, those lounging in mahogany deck chairs, or figures leaning pensively against the rail, everyone returns the gesture with a quiet respect. Elizabeth draws in a deep, steadying breath, her smile never fading. *This is how people should treat each other*, she thinks, savoring the simple dignity of being seen.

Elizabeth’s long skirt hides her worn boots, allowing her to feel right at home among the other women. She notices how much fashion has shifted as 1920 approaches. The wide, ornate hats of the past are gone; feathers have replaced flowers, and many women wear simple flapper hats. The stifling layers have vanished, too—gone are the petticoats, the bustles, and most delightfully, the corsets. Dresses are shorter now, daringly exposing the ankles, and long strands of necklaces are the jewelry of choice.

She spots men in casual caps and vests, realizing it has been a long time since she has seen so many gentlemen in proper jackets and ties. Finding her rhythm, she straightens her

posture, moving with the poise all upper-class women are taught from a young age.

He escorts her to the rail to watch the dark water churn below. When he notices her rubbing her arms for warmth, he stops.

“Are you warm enough?”

“Yes, thank you,” she replies, though her breath fogs in the air.

He doesn't hesitate; he slips off his jacket and drapes it over her shoulders.

The warmth from his body is still trapped in the fabric. Elizabeth beams, holding tighter to his elbow as Nathan stares into her eyes.

“God, you have the most incredible eyes,” he says, unable to look away.

“I do?”

“Yes. They sparkle like diamonds floating in pools of chocolate.”

Elizabeth giggles at the compliment. She tilts her head and fidgets with her long braid, then licks her lips and smiles—a playful, knowing look she learned from Maria.

“Are you always this charming?” she asks.

“I am when I'm with a beautiful woman like yourself.”

Nathan winks, and Elizabeth feels the heat of a blush crawl up her cheeks.

“I thought about you all night, Lizzie,” he says, his voice dropping. “What is this spell you've put on me? I simply cannot get you out of my mind.”

She smiles coyly, her fingers finding her long braid again.

“Where are you from, Lizzie?”

“I've been on a farm in the Pale for the past year,” she tells him, “but originally I'm from St. Petersburg. And you? Where are you and your parents from?”

“We’re from Estonia,” Nathan says. “My father’s a scientist. He’s been working with the government on some secret project—so secret, he won’t even tell me. He told me Europe is about to change and it won’t be safe for Jews anymore, so we need to leave.”

He pauses, his tone shifting from politics to something more personal.

“Why are you traveling alone? Where’s your family?”

Elizabeth looks sadly down at the floor, then back at him.

“They were killed by Bolsheviks,” she says. “I had to survive alone, wandering in the forest. My will to live grew stronger with every step I took. I lived so that my parents didn’t die in vain. I want to make them proud.”

“I think you’ve made them very proud.”

He watches her eyes well up as a heavy silence falls between them. Nathan shakes his head, his expression full of sorrow, and places a reassuring hand on her arm.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I bet they were wonderful parents.”

She nods, her throat too tight to speak.

“Well, we have almost three weeks before we arrive in America,” Nathan says. “Plenty of time to talk. I want to know everything about you, Lizzie.”

She nods, a small smile forming at the thought. As she looks up at him, she realizes he stands a good foot taller than she does, his black, wavy hair catching the salt breeze.

“Let’s make a pact to meet every day after breakfast. Okay?” he adds.

She nods again, her smile widening. The idea of having someone to look forward to every morning makes the long journey ahead feel far less daunting.

The romantic strains of “*Let Me Call You Sweetheart*” drift toward them from a live

band playing nearby.

Nathan draws her in close, taking one of her hands while resting his other against the small of her back.

Elizabeth's eyes widen; she has never been held by a man like this before.

They begin to sway slowly to the music, their rhythm matching the steady roll of the ship. Suddenly, Nathan twirls her, the velvet of her skirt flaring out, before bringing her back against him.

She has never felt this excited.

As they dance, they simply gaze into each other's eyes, lost in a long, breathless moment.

"Are you happy, Lizzie?"

"I could not be any happier," she says. "And you?"

"I don't think I've ever been as happy as I am right now."

They gaze into each other's eyes for a long time, the world around them falling away.

For this moment, the memory of the forest and all her past suffering is forgotten. She is simply beaming, lost in the light of his stare.

As the days go by, Elizabeth and Nathan spend every possible moment together, cementing their relationship. But the voyage to America is far from easy.

On sunny days, the third-class passengers crowd the deck, eager for a bit of sunshine and fresh sea air—though it is usually blended with the thick soot and smoke from the ship's funnel. The emigrants stand at the rail, staring out at the endless horizon. For those who came from landlocked villages, the vast, churning sea is a sight of pure awe.

Time passes slowly. On days of inclement weather, they are stuck below with nothing much to do, packed in like sardines under miserable conditions. Men smoke pipes and cigarettes, filling the cramped space with a thick haze. Women sew to pass the hours, while others play cards or dominoes. They listen and dance to the stray notes of a harmonica, a violin, or a balalaika.

Life and death happen right there on the waves. Babies born onboard are baptized by the captain, while those who die are buried at sea after a brief, somber ceremony. Most of their time is spent talking—whispering about the reasons they fled and their fear of the unknown. They are desperate people who suffered discrimination at home and are willing to endure any hardship to find a better life in a new world. There is constant talk of America being the land of freedom; they dream of wealth and a future where their children can finally thrive.

Elizabeth feels lucky. She spends most of her days at sea with the Leibernans, and Nathan's companionship is a constant comfort during the long, monotonous voyage. Every day, like clockwork, Nathan sneaks her up to the second-class deck after breakfast and returns her before dinner. To make the time count, she decides to skip her own midday meal—which in third class is usually a thin soup, bland meat, boiled potatoes, and a piece of fruit.

One morning, the routine breaks. Nathan is unlatching the rope when a second-class cabin steward, who happens to be walking by, stops in his tracks.

"Excuse me, sir," the cabin steward says, his voice sharp and formal.

Nathan freezes, his hand still on the latch. "Yes?"

"Third-class passengers are not allowed on this deck," the steward says firmly.

Nathan doesn't flinch. He walks up until he is standing within inches of the man, staring

him straight in the eyes. Without a word, he pulls twenty dollars from his pocket. It is a small fortune for a cabin steward in 1919, especially when the average hourly wage is only twenty-five cents.

“No one needs to know,” Nathan says.

He reaches out and stuffs the bribe into the crewmember’s pocket.

The steward’s posture softens instantly. “No, sir,” he says, tipping his cap before turning to walk away.

Nathan turns back to Elizabeth with a calm smile. “Come, let’s go.”

Elizabeth’s days are filled with a newfound sense of peace. She spends most of her time with the Liebermans, finding Nathan’s presence to be a constant anchor during the long, repetitive voyage. Every morning, like clockwork, Nathan sneaks her up to the second-class deck and doesn’t bring her back until it’s time for dinner. She gladly skips her own midday meal—usually a thin soup, bland meat, and boiled potatoes—to remain by his side.

One afternoon, they settle into adjacent deck chairs, and Nathan drapes a heavy wool blanket over both of them. Beneath the fabric, he finds her hand and holds it tight, his thumb gently stroking her skin. Elizabeth closes her eyes, savoring the rhythm of the ship and the warmth of his touch. She knows, with a quiet certainty, that this is a memory she will cherish for the rest of her life.

She delights in the sudden, majestic sight of a whale breaching, its massive tail silhouetted against the sky. Sometimes, pods of dolphins leap through the wake, racing alongside the ship, while the occasional white ghost of an iceberg or a flat ice floe drifts silently past in the distance.

The days find a happy rhythm. She loves playing cards with Heinrich and Nathan, the simple games filling the hours with laughter. When the air is crisp, she walks the deck with Ida, her hand tucked firmly into the older woman's arm. Even though Ida doesn't speak a single word of English, they find a way to understand each other through shared smiles and the steady, comforting pace of their stride.

A loud P.A. announcement cuts through the quiet serenity of the afternoon.

“Good afternoon, everyone. This is your Cruise Director. I want to remind first and second-class passengers that we will be teaching a new dance called the *Castle Walk* in our lounges in thirty minutes. Hope to see you there.”

Elizabeth's eyes light up. “Let's go learn how to dance,” she begs Nathan.

“Okay,” Nathan says with a grin, “but I have to warn you, I have two left feet.”

Elizabeth looks down at his boots, her expression completely blank as she tries to understand the strange expression.

Nathan bursts out laughing. “You're adorable, Lizzie,” he says, pulling her closer.

After they have fun dancing, Nathan buys her a drink, and they make their way to the stern. He stands behind her, his arms wrapped securely around her waist as they watch the sun dip below the horizon, painting the sky in deep oranges and purples.

Later, just before dinner, he escorts her back to the staircase that leads down to her world. When she returns to her bunk, she finds her food basket sitting empty. She notices the children sitting on their own bed nearby, happily devouring what looks like her last pieces of fruit and her precious leftover honey cake.

“I would have given them to you if you had only asked,” she says softly, watching them

eat.

The children's father, a large and imposing man, steps forward until he is inches from her face.

"Are you accusin' them of somethin'?" he growls.

"No, sir," Elizabeth answers politely, her heart beginning to race.

She glances over at his wife, who simply stares back with a hollow expression.

As Elizabeth turns to walk away, she hears the woman whisper to her husband, "They shouldn't 'ave taken it."

The man's temper explodes. "You don't talk to me like that, woman!"

He throws a heavy punch, striking his wife square in the jaw.

Elizabeth doesn't wait to see more. She hurries away, trying to lose herself in the shadows of the large, dark, and crowded room.

Suddenly, a man lurches out of the gloom and pins her against the wall.

"Well, aren't you a pretty one," he sneers.

He forces her coat open and paws at her chest.

"Stop it! Don't touch me!" Elizabeth yells, her voice cracking with terror.

She looks around desperately, but in the chaos of the steerage quarters, no one intervenes to help her.

He starts to kiss her neck, his breath hot against her skin. She tries to shove him away with all her strength, but he is too heavy, pinning her down. Just as he reaches under her dress, Elizabeth lunges forward and sinks her teeth into his ear.

With a roar of pain, he releases her to clutch at the blood blooming on his side of his

head.

“Leave me alone!” she screams.

The grief of losing her parents and the agony of leaving Moyshe and Katya have been locked behind a dam for far too long. Now, the wall breaks. All that suppressed rage spews out in an uncontrollable torrent. She rains blows down on his chest, hitting him over and over with her small, balled fists. As he stumbles back, she doesn't stop; she lunges forward, swinging wildly until the man finally reaches out and slaps her hard across the face.

Shocked by the blow, he turns and disappears into the crowd, leaving her trembling in the dark.

Elizabeth touches her sore cheek, her skin stinging from the blow. She is not used to such abuse. Having always lived where women are treated with respect and dignity, she now realizes she has been living in a gilded cage.

She returns to her bed only to find that even her empty basket is missing now. She glares at the children, but she says nothing; she has no more fight left in her tonight. To protect what little she has, she wedges her suitcase firmly between her body and the wall. Sleep does not come easily. The ship rocks up and down, a constant reminder of the vast, indifferent ocean, and the lingering fear of being molested keeps her heart racing. To find peace, she forces herself to think of Nathan—of his smile and the way he held her hand. Slowly, the dark reality of the steerage cabin fades, and she floats away into the wonderful land of dreams.

The next morning, she meets Nathan at their rendezvous spot. He takes one look at her and stops cold.

“What happened to your face?”

Elizabeth tells him everything—the missing basket, the children, and the terrifying moment she was accosted in the dark.

Nathan's jaw tightens with a mix of worry and anger.

"I have an idea, but let me discuss it with my parents first," he says firmly. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

She nods and sinks into a deck chair, the salt air stinging her bruised cheek.

True to his word, he returns after only a few minutes, looking determined.

"Lizzie, I talked it over with my parents. We've agreed to have you sleep in our cabin for the rest of the trip. There are only three days left before we land, and we have a large stateroom with plenty of room. I can sleep on the floor, and you can have my bed."

"Are you sure, Nathan? I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Let me do the worrying, Lizzie," he says, his voice steady and protective.

"And what about my food?"

"We'll bring you food from the dining room. Real meals."

"If you're sure..." she says, hesitating just long enough to give him a second to re-think the offer.

"Yes. I'm sure. Now, go down and get your suitcase. I'll wait right here at the stairs for you."

Elizabeth couldn't be more thrilled. A nice warm bed near someone she loves is a dream, but the best part is the shower, which is like a marvelous toy to her. Since there was no running water on Moyshe's farm, she had grown used to sitting in a wooden tub with only two buckets of water nearby. Katya would pour one bucket over Elizabeth's head to wet her long, beautiful hair,

and then rinse it with the second. Standing under the hot, steady stream of a shower is indeed a luxury. While she remembers the elegant bathing rooms of the palaces where her father worked, the constant flow of fresh, hot water feels like a treasure after a year of hauling buckets on the farm.

Nathan and Elizabeth have grown very close. They sneak a kiss now and then when no one is watching and spend most of their time holding hands. Their laughter rings out across the outside deck as they play spirited games of shuffleboard. On another day, while they sit with his parents for a game of cards, they trade loving looks and play footsie under the table. Ida and Heinrich take note of the secret smiles, glancing at each other with knowing grins. In the library, Elizabeth and Nathan peruse the book titles lining the shelves. Finding a quiet corner, Nathan looks around to ensure they are alone before leaning in to kiss her. She smiles and kisses him back. They eventually head to the outside deck, each carrying a book. Nathan moves two deck chairs close together and drapes a blanket over Elizabeth once she is settled. He takes her hand, pressing a gentle kiss to it, and for a while, they simply read, talk, and laugh together.

As the sun begins to set, Nathan slides his arm around her waist and draws her close. His kiss lingers this time. Elizabeth smiles, her index finger tracing the line of his cheek, before they lean in to kiss again, more passionately.

On the last day at sea, Elizabeth and Nathan stand at the rail, their hands clasped tightly as they watch the Statue of Liberty emerge from the morning mist in the distance. Nathan's parents stand quietly beside them, their gazes fixed on the horizon. Elizabeth feels a depth of love she has never known before, a warmth that fills her chest, yet a sharp pang of sadness hits her as she realizes their voyage is coming to an end.

Nathan turns to her, searching her gaze, and takes both of her hands in his.

“Lizzie...” He pauses as he feels his chest. He starts to sweat. “God, my heart is pounding.”

He wipes his sweaty palms on his coat then places one hand over his heart.

“Lizzie, I’m so madly in love with you.”

The ship’s horn blares loudly. Nathan rolls his eyes at the untimeliness of it.

“What did you say?”

“I know we’ve only known each other for a very short time, but Lizzie, I love you with every sliver of my heart. I can’t imagine my life now without you.”

His eyes bore into hers, searching for an anchor.

“When we land, the thought of you vanishing into this vast country—of us becoming strangers again—it ties my stomach in knots,” he says, his voice thick with the weight of the realization.

He drops to one knee right there in the aisle. The cabin falls into a hushed stillness as passengers pause, leaning in to witness the moment.

Elizabeth’s face illuminates with a radiant smile. She glances at Ida, who watches with a hand pressed to her heart, her expression soft and knowing.

“Elizabeth Kaminskaya,” he asks, looking up at her, “will you marry me?”

Elizabeth turns to Heinrich.

He meets her gaze with a steady, approving nod.

She looks back at Nathan, her choice certain. “Yes. It would be my greatest honor.”

Everyone applauds as they kiss for a long time while the ship’s horn blares again.

Elizabeth rests her head on Nathan's shoulder as they sail past the Statue of Liberty.

ELIZABETH EMIGRATES TO AMERICA

The ship moors against the pier with a heavy thud, the air thick with the smell of salt and coal smoke. Nathan, his parents, and Elizabeth lean over the iron rail, watching the chaos of the docks below.

“Lizzie, you have to go through Ellis Island,” Nathan says, his voice steady despite the noise. “We don’t have to because we’re second-class, but we’ll be waiting right there.” He points toward the looming brick buildings. “You see? Don’t worry about how long it takes. We aren’t moving an inch until you’re through.”

Elizabeth nods, her gaze fixed on the shore.

The pier swarms with activity. Men in stiff suits and hats jostle alongside women and young girls dressed in long, heavy coats with shawls draped over their heads. Young boys in knee-length shorts and jackets over tunic shirts clutch their caps, everyone hauling a suitcase or a sturdy wicker basket. A palpable electricity charges the air as the crowd disembarks the steamship. Elizabeth, with Katya’s shawl pulled tight over her head, blends into the throng.

“Everyone comes from somewhere,” she whispers to herself. “We are all different, yet we are all alike.”

After a month of constant movement since leaving Moyshe’s farm, Elizabeth finally sets foot in America. Hope and excitement pulse through the air, yet a sharp edge of worry remains. She wonders what this new land truly holds as she prepares to embark on yet another unknown adventure.

The crowd approaches a line of U.S. Customs Officers in crisp uniforms. One officer barks orders into a loudspeaker, his voice echoing across the wood planks of the pier:

“Open your bags! Have them open so we can see what’s inside!”

Since many of the immigrants don’t understand English, the sight of uniformed men barking orders into microphones triggers a primal fear. It mirrors the memories of corrupt officials they fled, and in an instant, utter chaos ensues.

Panicked travelers refuse to let the officers touch their belongings. Some scream in their native tongues, white-knuckling their bags as they argue with the guards; others break into desperate fistfights. A few are so consumed by terror that they spin around and bolt back toward the ship, seeking the only safety they know.

Elizabeth watches as an officer yanks a long Italian sausage from a man’s bag. The man gestures wildly, arguing in a language the officer ignores, desperate to keep his food.

When Elizabeth’s turn comes, the officer doesn’t just look, he upends her suitcase, dumping every single possession onto the dirty ground. Finding nothing of interest, he pushes past her to the next person, leaving her belongings scattered on the ground. Elizabeth burns him with a sharp stink eye and mutters a string of angry words to herself as she kneels to tuck her things neatly back into place.

Officials quickly usher her onto a small ferry bound for Ellis Island. The third-class passengers are crammed onto the boat like sardines in a tin can, shoulders rubbing and breath misting in the cramped space.

Once they arrive on Ellis Island, everyone is separated into two grueling lines—one for women and children, the other for men and boys over fifteen. The crowd presses in close,

leaving barely an inch of space between the person in front and the person behind. Some travelers cough or look visibly sickly, prompting Elizabeth to pull the end of Katya's shawl over her nose to shield herself.

As the line inches toward the entrance of the massive building, Elizabeth looks up. A sign overhead looms in the gray light: MEDICAL SCREENING.

The line moves forward, and Elizabeth enters a room filled with nurses in stiff white dresses and small white caps. A nurse works quickly, examining Elizabeth's eyes, ears, nose, and throat before checking her hair for lice.

"Take off your clothes," the nurse says.

"Why?" Elizabeth protests.

"Only healthy immigrants are allowed to enter America."

Elizabeth looks around at the others who are already undressing. The thought of exposing herself in front of strangers is terrifying. She hesitates, her hands clutching the edges of her shawl.

"If you don't remove your clothes you will be deported."

Elizabeth's heart sinks. Slowly, she begins to undress.

As the nurse presses a cold stethoscope to her chest to check her heart, Elizabeth watches other nurses marking the clothing of certain people with white chalk. Letters like "H" and "X" appear on shoulders and sleeves. Those marked are pulled from the line, led across the room, and locked inside a large wire cage.

"What does the chalk mark mean?" Elizabeth asks.

"They are too sick to enter. They will either go to the hospital for treatment or be

deported back to their country,” the nurse informs her. “Now, turn around.”

Elizabeth obeys.

The nurse thumps her fingers against Elizabeth’s back and then listens to her lungs through the stethoscope once more.

“Breathe in and out,” the nurse commands.

Elizabeth obeys hesitantly, her heart hammering against her ribs, terrified the nurse might find something wrong with her.

“You can get dressed now.”

Elizabeth smiles with relief, the tension leaving her shoulders in a rush.

She is ushered into the Great Hall, a cavernous space packed with long lines of people. A cacophony of different languages echoes off the high ceilings, punctuated by the sharp cries of tired children. As Elizabeth waits her turn in the slow-moving line, her hands shake with nerves.

She finally approaches a clean-cut Inspector in a sharp suit and tie, seated behind a wooden table. She stands before him and offers a hopeful smile.

The Inspector looks up, his expression a stern glare as he studies her for a long moment.

Elizabeth’s smile dissipates, and she gulps, the air in the Great Hall suddenly feeling very thin.

“What is your family name?” he barks.

“Kaminskaya.”

The Inspector checks his large ledger, the nib of his pen scratching against the paper.

“Now it will be Kaminsky.”

He changes her name in the ledger.

“Kaminsky?”

The Inspector looks up, his glare piercing. “You have a problem with that?”

Elizabeth shakes her head rapidly, her teeth catching her thumbnail as she bites it.

“Where are you from?”

“Russia.”

“So, you’re a Communist.”

“No, Sir. I came here to escape them, and Jewish persecution.”

The Inspector scribbles in his ledger, the sound of the pen loud in the small space between them.

“Are you traveling alone?”

“Not now, Sir,” Elizabeth says. “I just got engaged. I will be with my husband and his parents.”

Again, the inspector glares darts at her in a long moment of silence. Elizabeth holds her breath, the weight of the entire journey resting on this one man’s decision. Finally, he makes a sharp check mark by her name.

He points toward the exit and barks a single word: "Go."

A massive wave of relief washes over her, making her knees feel weak. She quickly gathers her suitcase, her heart light for the first time since she left the farm. She is finally, officially, in America.

Elizabeth finally walks down the landing dock and takes her first steps in America. She approaches the bench where the family is gathered; Heinrich and Ida are fast asleep, their heads

leaning against one another. Nathan stands up excitedly the moment he sees her.

"Lizzie, finally! We've been waiting for three hours," Nathan says.

"You know something, Nathan? After being examined and questioned, no one—not one person—said, 'Welcome to America!'"

"Probably because Americans are not happy about Europeans coming into their country," Nathan replies, "It'll take some adjustment on both sides."

Heinrich and Ida open their eyes and smile when they see Nathan and Elizabeth kiss.

The weariness of the long wait seems to vanish as they watch the two together.

"Welcome, Elizabeth," Ida says softly in Yiddish, her voice thick with sleep but warm with genuine kindness. "You are with family now."

Elizabeth smiles broadly at the thought.

Heinrich stands and stretches his stiff limbs, nodding in agreement. "A long day, but the start of a better life. Come, let us get out of this place."

LIFE IN NEW YORK

Elizabeth and the Leibermans walk down a busy, loud street on the Lower East Side, moving through one of the most densely populated neighborhoods on earth. They stop and look up, dumbfounded by the tall buildings that stand so close together they seem to touch the sky. With gaping mouths, they watch the roar of street life. Children play baseball in the narrow gaps between the crowds, while Model-T cars, trucks, and packed trolley cars navigate the cobbles. Men in suits or knickers and caps weave through the traffic, some on bicycles, while policemen on horseback patrol the corners.

The air is thick with the sound of men unloading goods from horse-drawn wagons and double-parked trucks in front of small shops. People sell their wares directly from the sidewalks, and the sheer volume of bodies moving in every direction makes the noise almost deafening.

"You see this? This is America," Nathan says, gesturing to the chaos. "And we need to adjust to this if we are going to survive."

He addresses Ida. "Mama, you need to learn English."

He turns to Heinrich. "Papa, you and I will open a clothing store."

To Elizabeth he says, "And Lizzie..." He whisks her up into the air. "...we will marry and start our family."

Elizabeth laughs as he spins her around, her feet leaving the New York pavement for the first time.

When he sets her back down, the smell of toasted dough and spices pulls them toward a

wooden pushcart on the corner. An old man with a thick beard hands them a warm, salty pretzel wrapped in a scrap of paper. Elizabeth takes a bite, the simple taste of it more real than anything she has experienced in weeks.

"Our first meal in New York," Nathan says, sharing a piece with his father.

They continue walking, but the celebratory mood shifts as they find themselves surrounded by several Italian men and boys. The group carries hammers, sticks, and bats, and some wear brass knuckles across their fingers.

"Hey, where youz guys headed?" the first man asks, stepping into their path.

"We're looking for an apartment," Nathan answers, his voice cautious. "Do you know where we can find one?"

"There's nuttin' for youz here, so keep walkin', Jew Boy," a second man says, stepping forward.

"Go on. Get outta here," the whole gang orders, their voices rising in a unified threat.

The Leibermns and Elizabeth continue walking and now find themselves stared at by teenagers who have stopped playing soccer in the street. The teens begin to follow them, their eyes tracking every move the family makes.

Suddenly, ten Irish men spill out of a nearby pub and surround them. In the confusion, a man lunges forward, grabs Ida's purse, and sprints off into the crowd.

Ida screams in German, "My purse! He took my purse!"

Nathan spins around, his eyes darting through the throng, but he can't figure out who the thief was. "Which one, Mama?"

One of the Irishmen steps forward, mocking Nathan's voice. "Which one, Mama?"

The whole group erupts into laughter, closing the circle even tighter around the family.

"You're in the wrong neighborhood. Kikes belong in the ghetto," a second Irishman says, his voice cold.

The first Irishman whistles at Elizabeth, sizing her up and down. "Wow. Ain't you a beaut," he says.

He steps close, crowding her until she is backed flat against the brick wall of a building. He reaches out and starts to feel her up.

Nathan lunges forward and shoves the man away. "Leave her alone!"

The Irishman responds with a swift punch that sends Nathan crashing to the ground. The rest of the men immediately surround him, shouting and encouraging the second Irishman to kick Nathan in the ribs. He delivers a heavy blow, and Nathan groans in pain.

Suddenly, a priest intervenes, stepping into the center of the circle. "Leave 'em be, lads."

The Irish crowd backs up as the priest offers his hand to Nathan. Nathan grips it, his face tight with pain as he gingerly rises to his feet.

"Come with me. I'll take you to the Jewish Quarter," the priest tells them, his voice calm but firm.

"Thank you," Elizabeth and Nathan say in unison, their voices shaking.

They follow the priest through the winding, crowded streets until he stops under a street sign that reads: HESTER STREET.

"This is where you should be if you want to stay out of trouble," the priest explains, gesturing to the teeming sidewalk. "It's the Lower East Side. You will find an apartment..." He points toward a row of high, cramped brick buildings. "...in one of those tenements. And a word

to the wise... try to Americanize yourselves as soon as possible."

Nathan shakes the priest's hand with one hand as he holds his ribs with the other. His voice is raspy, and he has a hard time speaking.

"We appreciate your help, Father."

Little snowflakes start to fall gently like a sprinkling of stardust. They walk down the street looking for an available tenement apartment and finally find one in Brooklyn before it snows heavily.

The Leibermans and Elizabeth step inside the apartment, and Elizabeth stands near the doorway with a gaping mouth. She scans the dilapidated rooms where peeling wallpaper hangs in strips and the floors are badly stained from years of use. The space is crowded with worn, second-hand furniture that looks as if it might fall apart at a touch.

She peers into the small kitchenette, noting a cramped icebox, and then spots a closet-sized room tucked in the corner. Inside is a single toilet with an overhead pull chain. The air is stale, and the narrow windows let in only a sliver of light from the alleyway.

"I hate America!" Elizabeth cries, her voice echoing in the cramped, stale room. "It's worse than at home. It's overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous. They live like pigs, and everyone is prejudiced against Jews. We might as well go back home."

Nathan looks around the dilapidated apartment, then back at her, his expression weary but determined.

"I think we should give it a chance here, Lizzie. Maybe it'll be better after Papa and I open a store. At least we now know to have our store in the Jewish Quarter."

Elizabeth sinks onto a piece of the second-hand furniture, the dust rising around her. The

roar of the street outside—the shouting, the horse hooves, and the distant rattle of the trolley—seems to vibrate through the thin walls.

The following months are a blur of scrubbing floors, haggling with wholesalers, and Nathan and Heinrich working until their hands are raw. Slowly, the grime of the tenement becomes a backdrop to their new ambition. Disgust turns into determination as the small family pools every cent they have. The cold Brooklyn winter eventually begins to thaw, and with it, Elizabeth's resentment starts to soften into a cautious kind of hope.

Nathan, Elizabeth, Heinrich, and Ida stand in the street staring at their simple store with a large banner in the window, "GRAND OPENING TODAY". A line of excited, chattering women has already formed waiting for Nathan to open the door.

Nathan smiles at Elizabeth.

"In a few months if all goes well, we can get married."

Elizabeth smiles like a Cheshire cat, her earlier doubts finally beginning to fade.

The success of the clothing store brings a steady rhythm to their lives, and the "few months" Nathan promised fly by in a whirlwind of sewing and sales. As the wedding date approaches, the excitement of the Jewish Quarter becomes a backdrop for Elizabeth's own preparations. With the shop finally thriving, it is time to seek out the woman who will help her prepare for her new life.

ELIZABETH AND NATHAN MARRY

Elizabeth stands in front of a three-story brownstone rowhouse in Brooklyn, her eyes darting between the numbers on the shared front porch. To the left is 237, and to the right is 235. She double-checks the address scribbled on her paper before stepping up the stairs to 235 and pressing the doorbell.

The door swings open to reveal a thirty-seven-year-old Orthodox Jewish woman. She wears a crisp white apron over a modest, long-sleeved housedress, her hair tucked neatly beneath a traditional headscarf.

"Hi. Are you Galina?" Elizabeth asks.

"I am," the woman replies.

"I'm your cousin, Elizabeth. Elizabeth Kaminskaya."

"Oh, my heavens. Elizabeth! Yes, of course. Come in," Galina stammers, stepping back and ushering her forward with a frantic wave. "Please, come in."

Elizabeth steps into the entryway, where she is immediately met by a wall of curious stares from six children, ranging from a wide-eyed five-year-old to a stoic nineteen-year-old.

"Franklin!" Galina calls out, her voice rising above the household hum. "Come quickly!"

Her husband appears from the kitchen, a sturdy man of forty balancing their three-year-old daughter on one hip. He is the picture of tradition: long side-curls framed a weathered face, and a velvet yarmulke resting atop his head. His crisp white sleeves are rolled at the wrists, and high-waisted trousers are held firm by suspenders. Knotted at his waist is a *gartel*, the ceremonial prayer belt, its fringes swaying as he walks.

“Franklin, this is my cousin Elizabeth.”

Franklin’s expression softens into a warm, welcoming smile.

“Shalom, Elizabeth. Welcome to our home.”

“Come, let’s go into the kitchen,” Galina says, already turning. “I’m just finishing some chopped liver sandwiches. You must be hungry.”

“No, thank you. I’ve already eaten,” Elizabeth replies, following the trail of savory, onion-heavy scents into the heart of the home.

Galina isn't deterred. “Then at least a glass of tea? You can’t come all this way and have nothing.”

“Yes, thank you,” Elizabeth agrees. “That would be lovely.”

In the corner of the bustling room, Elizabeth notices an elderly woman hunched over a washbasin, her hands moving rhythmically through the suds.

“This is my mother,” Galina says, nodding toward her. “She lives with us.”

Then, raising her voice to pierce through the woman’s concentration, she leans closer. “Mama! This is Vladimir’s daughter, Elizabeth. You remember Vladimir, don’t you?”

The older woman pauses, her wet hands hovering over the basin. She looks up with cloudy, distant eyes and shakes her head slowly. “Vladimir? *Nein*,” she rasps.

Galina offers Elizabeth a small, apologetic shrug. “Let me get you that tea,” she says, turning toward the stove. Her face brightens again as she reaches for the kettle. “Really, it is so good to finally have you here.”

Elizabeth sits at the long wooden table, built wide enough to hold the whole family, while the younger children swirl around her like a whirlwind, their laughter echoing off the kitchen

walls. Franklin pulls three tea glasses from the cabinet—heavy glass, no handles—and sets them down before joining her.

Across the room, the kettle begins a low, steady hiss on the stove.

“I have to tell you, I was stunned when I got Moyshe’s telegram,” Galina says, her back to the room as she tends the heat. “Last I heard, you were still working the farm. To think you’ve come all the way to America!”

Elizabeth nods, her hands fold neatly on the worn wood of the table.

“I am very grateful to Moyshe and Katya. They truly took me under their wing when I had nowhere else to turn.”

“And how are they? Still as stubborn as ever?” Galina asks with a soft laugh. She carries the kettle over, the steam rising in white plumes, and filled the three glasses. After setting the kettle aside, she finally sinka into the chair beside Elizabeth.

“Lydia, take everyone upstairs to play in their bedrooms,” Galina commands.

“Yes, Mama,” Lydia says, herding the little ones toward the stairs.

Once the room settles, Elizabeth turns back to Galina. “They are all fine. Wonderful people. I really enjoyed staying with them; they were so good to me.”

“And the kids?” Galina asks.

“Ivan is a very smart young man. Rebecca is just like Katya—she loves to cook and sew. Mikhail has dreams of becoming a fashion designer, and Dimitri is so handsome, I don’t think he’s going to be single very long.”

“How was your journey?” Franklin asks, leaning forward.

Elizabeth leans in, her voice softening as she tells them about meeting Nathan on the

ship. She describes the way they fell in love amidst the waves and the moment he finally proposed to her.

“We hope to marry in seven months,” Elizabeth says.

“Mazel tov!” Galina and Franklin say simultaneously.

“After I leave here, I am going to send Moyshe a telegram about my betrothal.”

“He is going to be so surprised,” Galina laughs. “To think you were on your way to America and ended up finding the love of your life on the way.”

She smiles at Franklin, who beams back at her.

“So, the reason I came here was not only to see you, Galina,” Elizabeth continues, her voice turning earnest. “I am wondering if you would be my witness at the *ketubah* ceremony and escort me to the *chuppah*, since you are my only relative in America.”

Galina’s eyes soften. “Of course, I will. I would be honored. So, tell me more about this Nathan.”

“He is the sweetest, most intelligent, and well-mannered man I have ever met,” Elizabeth beams.

“What does he do for a living?” Franklin asks, his tone curious but practical.

“He and his father are looking for work,” Elizabeth explains. “His father was an important scientist, but they are thinking about going into the retail business.”

“That is a good idea, since garment factories are on the rise,” Franklin comments, nodding. “They could come work for me in my men’s wear store. I can teach them all about the business.”

“Thank you, Franklin. That is very generous of you. I will tell Nathan.”

True to his word, Franklin brings them on. Heinrich and Nathan agree to work at the shop and quickly learn the retail business's ins and outs. Nathan is relieved; he finally has enough money to provide for their future and fund the wedding.

Seven months quickly pass, and Nathan and Elizabeth stand before Rabbi Steven Glitzberg in the grand ballroom of a glamorous hotel. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the gathering as the scent of fresh flowers fills the air.

Together, they sign the *ketubah* marriage contract, their signatures binding them to one another. Heinrich, Ida, Galina, and Franklin stand close by as official witnesses, watching with pride as the ink dries on the parchment.

During their traditional wedding, Elizabeth stands under the *chuppah* wearing Katya's shawl over her head. Her long-sleeved, form-fitting white satin dress gleams under the ballroom lights, and a simple strand of pearls rests against her neck, a quiet reminder of the Romanovs.

Nathan looks sharp in a long-coated tuxedo with wide lapels and a crisp bow tie. Like Franklin and all the other men in attendance, he wears a velvet yarmulke. The rabbi begins the ancient prayers, and the room falls silent, honoring the journey that brought these two souls together.

In attendance, alongside Nathan's parents, are Elizabeth's cousin Galina, her husband, and five of their children. Galina's mother stays home to watch the two youngest, ensuring they don't disrupt Elizabeth's big day. Several of the hotel's male employees stand quietly along one of the walls, adding to the solemnity of the room.

Galina steps forward and gently covers Elizabeth's face with a veil over the shawl.

As the music swells, Elizabeth follows Nathan toward the *chuppah*. The wedding

canopy stands tall, symbolizing the new home and the life they are building together as husband and wife.

Heinrich escorts Nathan to the canopy, and Galina walks beside Elizabeth. Upon reaching the *chuppah*, Elizabeth follows the Ashkenazi tradition, circling Nathan three times. Each circuit serves as a silent prayer for the three virtues of their new marriage: righteousness, Justice, and loving-kindness.

Two cups of Kosher wine stand ready in a silver chalice as Rabbi Gritzberg recites the ancient prayers, his steady voice acting as a bridge between the struggles of the past and the hope of a future in a new land. While Franklin and his sons bow rhythmically in prayer, the Rabbi speaks of the resilience that carried them across the ocean, reminding the couple that their true strength lies in that shared endurance.

Following the betrothal blessings, Nathan and Elizabeth drink from the first cup, their eyes locked over the rim as the sweet wine sanctifies their union. The Rabbi then recites the *Sheva Brachot*, the seven blessings celebrating creation and companionship. As the prayers conclude and the final whispers fade, Nathan and Elizabeth drink from the second cup, the lingering sweetness marking their finalized spiritual bond.

In this sacred moment, Nathan and Elizabeth exchange rings with their vows consecrating her to him according to the law of Moses and Israel. Following tradition, the ring is a plain gold band without stones, symbolizing an unbroken and honest union.

With a steady hand, Nathan places the ring on Elizabeth's right index finger, the finger believed to have the most direct path to the heart.

"Elizabeth," Nathan says, his voice steady and clear. "In the presence of God, our

family, and friends, I give myself in marriage to you. I promise to spend all my days loving you, and I give you this ring which represents the never-ending circle of my love.”

Then Elizabeth presents a ring to Nathan.

“Nathan. I will always love, respect, and honor you. I will bear your children, and pledge to be your obedient and faithful wife. I look forward to growing old with you, and I will cherish you now and forever.”

Galina and Franklin stand close as witnesses as she places the ring on Nathan’s finger, sealing their mutual promise.

Rabbi Glitzberg reads the *ketubah* in its original Aramaic text before handing it to Nathan. Nathan, in turn, presents it to Elizabeth, who must hold onto it throughout their marriage as a sacred safeguard.

The ceremony reaches its crescendo as Nathan stomps his right foot, shattering a drinking glass against the floor.

“Mazal Tov!” the room erupts in a singular, joyous shout.

Following the ceremony, the *Yichud* requires Nathan and Elizabeth to spend at least ten to twenty minutes alone. They retreat to a quiet side room, leaving the noise of the ballroom behind to reflect privately on the life they have just committed to one another.

When they finally emerge, the room swells with music and cheers as everyone rushes forward to congratulate the newlyweds.

Nathan’s band of five teenage musicians strikes up the first lively notes of “Hava *Nagila*.” Nathan and Elizabeth sit in their chairs, each gripping a corner of a white handkerchief as the hotel employees step away from the wall to join the celebration. The men hoist the couple

high into the air, parading them around the ballroom as the crowd claps in rhythm.

Nearby, Galina, Franklin, and their children perform the *Mizinke*, the “broom dance,” sweeping the floor around Nathan’s parents in a playful circle. The energy shifts as everyone joins hands for the *Hora*, spinning in a massive, dizzying circle that fills the room with heat and laughter.

As the circle breaks, the *Mitzvah Tantz* begins. Heinrich, Ida, and Rabbi Glitzberg take turns dancing with solemn joy in front of Elizabeth, then repeat the honor with Nathan. Finally, the guests step back to give the newlyweds the floor. The room grows quiet for a moment as Nathan and Elizabeth begin their first dance together, alone at last in the center of the room.

Nathan grabs Elizabeth with one hand on her waist, the other arm extended in the air. She does the same to him. They dance to a Russian song.

Then the music changes to a slow dance. Nathan and Elizabeth look at each other and dance close together.

“I love you, Lizzie, for now and forever,” he whispers in her ear.

“I love you too, Nate,” she says putting her head on his shoulder with no space between them as they dance.

Then the music changes again and they break out into the *Castle Walk* that they learned on the ship.

Since the entire guest list consists of only eleven people including the bride and groom, they all sit together at one long table for lunch. Rabbi Glitzberg blesses the challah, and the newlyweds then pass around pieces of it to everyone.

The main course is Kosher roast chicken with potatoes and vegetables, followed by

assorted Kosher bakery cakes, small pastries, and fruit.

After eating, there is more dancing, but this time by professional Russian dancers that Nathan hired. Three dancers amazingly squat, kick their legs out and move their legs in a circle. Then another dancer squats and moves forward as he kicks his legs out again while waving his hat overhead. As they stand, and all stomp, clap and strike the sole of their feet, thighs, knees, and chest with their hands. Then they all jump up and do the splits in the air.

Everyone applauds and cheers.

Heinrich strikes a spoon on his glass for everyone's attention. He stands up holding a glass of Kosher wine.

"To love," Heinrich toasts.

"*L'chaim*," everyone says as they drink their wine.

Nathan takes Elizabeth's hand and leads her to the dance floor. They dance slowly as everyone watches.

Heinrich puts his glass down and extends his hand to Ida. They join the happy couple.

Then they switch partners with Heinrich and Elizabeth dancing and Nathan with Ida.

Finally, everyone joins in. The happy festivities last for almost four hours.

ELIZABETH BECOMES A MOTHER

It is often said that joy and sorrow are inseparable—a delicate balance of light and shadow that Elizabeth had come to know as the rhythm of her own life. A year after mastering the nuances of retail under Franklin's watchful eye, Nathan and his father stepped out on their own, opening a clothing shop that captured the vibrant spirit of a new decade.

Nathan and Heinrich's clothing store occupies a prime corner, its four large display windows serving as a stage for the latest 1920s elegance. The store is perfectly positioned between two reliable anchors of the neighborhood: on one side, a small grocery store where the scent of fresh produce and wooden barrels of dry goods drifts into the street; on the other, a bustling drugstore whose soda fountain and glass cases of medicinal elixirs keep a steady stream of neighbors moving past. Together, these neighboring shops create a natural flow of foot traffic, ensuring that the vibrant displays in Nathan and Heinrich's windows are never without an audience.

As the 1920s dawned, Elizabeth and Ida work with an artist's precision, draping mannequins in the season's boldest flapper silhouettes, fox stoles, and shimmering Sears silk nylons with sleek snakeskin shoes to capture the eye of every passerby and promised a walk into a bold, modern future. Their shelves soon overflowed with the era's most coveted treasures of the Roaring Twenties.

The inside of the shop is a study in organized elegance. Upon entering, customers are greeted by a centerpiece table overflowing with the season's most fashionable hats for both men

and women. The air is always thick with the hum of commerce, as the store remains packed with a steady stream of eager customers. To the left, the men's department features ready-made suits hanging in stately rows along the wall, protected by glass counters filled with an array of ties, socks, and fine undergarments. The right side mirrors this with women's ready-made dresses and counters filled with feminine essentials

One day after the store is closed for the day, Nathan sits in the back room and counts the money. Observing how exhausted Elizabeth and Ida look as they straighten the shelves, he comes out to the front and approaches Heinrich.

“Papa, we're making enough to hire more help.”

Heinrich nods in agreement.

Nathan turns to Elizabeth and Ida.

“We're going to hire more people so you can stay home.”

Elizabeth looks to Ida, who says, “Good.”

Within three days of placing signs in the windows, they hire three women and two male tailors.

Business is so good that the Leibermans move into a nicer, larger apartment, complete with an icebox, a candlestick telephone, and a radio with the new vacuum-type tubes.

As they settle into their modern life, Nathan smiles at Elizabeth.

“Now is a good time to start our family.”

Elizabeth blushes, her heart full at the promise of what is to come.

Eight months later, business is thriving, and the air is filled with the hum of success. The

clothing store is still a whirlwind of activity, packed with customers and Nathan, Heinrich, and their five employees move quickly to keep up with the demand.

Nathan is at the counter counting the cash register money when the candlestick telephone rings. He picks it up and listens intently.

“What Mama, now?”

He hangs up the receiver and turns to his father with wide eyes.

“Papa, Lizzie’s in labor.”

A surge of adrenaline hits him, and he looks out at the crowded shop. He climbs onto a chair and shouts over the noise.

“Everyone!”

The customers continue to talk and browse, unaware of the shift in the room.

“Hello?” he yells again, his voice cracking with excitement.

The room finally falls silent as every head turns toward him.

“My wife’s in labor.”

A wave of warm applause breaks out from the women in the store.

“Thank you,” Nathan says, gesturing toward the door. “So you understand we have to close the store to be with her.”

The customers nod with smiles of understanding, gathering their things and filing out as the Leibermans prepare for the birth of a new generation.

In the bedroom of their new apartment, the air is heavy and still, a sharp contrast to the joy of only hours before. Elizabeth lies on her bed drenched in sweat, her body trembling after the final, grueling moments of labor. The midwife works with grim intensity, her hands and the

linens stained deep with the physical cost of the delivery. As the cord is cut and the midwife attempts to coax a first breath, a terrifying silence fills the room.

“What’s wrong with it? Why isn’t it crying?” Elizabeth frantically yells, her voice thin with rising panic.

The midwife only shakes her head sadly, showing Nathan the stillborn child before covering the small form and taking him away.

Elizabeth collapses back against the pillows, sobbing uncontrollably as the weight of the loss settles over her.

Nathan is beside himself with a grief that has no outlet. He drops to his knees, his hands covering his face as he sobs, the sound raw and hollow. After a moment, he stands and begins to pace the room rapidly, his breath coming in jagged sighs.

“I had a son. A son, Lizzie!” he cries out, the words laced with agony.

From the bed, Elizabeth looks at him through a veil of tears, her heart breaking for her husband as much as for her child.

“I’m sorry, Nate. I really did try. Please, I’m sorry.”

Unable to look at her, Nathan storms past Ida, who can only stand by and shake her head in silent, helpless mourning.

Ida walks over to Elizabeth and gently holds her hand, stroking the damp hair back from her forehead in a silent gesture of comfort.

In the hallway, the sound of the bedroom door slamming shut echoes through the apartment.

“I’ve never seen him like this,” Elizabeth says, her voice trembling with sadness.

Ida sighs softly, her eyes filled with understanding.

“He want son to continue family name,” she explains.

Heinrich looks down at Elizabeth, his face etched with a deep, personal pain.

“No parent should ever outlive their child,” he says quietly.

At his words, Elizabeth turns her head away, buried in the pillows as she cries uncontrollably.

In the kitchen, Nathan frantically searches the cabinets until his hands find a bottle of vodka. He sits heavily at the table, drinking straight from the bottle as he tries to numb the jagged edges of his grief.

Heinrich walks into the room and rests a steady hand on his son’s shoulder.

“It happens, my son. Ida and I had two miscarriages before we had you. Ida almost bled to death. Be glad that Lizzie’s okay.”

Nathan pauses, the bottle halfway to his lips, before a surge of fury overtakes him. He throws the bottle against the wall, the glass shattering as he stands and collapses into his father’s chest, sobbing for the son he will never know.

Since Jewish tradition dictates that a person is to be buried within twenty-four hours, the infant is laid to rest the very next day. Elizabeth, Nathan, and his parents stand before the small grave, their faces etched with shock and a hollow, lingering depression. One by one, they each place a stone upon the simple headstone—a silent, ancient marker of their visit and their grief. They step back, staring at the site as the reality of the loss begins to settle.

Nathan, disheveled and unkempt, takes a long drink from another bottle as he glares at the inscription: BERNARD LEIBERMAN, March 10, 1924 – March 10, 1924. He

turns his gaze toward Elizabeth, his eyes cold and accusing.

“You named him Bernard? You should’ve asked me.”

Elizabeth’s mouth opens in silent disbelief, the cruelty of his words striking her harder than the winter air.

Without another word, Nathan angrily tosses his empty bottle aside and walks away, leaving her standing alone before the grave of their son.

Two weeks into a hollow silence, Elizabeth stands before the bathroom mirror, her eyes fixed on a version of herself she no longer recognizes. The weight of postpartum depression is a physical heaviness, a fog that has settled deep in her bones. With trembling hands, she pulls a pair of heavy scissors from the vanity. The steel is cold against her palm. Without a word, she severs her long, thick braid. The sharp "snip" of the blades echoing in the quiet hall. The hair falls to the floor like a discarded memory, but Elizabeth doesn't blink; she remains suspended in a trance, staring at the jagged silhouette in the glass.

As Ida walks down the hallway, she pauses in the doorway. She takes in the shorn hair and Elizabeth’s vacant gaze, her expression hardening with a quiet, worried understanding.

Downstairs, the front door creaks open. Nathan and Heinrich return from the day's labor, hanging their hats in a practiced, weary rhythm. Before Nathan can even unbutton his coat, Ida is there, her hand gripping his arm with uncharacteristic urgency.

“You go check wife,” she orders, her voice low and sharp.

Nathan doesn't ask questions. He takes the stairs two at a time, his heart hammering against his ribs. He finds Elizabeth in their bedroom, shrunk into a tight fetal position in the center of the bed, a small island of grief.

“Lizzie.”

She doesn't move. She doesn't even seem to breathe.

Nathan sits on the edge of the mattress, the wood groaning under his weight, and gently hooks his arms under her. He lifts her upper torso, pulling her into him until her head rests in the hollow of his lap. As he strokes the raw, uneven edges of her new, short hair, a lump forms in his throat.

“Lizzie,” he whispers, his thumb brushing her temple. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Elizabeth opens her eyes, looks him in his eyes and says tenderly, “I love you, Nate.”

“I love your new hairstyle,” he says weaving his fingers through her hair.

She scoffs.

“I know life is hard right now, Lizzie. But I guess we have to accept the bad in order to appreciate the good,” he philosophizes.

“That’s what my father told me,” she replies softly.

“Sounds like your father was a wise man.”

Elizabeth smiles as she closes her eyes and thinks of him.

In a soft voice she says, “I let you down, Nathan. I’m sorry.”

Nathan lifts her up to a sitting position, grabs her by the shoulders.

“I’m sorry if I reacted poorly.”

He kisses her forehead.

“It was wrong of me. I was just caught up in the emotion of losing our child. It wasn’t your fault. I don’t blame you, so don’t ever blame yourself. We’ll try again.”

A week later, Elizabeth sits before her oval vanity mirror, the rhythmic stroke of her brush the only sound in the room. The door swings open and Nathan stumbles in, the heavy scent of bourbon trailing him.

“I’m concerned about your drinking, Nate,” she says softly.

As she rises to face him, the warm glow of the bedside lamp catches the sheer fabric of her nightgown, silhouetting her figure. Nathan pauses, his gaze drifting over her before locking onto hers.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?”

A small, hesitant smile brushes her lips. For a heartbeat, the room is still, the air thick with unspoken words. Then, breaking the silence, he reaches out—his hand firm against the back of her neck—and pulls her into a sudden, hungry kiss. Reaching blindly to the side, he flicks the lamp switch, plunging the room into darkness.

Nine months later, the sterile chill of the hospital delivery room stands in sharp contrast to the home birth Elizabeth had imagined. Drenched in sweat, her feet locked in the metal stirrups, she gasps for air. A nurse in a crisp white dress and starched cap leans over her, rhythmically dabbing her forehead with a damp towel.

The doctor, clad in a stiff white lab coat, maneuvers a pair of gleaming forceps.

"Come on, Elizabeth. Just one more good push," he urges, his voice calm against the clinical backdrop.

Elizabeth lets out a guttural scream of exertion and pain.

"Good. Great. Here he comes."

A sharp, thin wail pierces the air. The doctor lifts the infant, a weary triumph on his face.

"It's a boy!"

Elizabeth inhales, then exhales a long breath of relief. She smiles broadly, then collapses from exhaustion.

"Good job, Lizzie. I love you," Nathan says before kissing her on the forehead.

"Would you like to cut the umbilical cord?" the Doctor asks Nathan.

He nods nervously.

After the baby is cleaned, the nurse hands him to Elizabeth.

"That was amazing., Lizzie," Nathan says kissing her on the lips.

"Would you like to hold him?" Elizabeth asks.

Nathan smiles and gently takes the baby into his arms.

"What shall we name him?" Elizabeth asks.

Nathan notices the baby's little penis. "This one we shall call George after my grandfather. He also had a small schmeckel."

Elizabeth laughs.

Nathan hums an old Russian tune, bends his knees and dances in circles with George. He hands George back to Elizabeth.

As she holds him, she notices his reddish hair, and is reminded of Moyshe's and her father's red hair.

George grows up spoiled by his doting parents and grandparents. He wants for nothing and is surrounded by clothes, toys, and every comfort they can provide. His favorite is a large steel dump truck with rubber Firestone wheels—a toy he pushes proudly across the floor, its

weight and clatter making him feel powerful and important.

During the roaring twenties, in 1924 to be exact, Elizabeth gives birth again. An exhausted Elizabeth watches anxiously as the very overweight doctor in the delivery room lifts the newborn girl by her feet. He gives her a firm pat on the rear, and the baby lets out a sharp cry. He hands the wailing infant to Elizabeth, who exhales a long, trembling breath of relief.

As she cradles the newborn, Elizabeth notices a small mole on the baby's right cheek.

"She has the same mole on her right cheek as my mother, Svetlana."

Nathan steps closer, leaning in to see.

"She's got your beautiful looks, babe. What shall we call her?"

"The Book of Ruth says there is hope in the most devastating times of our lives,"

Elizabeth says softly. "So what about Ruth?"

Nathan nods, his expression warm as he addresses the baby. "Hello, Ruth Leiberman."

ONE DISASTER AFTER ANOTHER

The Leibermans settled into a new rhythm of life. They worked hard. They learned English. In time, they blended into the pulse of the bustling city, carving out a place for themselves with determination and hope. For a while, it seemed as if their struggles were finally behind them. But life has a way of shifting without warning. Just when their footing felt steady, one hardship after another rose to test their resolve—each blow sharper than the last, each challenge demanding more strength than the one before.

At Nathan's clothing store, the clock on the wall shows five minutes to five. Five employees file out for the day, calling their goodbyes as they head into the evening air. Nathan follows them to the door and reaches for the key—when four men shove their way inside. They carry clubs. Brass knuckles glint on their hands.

“What do you want?” Nathan demands, anger rising in his throat.

One thug steps so close Nathan can smell his breath. Another swings his club up and presses it across Heinrich's neck, pinning him against the wall.

“There've been a lot of thefts in the neighborhood,” the first man says. “We're here to protect you. But it'll cost ya.”

“We don't need protection,” Nathan replies, his jaw tightening.

“Shut up! You're gonna pay us fifty dollars every week. Got that? Jake, here, is gonna show you a sample of what'll happen if you don't pay us.”

Jake steps forward and swings his fist. The blow snaps Nathan's head to the side, sending

him stumbling.

Nathan steadies himself, breath sharp, vision swimming.

“Give us everything you’ve got in the cash register,” the thug orders. “We’ll be back at the end of the week for our hundred. And you better have it if you wanna live.”

At their apartment, Ida washes dishes in the nicely decorated kitchen while Elizabeth sits at the table with George and Ruth, helping them finish their meal.

The front door bursts open. Nathan storms in. His face is bruised, his eyes blazing. He drops into a chair and slams his fist on the table so hard that George bursts into tears. Ruth flinches, her little shoulders jumping. Nathan leans forward, elbows on the table, cupping his forehead with both hands.

Elizabeth’s breath catches when she sees his battered face.

“Nate! What happened?”

Behind him, Heinrich quietly hangs their hats.

Ida hurries to Heinrich, checking him with worried eyes. He gives her a small nod—he’s unharmed.

“Four men came into the store demanding protection money,” Nathan says, voice shaking with fury. “They said they’re going to kill me if I don’t pay. Protection! The only protection we need is from them!”

Elizabeth rushes to the sink, wets a towel, and hurries back to him. She reaches for his face, trying to clean the blood.

Nathan shoves her hand away.

“I’m okay. Don’t make a fuss.”

“What are we going to do?” Heinrich asks, worry tightening his voice.

“I don’t know, Papa. Right now, I’m gonna have a drink.”

With a sudden, urgent energy, Nathan pushes back from the table. He strides to the cabinet, yanks it open, and grabs a bottle of vodka. Without another word, he storms out the door, the bottle clutched in his hand.

Just a few days later, an elderly doctor listens to the lungs of George, who lies sick in the crib of the children’s new bedroom. Three papers hang on the wall beside the crib, each with a small handprint that grows larger from left to right. The first has a tiny hand marked with a number one. The second shows a slightly larger hand with a number two. The third displays the biggest hand, labeled with a number three. The elderly doctor straightens, his expression heavy as he looks at Nathan and Elizabeth.

“He has pneumonia. I’m sorry, but he won’t live through the night.”

Nathan’s face goes slack with shock. He grabs a small wooden child’s chair and hurls it against the wall, the crash echoing through the room.

Elizabeth drops to her knees beside the crib, her sobs breaking the silence.

At the cemetery, Elizabeth holds Ruth close against her shoulder. Beside them, Heinrich and Ida stand with handkerchiefs pressed to their eyes, their grief quiet but overwhelming. Nathan drinks from a bottle again, his hands unsteady, as the small pine casket is lowered and covered with earth.

A rabbi begins to sing a memorial prayer in Hebrew, his voice low and mournful, the ancient melody drifting over the graves like a lament carried through generations.

The loss of George changes them both, but not in the same way. Nathan begins to move through life as if something inside him has snapped and won't reset. He carries himself with a heaviness that wasn't there before, a weight that settles into his shoulders and never quite lifts. The bottle becomes his shield—something to dull the sharp edges of guilt, fear, and helplessness. He works longer hours, speaks less, and when he does speak, his words come out clipped, as if he's afraid that if he lets one feeling slip, the rest will come pouring out. He loves Ruth, but he holds her awkwardly now, as though she might break or vanish if he lets himself get too close.

Elizabeth changes in the opposite direction. Her grief makes her softer, not weaker—more attentive, more protective, more determined to hold her family together. She watches Nathan with a quiet, growing worry, sensing the distance widening between them even as they sleep in the same bed. She clings to Ruth, not out of fear, but out of a fierce, almost sacred gratitude. Every breath Ruth takes feels like a small miracle. Every smile feels like a promise that life can still move forward.

Elizabeth and Nathan love each other, but the loss has carved a canyon between them—one they will have to learn to cross, or risk losing more than their son. For four years after George's death, the Leibermans live with a grief that never fully loosens its grip. Life goes on—work, meals, small celebrations—but beneath it all runs a quiet current of strain that deepens with time. Nathan carries the heaviest weight. Something in him had cracked the night they lost their son, and though he kept the store running and provided for his family, a shadow follows him everywhere. He works longer hours, and leans too often on the bottle to steady himself.

By the autumn of 1929, they had learned to brace themselves for hardship without even realizing it. So when the next disaster arrived, it didn't feel sudden. It felt like the world simply

giving way beneath their feet.

Exactly four years after George's death, with the store full of shoppers, a man is being fitted for a suit. Nathan walks toward his desk. The calendar on the wall shows the date: OCTOBER 28, 1929.

The store phone rings, and Heinrich answers.

"Adam? Adam Smirnakova?" he calls out.

"That's me," the man says.

"Your wife's on the phone."

"Thanks." Adam steps over and lifts the receiver.

He listens.

"What?"

The phone slips from his hand and hits the counter. Without another word, he bolts out of the store.

Nathan turns to Heinrich. "What just happened? Why did he run out?"

Before Heinrich can respond, screams erupt from outside. People rush out of buildings and spill into the street, their voices rising in panic.

Nathan rushes outside with his customers.

A hysterical man paces back and forth with his hands pressed to his temples, elbows jutting out as he mutters and shouts to no one in particular. Nathan approaches him, trying to make sense of the chaos. They speak over the deafening swell of hundreds of people talking, yelling, and crying. Whatever the man tells him makes Nathan's jaw drop.

Inside the store, Heinrich stares out the window, frozen.

Nathan pushes back through the doorway. Heinrich and the five employees gather around him, their faces pale.

“What’s happening?” Heinrich asks.

Nathan swallows hard. “The stock market just crashed.”

Within a week, Nathan paces through what is now a completely empty store. No one has money to buy anything, and those who do are saving every penny just to survive. Bills pile up on his desk. The silence in the shop feels heavier than the crowds ever did.

Heinrich looks from Nathan to their employee, Esther.

Nathan gives a small, pained nod. A knot in his stomach hurts from the thought of what he and Heinrich are about to do.

“Esther, we’re going to have to let you go,” Heinrich says gently.

“I have two children and no husband. Please... I need this job.”

Heinrich’s eyes move to the other three employees, searching for an answer that doesn’t exist.

“Then Matthew, I’m sorry.”

Matthew shakes his head. “Jozelle and I have four children, and you know she’s sick.”

Heinrich’s voice breaks. “I can’t do this,” he says shaking his head to Nathan.

“Papa, we have to let them go, otherwise we’ll lose the store.”

Nathan looks at all the employees—faces he’s known for years, people who have stood beside him through every hardship.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “But we have to let everyone go.”

Shock ripples through the room. Sadness follows. One by one, the employees gather their belongings, moving slowly, as if hoping time might stop and spare them from this moment.

At home in the kitchen, Elizabeth takes a honey cake from the oven and sets it on the table. Ruth sits nearby, playing with her Patsy doll, humming softly to herself. The warmth of the room feels almost out of place.

Nathan and Heinrich walk in and hang up their hats.

“We’re gonna have to close the store,” Nathan says, the words heavy with regret.

He sinks into a chair, elbows on the table, cupping his forehead.

“Those thugs again?” Elizabeth asks.

Nathan doesn’t answer. He stands, opens the cupboard, and pulls out a bottle of vodka. He sits back down and drinks deeply, as if trying to swallow the fear rising in his chest. The thought of losing everything is too much. Nathan starts coughing, the sound harsh in the quiet kitchen.

“Nate, the doctor warned you your liver can’t take any more.”

He snaps back at her. “You should be more concerned about how we’re going to raise Ruth without any money!”

“What are you talking about?”

Nathan speaks without looking at her, his voice low and tight.

“We don’t have any customers and we don’t have any money. And even if we did, those thugs will take it.”

He finally lifts his eyes to Elizabeth. “You don’t understand, Lizzie. We’re broke. We have no money for food. This store is our livelihood. Without it, the only jobs Jews can get are

selling from pushcarts—and those thugs will still demand protection money.”

Heinrich steps forward and puts a steadying hand on Nathan’s back.

“We’ll be okay, son. I have money in the bank.”

“Banks are closed, Papa. I doubt you’ll ever see that money again!”

Heinrich’s eyes widen, panic rising as he turns toward Ida.

Elizabeth covers her mouth with her hand, stunned by the realization of how quickly their world is collapsing.

Three days later, Elizabeth walks into a jewelry store carrying a small pouch in one hand and holding Ruth’s hand with the other. She approaches a tall jeweler at the counter.

“Good afternoon,” the tall, thin man says. “How may I be of service, madam?”

Elizabeth empties the contents of her pouch onto the counter—rings, earrings, a brooch, each piece holding a memory she can no longer afford to keep.

“Good afternoon. How much can I get for these?”

The jeweler exhales heavily. “Madam... everyone nowadays is pawning their jewelry. I really don’t need any more.”

Elizabeth’s eyes well up. “Please, sir. We need to buy food.”

The jeweler looks down at Ruth—her small hand wrapped around her Patsy doll—then back at Elizabeth.

“Well... I suppose I can take a few more.”

Elizabeth’s face softens with relief. She offers him a grateful, trembling smile.

He looks over the jewelry, selects a few items, and studies them closely with a jeweler’s loupe. After a moment, he glances at Elizabeth again, then walks to the cash register. He

presses the metal tabs, opens the drawer, and counts out a small stack of bills.

“Here. It isn’t much, but it should help.”

Elizabeth gives a half smile and nods. As he hands her the money, she notices his left hand.

“I see you’re not wearing a wedding ring,” she says gently. “I imagine a single man like yourself would enjoy some good homemade meals. I’m a good cook. Would you be willing to pay me if I brought you some?”

He hesitates, intrigued. “Well... that does sound good. Okay, bring something and we’ll see how good a cook you really are.”

Elizabeth smiles—grateful, relieved, and already planning what she’ll make.

Back at the apartment, Elizabeth cooks while Ida sets the kitchen table. Nathan and Heinrich walk in and hang up their hats.

“Something smells good,” Nathan remarks.

“Come sit. We’re having veal cutlets.”

Heinrich and Nathan exchange a look, then turn back to her.

“We can’t afford veal. Where’d you get the money for it?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Liz...”

“Okay. Okay. I sold a few pieces of jewelry I don’t need.”

Nathan explodes. “I’m the man of the house! It’s my responsibility to provide for us. Don’t ever do that again!”

He turns to his father, his voice cracking. “I can’t take this anymore. Losing George, and

now the store. It's too much!"

He storms out, slamming the door behind him.

Elizabeth's eyes well as she looks at Heinrich and Ida. The room grew still, as if everyone felt the same dread at once.

That night, Nathan watches his store burn. Flames crackle through the windows, swallowing the place he re-built with his own hands. He takes a long drink from the bottle in his hand, then slips a lighter into his pocket. Another coughing fit seizes him. He pulls out a white linen handkerchief and coughs into it. When he lowers it, the cloth is streaked with blood.

Elizabeth is not surprised when Nathan dies of cirrhosis. The Depression and losing two sons had taken their toll on him. It rains heavily during the funeral. Elizabeth hugs Ruth close with one arm and holds an open umbrella with the other. Heinrich stands beside Ida, holding a large oversized umbrella over both of them. They all stare at Nathan's pine casket resting in the open grave.

Above the steady pounding of the rain, the rabbi's Memorial Prayer can be heard.

When the rabbi finishes, Elizabeth and Ruth step closer to the grave. They look at each other.

"Now?" young Ruth asks.

Elizabeth nods. Ruth reaches down, scoops up a handful of mud, and tosses it onto the casket. The rain dissolves it instantly, turning it into brown water that runs down the sides of the wood.

Ruth looks up at her mother and sees tears streaming down Elizabeth's cheeks.

"Mama?"

“I’m okay, sweetheart.”

She wipes her tears with her finger as she continues to stare at the grave, then turns to Heinrich and Ida and sighs heavily.

“He was a good man.”

Heinrich and Ida nod sadly.

“I’m afraid now we’re going to have to move back to the tenements.”

Heinrich and Ida exchange a worried glance.

Ida reaches for Elizabeth’s arm, her voice soft. “We’ll manage,” she says, though her eyes betray her fear.

Ruth presses closer to Elizabeth’s side, clutching her mother’s coat with both hands. She doesn’t fully understand, but she feels the heaviness in the air. A deep depression settles over Elizabeth as she realizes she has lost everything and is now alone with a child to raise.

For the moment, no one speaks. The future feels uncertain, but they stand together at the edge of Nathan’s grave, bound by loss and the need to survive.

Grief presses on Elizabeth’s chest, but beneath it something else stirs—something steady and fierce. She has survived before. She will survive again--for Ruth, for Heinrich, for Ida, and for the family that remains. Elizabeth feels a new responsibility settle over her. They are all looking to her now, even if no one says it aloud.

Elizabeth Struggles to Survive Again

That night, after everyone is asleep, Elizabeth sits alone at the kitchen table. The apartment feels too quiet without Nathan's heavy footsteps, without his voice, without the familiar tension that had filled their home for years. She folds her hands and stares at the dark window, listening to the rain tapping against the glass. They cannot go back to the tenements. Not if she can help it. She cannot bring Nathan back. But she can keep them from falling apart.

A loaf of bread at the market is 9 cents. Milk is 10 cents. A dozen eggs are 18 cents, and two rolls of toilet paper are 9 cents. Very expensive when you don't have any money. The Leibermans get relief at a warehouse that hands out free bags of food and clothing. They wait in a long line that curves around the block.

"Four months ago we had a son," a now white-haired Heinrich says, looking at his frail wife. "We had a good business. And look at us now, getting charity. This is humiliating."

Elizabeth, holding Ruth's hand, looks back at the line stretching behind them. Around them, the line shuffles forward—tired faces, thin coats, children clinging to their mothers' skirts. The smell of damp wool and cold air hangs over the crowd. Elizabeth studies the people waiting: men who once had trades, women who once had homes, families who once had enough. All of them hungry. All of them waiting for a little help.

"All these hungry people," she says to Heinrich and Ida. "They need a good home-cooked meal."

Then Elizabeth's face brightens as an idea takes shape. She turns to them.

“We need money. I can cook. So maybe we can make a deal with Jerry at the market since he’s not selling much of his produce. I can make simple soups—potato soup, corn chowder. And with your help, we can sell the soups.”

Heinrich hesitates. “I don’t know, Lizzie. Ida and I are getting up in years.”

“I would do all the cooking and cleaning,” Elizabeth says. “I just need both of you to help collect the money and collect the bowls and utensils.”

Heinrich looks at Ida. “I think we can manage that, right, Ida?”

Ida nods.

Elizabeth exhales, relieved. For the first time in weeks, she feels something other than fear. She feels purpose. Again, Elizabeth found a way to survive, and again with her cooking. For the first time since Nathan’s death, she feels the faintest spark of hope.

After shopping at Jerry’s for what she needs, Elizabeth cooks the soup of the day in four large pots. Steam fills the kitchen, fogging the windows and warming the small apartment. On the kitchen table are cardboard boxes—three filled with ceramic soup bowls, one packed with plastic spoons. The smell of potatoes, onions, and corn fills the air, comforting and familiar.

Heinrich carries one pot, steadying it against his chest. Ida lifts a box of bowls with both hands, her thin arms trembling slightly but determined. Elizabeth takes two boxes of bowls, balancing them carefully. Ruth, eager to help, carries the box of spoons pressed against her small body.

They walk together down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk, setting up near the market where foot traffic is steady. Elizabeth ladles steaming soup into bowls while Heinrich collects the coins and Ida gathers the used bowls and utensils. Ruth stands beside her mother, handing out

spoons with quiet pride.

People come—hungry men, tired women, children with red noses and thin coats. Some pay with nickels, some with pennies, some with whatever they can spare. Elizabeth never turns anyone away. Then one day...

Two men in 1930s suits and hats turn the corner and stop short when they see the long line of people stretching down the sidewalk. Steam curls into the cold air. The smell of potatoes and onions drifts down the block.

“What’s going on?” Man #1 asks.

“I don’t know, but it sure smells good,” the second man says, lifting his chin to catch the scent.

They pause to watch Heinrich collect money from an elderly, dirty woman whose unbrushed hair and worn coat make it clear she has no home.

“That’ll be five cents,” Heinrich says gently.

The woman digs into her pocket, counts out the coins, and hands them to him.

Ruth steps forward and offers her a spoon with both hands, solemn and proud.

Elizabeth smiles warmly as she hands the woman a steaming bowl of soup. “There you go. Enjoy,” she says.

The woman nods, grateful, and steps aside to eat. She smiles widely, displaying many missing teeth as she eyes the soup. She quickly devours it, holding the bowl close as if afraid it might disappear. When she finishes, she hands her empty bowl and spoon to Ida, who places them on a tray.

The two men exchange a look — curiosity, surprise, maybe even admiration — as the

line continues to move and the little family works with quiet efficiency. Steam rises from the pots. Coins clink into Heinrich's tin. Ruth hands out spoons. Elizabeth keeps ladling, bowl after bowl, her face flushed from the heat and the effort.

"This is quite a set-up," Man #1 remarks.

"Yes. Quite industrious of them," Man #2 replies. "This is survival... one bowl at a time. You know," he says under his breath, "this woman's got something. Real grit."

Man #1 nods. "And a system that works."

The woman walks contentedly toward the two men, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Was it good?" Man #1 asks.

"Delicious! Best soup I've ever had."

She extends her hand to them. "Can you spare a nickel? I want to get some more."

Man #1 reaches into his pocket and hands her a nickel.

She beams, clutching the coin, and hurries back to get in line again.

"Let's get in line," Man #1 tells his friend.

They follow the woman, and step into the queue, joining the others waiting patiently along the sidewalk. They inch forward with the line, watching Elizabeth's determination, the way she keeps moving even when her arm must ache, even when her face flushes from the heat of the pots.

"Hard times make hard workers," Man #1 adds. "But this... this is different."

Man #2 glances at him. "What are you thinking?"

He doesn't answer yet. He just keeps watching Elizabeth — the way she smiles at each

customer, the way she makes every bowl feel like a small mercy. Something is turning in his mind. Something that might change everything.

The line moves in unison rapidly until it's their turn.

“There you go, gentlemen. Enjoy,” Elizabeth says with a smile as warm as the soup.

The two men drink their soup and smile at each other. They hand their bowls to Ida, and walk over to Elizabeth.

“That’s the best soup I’ve ever tasted.”

They walk back to Elizabeth. “What’s your name?”

“Elizabeth. Elizabeth Leiberman.”

“Well, I’m Abel Dreyfuss. I own Ziggy’s Deli. Where’d you learn to cook like that?”

“In Russia. My mother cooked for the Tsar and taught me.”

Man #1 looks at Man #2, “A real Jewish, Russian cook. Just what our deli needs!”

Man #2 nods over and over.

To her delight and relief, Elizabeth now has a steady, good-paying job during the Depression — enough to support her daughter and Nathan’s parents. Elizabeth is lucky. Many families in these hard years have no skills to fall back on, no work to be found, and no way to ease the slow ache of starvation.

Sometimes, the weight of that luck settles heavily on her shoulders. She thinks of Nathan, of the promises they whispered to each other in the dark, of the life they meant to build together. She thinks of the people in line each morning, their hollow cheeks and tired eyes, and wonders why she has been spared when so many others have not. But then she unlocks the apartment door and hears Ruth’s laughter, sees Heinrich and Ida sitting at the table with warm food in front

of them, and she knows the answer. She is working for all of them now. She is keeping them alive. And in a world where so much has been taken from her, this — providing, protecting, enduring — is something she can still do.

But sadly, within a month, Ida becomes very sick. She has no energy and finds it difficult to eat. The doctor's diagnosis is cancer. She dies two weeks later and is laid to rest next to Nathan. Heinrich is overcome with grief.

Two months later, Heinrich suffers a stroke and passes away. The cause of death is listed as “natural causes,” but Elizabeth believes it was a broken heart.

In the silence that follows, Elizabeth stands alone at their graves, the winter wind tugging at her coat. She feels the weight of every loss — Nathan, Ida, Heinrich — another branch of her life cut away. Yet as she turns toward home, she squares her shoulders. There is Ruth waiting for her. There is work to be done. And though her heart aches, she walks forward, carrying all of them with her.

THE STORY OF MAX

The economic hardship of the Depression takes its toll on everyone. The stress of losing one's home or job brings a kind of fear that settles deep in the bones — the fear of not knowing how to feed one's family, or whether tomorrow will be worse than today. Hope becomes a fragile thing. For too many, the weight of despair grows unbearable. With no work, no money, and no way out of the crushing anxiety, ending one's life becomes, tragically, the only escape they can see. During these years, suicide rises to become one of the causes of death.

On the Lower East Side, Jozef Stein, his wife Sofia, their twelve-year-old son, Max, and their four young daughters sit down to a Shabbat dinner of only soup. Sofia wafts the smoke from the candles toward her eyes, murmuring the blessing. Jozef's eyes begin to well up.

“What's wrong, Jozef?” Sofia asks gently.

“There's not enough food for everyone. I'm sorry, Sofia.”

Sofia rises from her chair, goes to him, and rubs his back in slow, comforting circles. “Why are you sorry? You... we... are doing just fine. There are others who don't have anything. At least we have soup, some matzo, a place to live, and a family that cares about each other.”

Jozef pushes back from the table, goes to the cupboard, and takes out two bottles of kosher wine. Without a word, he steps outside into the rain.

“Jozef, where are you going?” Sofia calls after him.

He ignores her.

Drenched from the rain, Jozef turns around to go back to the apartment, then hesitates. He stands there, soaked and trembling, torn between returning to his family or walking away from everything he can no longer bear. Confusion grips him — shame, fear, exhaustion — all twisting together until he can't tell one feeling from another. At last he decides to continue walking.

He trudges four miles through the storm to the Empire State Building, clutching the two bottles of kosher wine. In a burst of anger and despair, he hurls one empty bottle against a wall, the shattering glass swallowed by the rain.

Jozef stops beside the towering building and looks up. The rain stings his eyes, making it hard to see the top. After a long moment, he steps inside the Empire State Building. He exits the elevator at the top floor, carrying the second bottle. He leans against the wall near the elevator, drinking as he watches the rain lash against the windows. After a moment, he staggers toward the ledge and looks down. The height makes him dizzy. A sudden gust of wind blows his yarmulke off, sending it spinning into the darkness. He braces himself against an even stronger gust. Still clutching the bottle, he loses his balance and falls over.

A week after Jozef is laid to rest, Sofia — still mourning in black — gathers her five children around her. She kneels in front of her son, Max, and takes both of his hands in hers. Her eyes are tired, swollen from days of crying, but her voice is steady.

“You’re the man of the house now, Max. I know how much you love being with your friends at school, but you will have to find a job now so we can have food. Your sisters and I will do laundry and sew for other people. All of us will do our part to make some money. Do you

understand?”

“Yes, Mama. Can I go outside and play now?”

Within two days, Sofia secures Max a job selling for the local newspaper. Max puts on his father’s shoes, but they’re far too big. He stuffs cardboard into the toes, ties the laces tight, and steps outside. He stands on the street corner and waits for the delivery truck to slow enough for the boys to grab their stacks. When it arrives, Max reaches up, takes a bundle of newspapers, and hurries to his spot on the sidewalk.

“Newspapers. Newspapers. Get your newspapers here. Only three cents.”

Nearby, a man named Bernie and his employee, Shlomo, walk out of BERNIE’S KOSHER BUTCHER SHOP and wait by the curb. Max watches them — Bernie, bald and heavysset, and Shlomo, thin and quiet, standing side by side under the awning.

“Do you want to buy a newspaper?” Max asks.

Bernie waves his hand, dismissing him. Max doesn’t move.

“Newspapers. Newspapers,” he yells again.

A Ford Model AA truck pulls up with two men inside. The driver steps out and walks over to Bernie to be paid, while the passenger hauls a heavy cow slab from the back and drops it at the curb. Shlomo hurries to take it inside. By the time he returns, the passenger has dropped a second slab, and the truck pulls away.

Shlomo bends to lift the second slab.

“This will be your last one,” Bernie says.

Shlomo freezes. “What? What are you saying?”

“I can’t afford to keep you any longer.”

“But I have a family.” Bernie doesn’t answer.

“I have three children to feed,” Shlomo pleads.

“I’m sorry,” Bernie finally says. “I have a family too. I have to cut costs to survive. I can’t afford to pay you twenty-five cents an hour.”

“What about fifteen cents an hour?”

Bernie shakes his head.

Shlomo storms off, cursing under his breath as he disappears down the street.

Bernie looks down at the slab of meat lying on the wet pavement.

“I should’ve waited until he took it inside,” he mutters to himself.

Then he glances at Max — really looks at him — sizing up the small boy with the oversized shoes and the stack of newspapers under his arm.

“Hey, kid.”

Max rushes over, thinking the butcher wants to buy a paper. “Yes, sir?”

“Do you think you can lift this slab?”

Max looks down at the meat, hesitating. “I don’t know. It looks pretty heavy.”

“How much do you get for selling your papers?” Bernie asks.

“One cent for every paper I sell.”

“Have you been selling a lot of them?”

“No, sir. Times are tough.”

Bernie points toward the butcher shop. “Do you want to work here?”

Max looks at the shop, then back at Bernie. “Sure. How much would you pay me?”

“I’ll give you five cents an hour for four hours a day.”

Max frowns, trying to do the math in his head.

“What would I be doin’?” he asks.

“I’ll train you how to cut meat. You’ll become a butcher. Whadya say?”

“Make it ten cents an hour, and you have a deal.”

“Eight,” Bernie counters.

Max grins — it’s more money than he’s ever imagined. “Deal. When do I start?”

“Right now. What’s your name, kid?”

“Maxwell Stein. Everyone calls me Max.”

Max stuffs the newspapers into his bag and sets it against the store wall. Bernie watches as the boy crouches beside the slab, trying to lift it onto his back. Max bends all the way over, his small frame straining under the weight. His knees wobble. He nearly drops it.

Bernie steps in, grabbing one end before it slips. Together, they carry the slab into the shop.

Seven years later, on a sunny but cold day in December 1941, Elizabeth — now in her fifties — wears a smart 1940 dress beneath a long mink coat and matching hat. She pauses by the front door, searching through her purse for a bit of money.

Twenty-year-old Ruth, also dressed in a 1940’s day dress with a long coat trimmed in real fur at the collar, pulls on her galoshes and gathers her schoolbooks.

“Ruth, can you stop at Birnbaum’s after school and pick up a pound of hamburger? I’ll make us some stuffed cabbage for dinner. I’ll be home after work about five.”

She hands Ruth twenty-five cents.

Ruth repeats, “One pound of hamburger. Got it.”

After school she walks cautiously along the snow-plowed sidewalk toward Birnbaum’s Butcher Shop. The door is locked, a handwritten sign taped to the glass: CLOSED FOR FUNERAL. She hesitates, then turns and walks down the block. A few storefronts later, she spots a sign for BERNIE’S BUTCHER SHOP and heads inside.

Twenty-six-year-old Max, wearing a bloody white apron and a baseball cap turned backward, is adding a tray of cutlets to the display case. The moment he sees Ruth, he freezes. He can’t take his eyes off her.

Ruth studies the hamburger meat in the case, noting the handwritten sign: 20 CENTS LB. She opens her change purse, then notices the lamb chops beside it.

From the back room, Bernie — bald, heavysset, and smoking a cigar — emerges carrying a large slab of brisket. He spots Max staring and smirks.

Max steps forward, bold and a little too confident.

“Haven’t seen you here before. What can I get you, gorgeous?”

Ruth looks around to see who he’s talking to. When she realizes he means her, she’s startled — she can’t quite believe he finds her pretty.

“I usually shop at Birnbaum’s, but they’re closed for a funeral,” she says.

“A funeral, huh?” Max turns to Bernie. “Sounds like fate to me. Whatta you think, Bernie?”

Bernie scoffs and shakes his head, unimpressed. Max turns back to Ruth.

“How much are two lamb chops?” she asks.

“Two? For you and your husband?”

“I’m not married. It’s for me and my mother.”

“For you and your mother, huh?” Max grins, leaning in just a little. “What’s your name, Sweetcakes?”

“Ruth. Ruth Leiberman.”

“The lamb chops are sixty-five cents a pound.”

Max sees the dejection flicker across Ruth’s face.

“But today, Ruth, is your lucky day,” he says quickly. “I was just telling Bernie...” He nods toward him. “...that we’re giving a prize to the first customer whose name starts with an R.”

“No way!”

Ruth glances at Bernie to make sure he’s not objecting.

Bernie shrugs, cigar bobbing at the corner of his mouth.

As Max wraps the lamb chops, he keeps sneaking glances at her. He notices the nursing textbook tucked under her arm.

“My heart is palpitating,” he says. “I think I need a nurse.”

Ruth looks down at her book, embarrassed but smiling.

“I’m not a nurse yet. I have one more year to go.”

“Beautiful and smart,” Max says, grinning.

He leans over the counter and hands her the package.

“Here you go, Nurse Ruth.”

She smiles broadly as she reaches for the package.

“Thank you... uh... uh...”

Max doesn't answer. He just studies her face, smiling.

"Max. His name's Max. Max Stein," Bernie says for him.

Max winks. "You sure are the cat's meow, Ruth."

Ruth blushes and beams. She gives Bernie a polite smile before heading for the door.

Max watches her as she exits the shop. "I'm going to marry that woman."

Bernie swipes his hand in the air and scoffs. He shakes his head as he swings a cleaver down on the slab of brisket.

"What? The heart wants what the heart wants."

Ruth enters the apartment and sets the package on the counter. Elizabeth comes in from the other room.

"Birnbaum's was closed, Mama. So I went to Bernie's."

Ruth unwraps the package. Elizabeth's eyebrows lift when she sees the lamb chops.

"Lamb chops? I thought I asked you to get hamburger for stuffed cabbage."

"You did, but the great-looking butcher gave me these for free."

"For free?"

"Yes, can you believe it?"

Elizabeth sighs, but there's a smile tugging at her mouth. "Alright. Then I'll stuff the cabbage with lamb."

"And tomorrow I'll get us a chicken, okay?"

Elizabeth gives her a look — half amused, half suspicious.

"Are you sure you're going back just for a chicken?"

The next day, Ruth steps excitedly into Bernie's Butcher Shop.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in. Hello, Nurse Ruth. Is Birnbaum's still closed?"

"No. I... I... um—"

She looks down into the counter case.

"I came to get a chicken."

"A chicken, huh?"

Ruth smiles at him, shy but glowing.

"For roasting, frying, or boiling?"

Ruth shrugs, unable to hide her nerves.

Max realizes instantly she didn't come just for a chicken. He pulls one from the case, stealing glances at her as he wraps it. Then he leans over the counter to hand it to her.

"How much?"

"For you, nothin', Sweet Stuff." He grins. "I'm glad you came back. *The Maltese Falcon* is playing at the picture show. Would you like to see it?"

Her eyes light up.

"You mean on a date? With you?"

"Uh-huh. Unless you'd like to go with Bernie."

Ruth glances at Bernie, then breaks into a broad smile at Max.

The next night, Max and Ruth approach the movie theater and join the long line for tickets. Ruth wears a yellow pullover sweater, a gold chain with the letter **R**, and a black pleated

skirt. She carries her long black coat over her arm. Max wears a black leather jacket over a white pullover sweater, and beneath that, a crisp white collared shirt.

“It’s a little chilly,” Ruth says as she starts to slip her coat on.

“Here. Let me help you with that.”

Max takes the coat and holds it open for her, making it easy for her to slide her arms in. He settles it gently on her shoulders, then puts an arm around her and rubs her arm to warm her.

Ruth glows under the attention.

They move forward in line toward the ticket booth, where a sign reads 24 CENTS for admission.

“Two, please,” Max says to the perky ticket lady as he slides two quarters and four pennies toward her. “What else is playing besides *The Maltese Falcon*?”

She checks the schedule. “Right now a cartoon is playing. Then it’ll be the newsreels, *The Maltese Falcon*, Abbott and Costello, more newsreels, Disney’s *Fantasia*, and another cartoon.”

As Max pays, he gives her a quick wink. Ruth can hardly contain her excitement. Max takes the tickets and proudly offers his elbow. She slips her hand through, and they head inside. They join the line for the concession stand beneath a sparkling crystal chandelier. As they wait, they both remove their coat and jacket, the warmth of the lobby settling around them.

“What would you like, Ruthie?”

“Popcorn, and... um... some Jujubes.”

Max turns to the concession boy.

“We’ll have two bags of popcorn, two sodas, one Baby Ruth, and one box of Jujubes.”

“That’ll be thirty cents.”

Max studies him. “You look like you’re, what, twelve years old?”

“Ten, sir.”

“Ten?” Max shakes his head. “I bet you have a family to support.”

“Yes, sir. I have six brothers and sisters. Our parents died last year. We live with our grandmother, and we all work.”

Max hands him four quarters. “Keep the change.”

“Wow! Thanks!” the boy beams, practically glowing.

Ruth looks at Max, touched. “That was really nice of you. You made his day.”

“Yes, well, I had to support my family, so I know how tough it is.”

Max slips the candy into his pocket and balances the two sodas, his jacket draped over one arm. Ruth gathers the bags of popcorn. Together they walk down the marble-lined hallway, the lights dimming until the space is almost completely dark.

They move slowly, adjusting to the shadows, following the faint glow from the screen ahead. At last they reach their seats and settle in, breathless, the screen flickering silver light across their faces.

A narrator’s voice booms through the theater as soldiers march in perfect formation past a reviewing stand where Adolf Hitler salutes.

“German soldiers march with precision past Adolf Hitler, as others flanking them carry Nazi flags,” the narrator says. “The soldiers salute Hitler as they pass.”

“Heil Hitler. Sieg heil,” the soldiers shout in unison.

Ruth instinctively squeezes Max’s hand. He puts his arm around her, drawing her close.

The footage shifts to a German panzer tank pounding a church as it advances through the streets of Belgium.

“The Germans have invaded France and Belgium.”

Ruth shakes her head softly. “What is the world coming to.”

The next day, Max and Ruth share a small booth over a lunch of pizza. Kay Kyser’s “*Love on a Greyhound Bus*” plays softly from the little jukebox on their table. They each take a slice from the plate and bump the points together like a toast.

Max brings the point of his slice to Ruth’s lips. She laughs and takes a bite. She does the same for him, feeding him the tip of hers.

A dab of sauce lands on her chin. Max reaches over, wipes it gently with his finger, then licks the sauce from his fingertip.

Ruth giggles, then a serious look replaces her smile.

She reaches across the table and takes Max’s hand.

“I’m worried about the war. Promise me you won’t enlist.”

Max holds her other hand. Ruth strokes his thumb, searching his eyes.

“Not if I don’t have to, my little Honey Bear,” he says.

Max wolfs down the rest of his slice and grabs another.

“Tell me about your mother. How are you two fixed for money?”

“My mother, Elizabeth, is a cook. She’s the chef at Ziggy’s.”

Max looks pleasantly surprised.

“Ziggy’s? I love that place! They have the best cabbage soup and cutlets. And the

potato latkes and blintzes are to die for!”

Ruth’s smile fades.

“My mother has a bad heart. She watched her parents get killed, then she lost two sons. And my father, who died of alcoholism.”

Max shakes his head sadly. “No wonder she has a bad ticker, with all she’s been through.”

Suddenly there’s commotion outside — people rushing past the window, voices rising in alarm. A teenager bursts into the restaurant. Max stands and intercepts him.

“What’s going on?”

“President Roosevelt just announced the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor yesterday!!”

Ruth stands up, grabs Max’s hands. Her eyes well with fear. She shakes her head as tears spill down her cheeks.

Someone turns on the radio near the counter.

Max grabs Ruth’s hand and rushes with her to the counter. A radio crackles to life as the announcer’s voice fills the restaurant.

“Just before eight A.M. yesterday, December seventh, Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, sinking an estimated twenty American ships.”

Max looks at Ruth. “I guess that means we’re going to war.”

He kisses her forehead and pulls her into a tight embrace.

Max and Ruth continue dating for two more years. Then, in 1943, Max reads a letter with furrowed brows. He looks away and sighs.

“Well, Bernie... looks like you’re gonna hafta find another helper. My number’s been

selected.”

Bernie walks over. Max hands him the letter and slowly removes his apron.

“I wish I wasn’t so old,” Bernie mutters. “I’d enlist myself and give that son-of-a-biscuit Hitler a piece of shrapnel up his wazoo.”

Max forces a small smile. “I better go tell Ruth.”

Ruth cries as Max tells her the news.

Elizabeth watches from across the room as Max slowly gets down on one knee.

“Ruthie, dear. My little lovebug... when I return, will you marry me?”

Elizabeth’s mind flashes back—just for an instant—to Nathan proposing to her aboard the ship so many years ago.

“Yes, of course. I was hoping you’d ask,” Ruth replies, her voice trembling but full of joy.

Elizabeth smiles and places her left hand over her heart. “Mazel tov.”

Ruth slips the silver ring off her finger and hands it to Max.

“Wear this to remind you of your promise.”

Max kisses the ring, then slides it onto his pinkie. He rises and pulls her into a kiss.

MAX GOES TO WAR

American Victory ships plunge through heavy seas, their decks crowded with soldiers. Battleships, cruisers, and carriers flank them, cutting toward the Japanese island. A stormy sky causes waves to crash over the bows of the fleet as they close the distance. To the sides, destroyers and aircraft hammer the shore with fire. They scour the island's defenses, clearing the way before the landing crafts hit the surf.

Max joins three other soldiers, nineteen to twenty-two, who smoke as they watch the bombardment from the deck. Their boat splashes into the ocean.

"May I?" Max asks.

Joey reaches out his pack. "Sure, here," he says with a New Jersey accent.

As Max takes one, he sees a ring with the initials JT. "What does the JT stand for?"

"Joey Trentino. That's Sergio," he says, pointing. "He's a sharpshooter. Best marksman out of all of us. And this big lollapalooza is Aiden, better known as Gargantuan.

Max understands the nickname when he sees Aiden's six-foot-nine frame. He has muscles everywhere from his years training as a football player; the guy even has muscles on his pinkie. Aiden tries to light the cigarette, but Max's hands shake too much. Aiden has to grab his hand to hold it steady.

Max takes a puff, then coughs and coughs.

"You ever smoke before?" Joey asks.

Max shakes his head as he continues coughing. "First time."

Joey also notices Max's hands shaking. "Well, this is as good a time as any to start."

Max nods and takes another drag. "Were you drafted?"

Max nods again. "I would never sign up for this."

"I did," Joey informs him. "I have six sisters and my mother to support. Combat pay is pretty good, not to mention the benefits."

"I wish we were in Germany instead of Japan," Aiden says angrily with an Irish accent. "I want to kill Hitler with my bare hands."

Max looks at him. "From the looks of you, I think you could actually do it, Gargantuan."

They toss their cigarettes into the ocean as the landing craft nears the shore. They check their rifles, the air thick with the fear of what's coming. Inside the boat, a soldier vomits over the side—not from the waves, but from pure dread.

Aiden looks at Max, who is visibly terrified.

"You'll be okay," Aiden says to comfort him. "Just breathe."

Max looks at him and fakes a smile before taking a long, deep breath.

The landing craft hits the sand with a heavy thud, and the front ramp drops into the surf. Machine-gun fire immediately begins to whistle past, kicking up sprays of water and sand.

"Go! Go! Go!" someone screams over the roar of the engines.

Aiden and the others surge forward into the knee-deep water.

Max follows, his boots sinking into the wet sand as the first bullets thud into the metal hull of the boat behind him.

The landing crafts hit the beach and a full-on invasion begins. Enemy artillery shells rain down from all directions. On a nearby grassy knoll, flashes of light mark the rat-tat-tat of a chine

gun spitting bullets as the soldiers jump into the water. Other American soldiers are cut down while running across the sand toward the forest. Grenades fly through the air. Bullets zing past, many finding their marks.

The landing crafts beach and the invasion begins under a rain of enemy artillery. On a grassy knoll, flashes mark a machine gun spitting a steady rat-tat-tat as soldiers leap into the water. Men are cut down as they sprint across the sand toward the forest. Grenades fly and bullets zing past, many finding their marks.

Moaning and groaning mix with screams and prayers. "Help me. Help me," rises from everywhere. If there is a hell, this is it. A soldier writhes on the beach, screaming, "I can't feel my leg! I can't feel my leg!" Calls for "Medic!" come from every direction.

Max cowers under a sandy embankment behind a fallen tree. Bullets zing past and shells explode nearby, sending plumes of sand into the air. The roar of the artillery is so loud it drowns out the screams of the men around him.

Max's whole body shakes, his eyes wide with dread.

Joey sees Max trapped. "Keep low! Keep low!"

Out of nowhere, a grenade hits Joey. The blast sends pieces of his body into the air. An arm lands next to Max. He recognizes the JT ring on a finger and vomits. He turns toward the ocean, desperate to leave, but more grenades explode nearby, pinning him down. He looks at his shaking hand and kisses Ruth's ring. Tears roll down his cheeks. He closes his eyes and waits for the grenade with his name on it.

Other American soldiers continue to shoot back. Gargantuan throws a grenade that finally knocks out the machine gun. As the Japanese soldiers retreat into the forest, the Sergeant

gives the command to advance.

“Let’s go, men!”

Max and the other soldiers stand and look at the carnage. Many bodies float in the ocean. Waves carry others to shore. The beach is littered with the dead—some missing limbs, some with bloody bullet holes, and some who died with dazed eyes still open.

He sighs deeply. Max follows the command to advance, walking cautiously next to Gargantuan. Both have their rifles ready to shoot anything that moves in the forest. Max is still shaking. Sweat pours from his forehead, and he swats at the persistent mosquitoes.

As they slowly and carefully walk deeper into the forest, every man is anxious, fearful of a sniper's ambush. Not a word is said. Filthy and exhausted, they want only to go home, yet they must go on. They point their rifles at the slightest noise and hit the ground every time they think they hear a gunshot.

After almost an hour with no contact, the Sergeant raises his hand to stop. He spirals his index finger, signaling that "this is the place."

The soldiers spread out with some soldiers facing trees. They lay their rifles down against the trunks. Urine waters the roots of the trees.

Max joins several men who use their small shovels to dig a hole. He removes his helmet and sets it on the ground very close to him on his left side. To his right is Aiden. They pull down their pants. Their naked butts can be seen as they squat to defecate.

Several soldiers stare at Aiden and smile at each other.

Aiden whispers, “What? You’ve never seen an Irish ass before?”

Giovanni whispers back with an Italian accent, “None as pretty as yours, Gargantuan.”

The men snicker with muffled laughs. Max holds his shovel like a cane for support as he defecates. He looks up at the sky through the tall trees gently swaying in the breeze. It is eerily quiet.

A young soldier near him farts loudly, and everyone laughs.

Suddenly, a sniper's bullet hits Max's helmet with a clank. Max looks down. He sees a hole in the steel.

Some American soldiers grab their rifles as pants are unzipped. Others stand and shoot with their pants down at their ankles. They fire at Japanese men perched near the tops of the trees. Dead Japanese soldiers fall from the branches like coconuts.

Max dons his helmet, the bullet hole clearly visible. He advances cautiously through the forest. It is eerily quiet.

Then, suddenly, a small Japanese soldier comes up from the ground behind him. He sticks the end of his bayonet into Max's back.

Max stops walking, drops his rifle, and raises his hands. He turns around slowly. He faces a young, teenaged boy in uniform with his finger on the trigger.

The two stand frozen for a moment, the air thick with tension. The young soldier's hands tremble slightly, yet the bayonet remains steady. Max looks into the boy's eyes, realizing how young his adversary truly is, as they both wait for the next move in this silent standoff.

Max kicks the boy in the groin, causing him to pull the rifle back. He grabs the rifle away and uses the butt of it to knock the boy unconscious. He aims the rifle at the kid, then lowers it, refusing to kill him. Out of breath and visibly shaking, Max drops to his knees and cries. He takes his helmet off and stares at the child who almost killed him.

Max grimaces, looking down at his bleeding abdomen before swatting mosquitoes from his neck.

Gargantuan and the Sergeant burst through the brush, rifles raised. They stop, looking from the unconscious boy to Max's blood-soaked shirt.

"You okay, Max?" Aiden asks, his voice low.

Max doesn't look up from the boy. "He's just a kid, Aiden. He's just a kid."

Back at the hospital, a young Hispanic man with a bullet hole in his shoulder is wheeled by.

Rachel watches with empathy, then turns to Lakeisha.

"My father always reminded me my whole life... if the bullet that hit his helmet had been one inch to the right, I wouldn't have been born. What luck, huh?"

"I would call it God's plan," Lakeisha says softly.

"Yes, well, I don't know if God planned for us to bomb Hiroshima, but thank God that pretty much ended the war."

V-J DAY

August 14, 1945

A depressed Ruth walks into the apartment she shares with Elizabeth, carrying a small bag of groceries. She finds Elizabeth sitting in a chair, listening to Glenn Miller's "*Moonlight Serenade*" on the radio.

"I wasn't able to get any butter because I didn't have enough rationing coupons, and they only had three potatoes left," Ruth says, heading toward the kitchen.

"That's okay, Ruthie. We'll make do. Did I tell you about the time I ate moss?"

Elizabeth gets up and joins Ruth in the kitchen.

Ruth stops and looks at her mother, her eyes softening.

"I know, Mama. After what you went through in those woods, I shouldn't be complaining about a few potatoes."

She watches Elizabeth take out two large bowls from the bottom cabinet and a small potato peeler from the drawer. Ruth looks down, tears welling in her eyes.

Her voice chokes. "It's just... I'm so worried about Max. I haven't heard from him in a month."

Elizabeth takes each potato out of the bag and puts them in one of the bowls. She stops and looks at Ruth. "I know you miss him, sweetie. But what do I always tell you?"

"Never give up hope."

Elizabeth nods. "Because..."

Ruth finishes, "It gives you strength."

"Now dry your eyes and come, let's listen to some music."

They go back to the living room. Elizabeth sits and begins peeling the potatoes into an empty bowl on her lap to make latkes, while Ruth lies on the small couch beside her. They listen to "*Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*" playing on the radio.

Ruth closes her eyes.

The music is interrupted by a radio announcer.

"We have breaking news that Japan has officially surrendered. Yes, this is good news, folks. The war is over!"

Ruth perks up. "Mama! Did you hear that? It's over!"

"Yes, my hearing is very good."

Loud cheers erupt from outside. A sudden outburst of noise crashes through the apartment walls: cars honking, sirens wailing, and firecrackers popping.

Ruth rushes to the window and looks down at the people celebrating in the street.

Soldiers and sailors march past as more neighbors spill out of their apartments to join them. The streets are packed. People stand on top of cars, waving and cheering. Handkerchiefs, hats, and small American flags flutter in the air. A conga line forms nearby. Men grab women and dance in the middle of the road while servicemen catch passersby for a kiss. Confetti rains from the skyscrapers like snow. Then, the crowd breaks into a swell of voices, singing the National Anthem together.

Servicemen carrying duffle bags over their shoulders rush into their apartments to join their families. There are tears, tight hugs, and surprised screams.

Everyone is happy, except Ruth. She sighs deeply.

“Ruth, why don’t you go out and celebrate with your friends?”

“Because Mama, I don’t know if he’s alive or dead. How can I celebrate?”

Tears flow down her cheeks as she watches couples hugging and kissing. The phone rings. Ruth answers it.

“Hello?”

She listens. “Oh hi, Tess. Yes, we just heard. Isn’t it great?”

“Come on down and join us,” Tess says over the line.

The apartment buzzer sounds.

“Just a minute, Tess. Someone’s buzzing to come up.”

Ruth walks to the intercom. “Yes?”

“Ruthie? It’s me. I’m...”

Ruth bolts out the door. She sprints down four flights of stairs and throws open the main door, a broad smile breaking across her face.

“Max! You’re home!”

“I was so worried. Why didn’t you write?”

“I couldn’t. I was fighting a bad case of malaria from the damn mosquitoes.”

They both smile, soaking in each other’s eyes, and then kiss for a very long time.

Max and Ruth marry in front of a modern younger Rabbi but in a non-religious ceremony, witnessed by Elizabeth, Galinda, Franklin, Sofia, Max’s four sisters, Bernie, and Ruth’s four friends. Ruth wears a simple off-white slinky dress with a large gardenia in her hair. She holds a bouquet of blue hydrangeas and white daisies. After the ceremony, she tosses it over

her head, and Tess screams in delight as she catches it.

Afterwards they all walk to a nearby hotel with a large room for meetings or parties. The tables are decorated with white table cloths and purple ribbons tying white chair coverings. They celebrate with a large buffet lunch, a beautiful wedding cake with hydrangeas made of blue icing, and lots of champagne. There is talk of the future, the possibility of moving to Los Angeles, how many children they will have, and Ruth finishing nursing school. Everyone is excited for the happy couple.

Max and Ruth dance to Perry Como's "*Prisoner of Love*" as everyone watches. They rock side to side, but don't move their feet. Then everyone joins in and they dance the afternoon away.

There is no honeymoon because they can't afford it, and in no time, Ruth becomes pregnant. They convince Elizabeth to move with them to Los Angeles where Max was told the weather was warm, there were lots of jobs, and vets could buy a house for practically nothing .

ELIZABETH CATERERS TO THE RICH AND FAMOUS

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA, 1950'S

Max buys a used 1940 Pontiac and drives Ruth and Elizabeth all the way across the continent. Finally in California, they drive along PCH an acronym they learn for the Pacific Coast Highway, a long street that winds along the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The view of the water is breathtaking, especially when the sun sets, lighting up the sky with colors of crimson, gold, and yellow. Seagulls and pelicans fly in flocks. The sound of ocean waves crashing against the shore, along with the smell of sea water, is very relaxing.

Ruth marvels at the beautiful homes in Malibu.

“Aren't these homes beautiful, Momma?”

Elizabeth nods.

“Someday when I make enough money, I'll buy you one,” Max says.

Elizabeth takes note of Max's promise, but instead of Malibu, they purchase a less expensive traditional two-story house in mid-city Los Angeles.

Max finds a job as a meat cutter. They were poor, but happy, and in 1946, Rachel comes into their lives.

Elizabeth stands at the hospital pay phone.

“Max, we're at Good Samaritan. Ruth's in labor. How soon can you get here?”

She listens. “Okay, I'll tell her.”

In the delivery room, Elizabeth holds Ruth's hand as Ruth screams to push the baby. Max rushes in just as a baby girl is born. Max faints at the sight.

Elizabeth shakes her head. "Men!"

An exhausted Ruth laughs.

One night over dinner, Elizabeth proclaims, "Well, I've got some good news. I'm going to be the new cook at a small restaurant in Hollywood."

"Really?" Ruth is surprised. "In Hollywood?"

Elizabeth nods. "Yes, I was told they get several movie stars and famous people for lunch from Paramount Studios which is nearby. I would rise at 5 A.M. every morning and ride the bus and be back by 6 P.M."

"Wow, Mama. You're very resourceful."

So, Elizabeth again became a chef. And once again, the cooking lessons her mother taught her helped her and our family survive.

Elizabeth didn't set out to cook for the elite. She just needed a job. But the restaurant she found happened to be right next to a major movie studio. It wasn't long before the stars started following the smell of her cooking through the back kitchen door.

At a Hollywood restaurant near the movie studios, the famous thirty-four-year-old comedian Lenny Bruce sits at a table. He savors his lunch, closing his eyes and smiling. He snaps his fingers for the waiter.

"I want to meet the fuckin' cook."

While the waiter goes to the kitchen, Lenny leans back in his chair with a smoldering

cigarette between his fingers.

Elizabeth's heart races. Hearing that a customer was swearing and demanding to see the cook, she assumes the worst. She stands stiffly, her stomach knotting with the fear that he is about to complain and get her fired.

He doesn't bother to stand as Elizabeth comes out wearing an apron and hairnet, slowly wiping her hands with a towel.

Lenny looks her over and gestures to the plate with his fork.

"You the one who made these?"

Elizabeth swallows hard. "I am, sir."

"They're incredible. Best fuckin' veal cutlets I've ever had," he says through a cloud of smoke. "Most places serve shoe leather, but this is art."

The wave of relief is so sudden Elizabeth almost loses her breath. She regains her poise and gives a small, professional nod.

"Thank you. They were the Tsar's favorite."

"The Tsar? Well, I feel honored."

Lenny slicks his hair back, then lights another cigarette.

"Do you know who I am?"

Elizabeth shakes her head no.

"I'm a fuckin' comedian. My name's Lenny Bruce. What's yours?"

"Elizabeth, but you can call me Lizzie."

"Well, Lizzie, I'm gonna eat here every fuckin' chance I get."

Elizabeth smiles.

A famous blue-eyed singer and actor, Frank Sinatra, sits at a booth with his friends nearby. He gestures with his index finger for Elizabeth to come over. She obliges.

“Did you make these sandwiches?”

“Is there something wrong with the food, Sir?”

“No, Honey. My friends and I were just saying these are the best sandwiches we’ve ever tasted. My egg sandwich is perfect. I just wanted to thank you. And when my guests are happy, I’m happy.”

He stuffs a twenty-dollar bill into her pocket.

Elizabeth smiles. “I’m glad you’re all enjoying them.”

She starts to walk back to the kitchen.

“Just a minute, Honey.”

Elizabeth’s smile dissipates. She turns around, puts her hand in her pocket, and pulls out the money thinking he changed his mind. She walks back to the booth.

“They just opened a new restaurant in Vegas called Foxy’s. They could sure use a good cook like you. Whatever they’re paying you here, I’ll make sure Foxy’s doubles it.”

Elizabeth happily puts the money back inside her pocket.

Lenny yells, “What the fuck, Frank! Don’t take her away!”

Frank waves him off. Lenny lights another cigarette and blows a cloud of smoke toward Frank’s table in anger.

Days later at their Los Angeles home, thirty-year-old Ruth walks down the stairs and hears voices coming from the kitchen. She walks over, but stops just before entering when she sees Lenny sitting there. Shocked, she steps back and listens to the conversation.

Max walks up behind her. “Hi hon—”

Ruth quickly puts a finger to her mouth. “Shh...”

“What’s goin’ on?” Max whispers.

Ruth points to the man in the kitchen.

Max’s eyes widen. “Is that who I think it is?”

Ruth smiles as she nods. They lean in and listen closely.

In the kitchen Elizabeth fries potato latkes. Lenny sits at the table relaxed with an arm over the top of his chair and his other elbow on the table. He watches eleven-year-old Rachel slice pears and add them to a bowl of berries.

“What’re you makin’, honey?”

“Compote.”

“Compote? Grandma teach you that?”

Rachel nods.

“Rachel’s good at that,” Elizabeth proclaims proudly.

Rachel smiles broadly at the praise.

Elizabeth takes a brisket out of the oven. She cuts a thick slice and adds two latkes to a plate, then places it in front of Lenny.

Lenny starts to eat, rolling his eyes in delight. He speaks with his mouth full.

“I wish you weren’t goin’ to fuckin’ Vegas. I’m gonna miss your cooking.”

Elizabeth looks sternly at him.. “You remember we agreed you can eat here as long as you don’t smoke and—”

Rachel doesn’t look up from her pears. “That’s a nickel, Mr. Lenny. Grandma says bad

words cost a nickel in the swear jar. You owe three already.”

Lenny stops chewing, his eyes darting to the eleven-year-old. He looks back at Elizabeth, slicks his hair back, then reaches into his pocket and slams a crumpled five-dollar bill onto the table.

“Keep the change, kid. I’ve got a feeling I’m gonna need a tab.”

Elizabeth smiles as she shakes her head, watching Rachel go back to her pears.

“I’m serious, Lizzie,” Lenny says, gesturing with a half-eaten latke. “Vegas is a godforsaken desert. It’s for gamblers and losers. Hollywood has style. It has soul. It has me!”

He leans forward, his voice dropping to a desperate plea.

“Who’s gonna feed me when I’m coming off a triple-show bender at 2 A.M.? Some kid with a greasy spatula? You’re a star in this kitchen. Don’t go out there and waste it on people who only care about the craps table.”

Elizabeth sets a platter of latkes down firmly.

“The air is cleaner there, Lenny. And the money is better. Frank promised.”

“Frank,” Lenny scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Since when do we listen to singers? They just like the way their own voices sound. Promise me if you don’t like Vegas, you’ll come right back.”

Elizabeth looks at him, seeing the genuine worry behind the comedian’s act.

“I promise, Lenny. If the desert doesn’t suit me, I’ll be back.”

During the four months before moving to Las Vegas, Elizabeth notices him changing... becoming more verbally abusive. At first their conversations were about his wife and child. Then after his arrest, he would go off into tirades about how he felt he was being persecuted by

the government who was infringing on his First Amendment right to his freedom of speech.

After his conviction, he became even more agitated.

The final dinner at Elizabeth's house is a far cry from their usual quiet meals. Lenny sits at the table, but he isn't relaxed. He paces the small kitchen, a cigarette—one he didn't even ask to light—burning in his shaking hand.

“It's fascism, Lizzie! Pure, unadulterated fascism!” he shouts, slamming his fist onto the table so hard the silverware rattles. “They're not just coming for my words; they're coming for the truth. They want us all in cages, polite little puppets who only say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ while they pick our pockets!”

Elizabeth stands by the stove, her back to him. She doesn't move as he continues his rant, his voice growing louder and more frantic. He ignores the plate of veal cutlets she set out for him, too consumed by his legal battle to eat.

He turns to Elizabeth, his eyes bloodshot and desperate.

“You can't go to Vegas. You can't leave me here with these... these censors, these morality police! They're killing the art, Lizzie. They're killing me!”

Elizabeth finally turns around. She looks at the man who used to make her family laugh, now a shadow of himself, consumed by a war he cannot win.

“The meal is getting cold, Lenny,” she says softly, but her voice is firm. “And you know the rules about smoking in my kitchen.”

Lenny looks at the cigarette, then at her, his anger suddenly replaced by a hollow, haunting silence. He realizes that for the first time, he has no words left.

Then he stopped coming by to see Elizabeth altogether. The chair at her table sat empty, and the kitchen felt strangely quiet without his frantic energy or the clink of nickels hitting the jar.

Elizabeth would catch herself looking at the door at 6 P.M., half-expecting to hear his raspy voice or see him dodging her rules one last time. She worried about him—not as a fan of a famous comedian, but as a mother who had seen too many men broken by wars of their own making.

In the weeks before the move, she asks around the studio, but the news is always the same: he is tied up in court, spiraling deeper into his legal battles and his own head.

THE FINAL TRAGEDY

During the 1960s, another war and civil unrest grip the United States. The Vietnam War and the subsequent student demonstrations are frontline news, punctuated by the shocking assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. It is a time when the word "hippie" becomes a common term, drug usage is widespread, women burn their bras, and the Beatles take America by storm.

Eighteen-year-old Rachel, dressed conservatively in a white cotton dress and a denim jacket, loads the last of her belongings into her '64 Ford Mustang. The car sits in the driveway of their Malibu home, a gift from Elizabeth paid for with the money she earned cooking at Foxy's. It is September 1964, and Rachel is off to begin her four-year education at UCLA to become a teacher.

Standing by the curb, Max hugs Rachel. Then Ruth kisses her on the forehead. Rachel leans forward for one last group hug before getting inside her car.

Ruth and Max watch as she drives off.

"Five years is a long time," Ruth says softly.

"My God, Ruth, UCLA isn't far. You can go see her every day."

He starts to walk away.

"Can't wait until she starts teaching and makes some money," he mumbles to himself.

Two years later, in 1966, Elizabeth walks through the front door of their Los Angeles home carrying a suitcase.

Ruth happens to be walking by. “Mama! What are you doing here?”

They hug tightly.

“I missed you,” Elizabeth says. “How is everyone?”

“They’re all fine. I’m going to miss our daily phone calls.” Ruth pulls back to study her mother's face. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I was thinking. I know Max doesn’t make enough money, and with the cost of Rachel’s college education, I decided to buy you that house in Malibu you’ve been dreaming of.”

“Are you serious?” Ruth asks excitedly.

Elizabeth nods.

Ruth picks up Elizabeth’s suitcase. “Here, let me help you.”

They walk toward Elizabeth’s bedroom. “You made that much money?”

Elizabeth smiles. Between her salary at Foxy’s and the generous tips from Frank and his friends, she had saved more than she ever let on. She had kept Max’s promise for him, turning her years in the desert heat into a house by the sea.

What Elizabeth doesn’t tell her is that she had a second heart attack in Las Vegas when Lenny Bruce died, and that’s why she came home. She doesn’t want to worry Ruth about it. She decided to spend all her money buying her daughter mother her dream home because she thought she wasn’t going to live much longer.

Within a year, they moved into a four-bedroom, three-bath home at the end of a cul-de-sac in Malibu. It had white rose bushes all along the wooden corral fence and sycamore trees that gently swayed in the ocean breeze.

It was December 1980...when tragedy struck.

Rachel gets into bed as torrential rain pounds the roof.

Eighty-seven-year-old Elizabeth pours hot tea from a kettle into a glass just as a roar of foreboding thunder shakes the house. She cautiously shuffles toward her bedroom, holding the tea steady so as not to spill a drop. She sips it in bed while watching the lightning flash across her window. When finished, she sets the glass on the side table, turns out the light, and falls asleep.

In the Master Bedroom, an elderly Max and Ruth watch television as lightning flashes. A weather reporter on TV stands in front of a map.

“Rain, rain, and more rain,” the reporter warns. “With the recent Agoura fires, the danger now becomes mudslides. If you don’t have to go out, it would be wise to shelter in place.”

“Should we be worried?” Ruth asks.

“Naw, I don’t think so,” Max says. “The mountain behind us is solid as a rock. I feel sorry for the people near PCH.”

Max fidgets with the pillows behind him.

“Back still hurting?” Ruth asks.

Max nods. “Carrying those slabs of beef has a toll.”

He reaches over to the nightstand and swallows a Percocet.

Ruth turns off the TV and the lights, and they both fall asleep.

A half hour later, a loud cracking sound jolts Ruth awake. She looks out the window from her bed. In the moonlight, she watches in horror as trees are uprooted and dragged away by rapidly flowing mud and water. Her eyes widen as she realizes the mountain is no longer solid.

“Max! Wake up! Max!”

Ruth uses both arms to forcefully shake him, her voice rising to a scream. “Oh my God, Max! Wake up!”

The bedroom wall behind the headboard caves in on top of them. The force of the slide shoves their bed across the room like a toy. Mud pours in with terrifying speed, burying them both in seconds. Ruth’s scream is heard, then goes silent.

In Elizabeth’s bedroom, one wall collapses and water quickly fills the space. Her bed floats outside like a boat, rain pouring down on her. She opens her eyes and realizes her bed is luckily wedged against a large tree, preventing it from being swept away into the dark.

Rachel wakes up to the chaos. She rushes through ankle-high water toward her parents’ bedroom, only to find the room demolished and filled with earth. Terrified, she runs to Elizabeth’s room and sees the bed is gone.

“Grandma? Grandma, where are you?”

She looks through the open wall and notices the bed outside. The water is now knee-high and rising around her, and she’s beginning to panic.

“Grandma, are you there?”

“I’m here, Rachel!” Elizabeth calls back through the rain.

Suddenly, a large Jeep SUV flows by in the mud and wedges itself tightly between the floating bed and the house. Rachel studies the heavy vehicle for a split second. She has a plan.

“I’m coming! Don’t move!”

Rachel quickly wades through the swirling, waist-high water toward the SUV, using it as a bridge to reach the tree where her grandmother is trapped.

She steps onto the back bumper and puts one foot on the wiper. As she climbs on top of the car, the wiper breaks with a sharp crack. She grabs the roof rack, holding on for dear life as she slithers slowly across the roof on her stomach.

She carefully steps down onto the hood of the car and jumps onto the floating bed. She collapses onto the mattress, hugging her grandmother tightly against the cold rain.

“Are you okay?” Rachel cries.

“Yes. Where are your parents?”

“Their room is gone! I don’t know where they are. What are we going to do?”

Elizabeth kisses her on the forehead and pulls her close, the two of them huddling together as the storm rages around their makeshift raft.

“I don’t know. But there’s one thing I’ve learned, Rachel... Life throws us obstacles that try to ruin happiness.” She takes a deep breath. “You know why I always tell you not to give up hope? Because hope gives you strength to overcome them. So let’s be positive and hope everything will be okay.”

Suddenly, the house slides off its foundation. The walls cave in, followed by the roof, leaving nothing but a heap of ruins in the mud.

“I’d like to hear your story again, Grandma. Tell me again about how you survived in the forest all by yourself.”

“You’ve heard it a dozen times. Are you sure?”

“Yes. I think it will help us both right now.”

Elizabeth begins to speak, her voice steady against the roar of the rain. As she recounts the freezing nights and the moss she ate to survive, the terrifying reality of the mudslide seems to

fade into the background. They cling to each other on the bed, anchored by the story of a woman who refused to break.

The sun rises the next morning, revealing Elizabeth and Rachel still asleep in the bed wedged against the tree. The floodwaters have finally receded, leaving behind a thick, treacherous layer of sludge and debris.

Two rescuers in high-top rubber boots trudge through the heavy mud toward them, their movements slow as they navigate around uprooted trees and pieces of the house.

“Hello? Are you okay? Anyone hurt?” one of the rescuers calls out, his voice echoing in the quiet canyon.

Rachel nudges her grandmother.

“Grandma, wake up. We’re being rescued.”

Elizabeth doesn’t respond. Rachel’s heart sinks as she looks at her grandmother’s still face.

“Grandma, wake up!”

Elizabeth’s eyes slowly flutter open. She looks at her granddaughter and offers a tired, peaceful smile.

Rachel lets out a long sigh of relief and pulls her into a tight hug.

“We’re okay!” she yells back to the men.

At the cemetery, Rachel’s face is etched with sorrow as she stands before the two markers. Tears streak down her cheeks, and she wipes them with a tissue, her eyes catching the Star of David carved into the top of each stone.

#1 headstone:

RUTH STEIN

BELOVED WIFE, MOTHER

1920–1980

#2 headstone:

MAX STEIN

BELOVED HUSBAND, FATHER

1914–1980

The silence of the cemetery is heavy, broken only by the soft rustle of the wind. Rachel reaches out, her fingers tracing the cold engraved letters of her parents' names. They had survived a world war and the move across the country, only to be taken together by the mountain they thought was their sanctuary.

Elizabeth stands beside her, an expression of overwhelming shock on her face. The weight of her sadness is apparent in her downcast eyes as she stares at the fresh earth.

Rachel looks at her and notices tears flowing down her face. It is the first time—the only time—she ever saw tears on her grandmother's face. Watching Elizabeth, she realizes that burying her daughter was like cutting the tiny thread that had been holding her grandmother's heart together all these years.

Elizabeth steps forward and places a small stone on Ruth's headstone. She suddenly clutches her chest, collapses, and dies.

Rachel's eyes widen in panic. She rushes to her side. "Grandma!"

She drops to her knees, her hands trembling as she swiftly lifts Elizabeth's head and shoulders to hold them in her lap. She stares at Elizabeth's face, her own body shaking as her eyes well up. Her lips quiver, and she bites them hard, trying to stay in control, before she sadly shakes her head.

In a very soft voice, she says, "I love you, Grandma."

She cries uncontrollably, and buries her head into Elizabeth's chest as she hugs her tightly.

BACK TO THE PRESENT

Los Angeles, California 2026

From her hospital bed, Rachel turned her gaze toward Lakeisha, her eyes heavy with a new kind of clarity.

“In that one night... that single night, I lost both my mother and father,” she whispered. “The horror of it... it’s a nightmare I’ll carry forever.”

Lakeisha moved closer, pulling Rachel into a steady, silent embrace.

“But in that moment,” Rachel continues, “all I felt was this overwhelming love for my grandmother. She had lost everyone she ever loved. I saw her pain, the decades of suffering and hardship, and realized she never once let go of hope. This woman I’d known my whole life suddenly became my hero. She taught me so much, but I truly believe it was her perseverance that truly changed me. I miss her dearly. I always will.”

Sitting in the sterile quiet of the hospital bed, Rachel watches Lakeisha.

Lakeisha’s eyes suddenly fill . She pulls off her glasses, wiping at the tears with the heels of her hands before letting out a long, shaky sigh.

Rachel mirrors her, catching her own tears with her knuckles and bracing herself against a sharp snuffle.

“I had her buried with Katya’s shawl,” Rachel says, her voice thin. “It meant everything to her.”

Lakeisha nods slowly, the weight of the moment settling between them.

“I get it,” Lakeisha whispers. “I really do. The things a mother gives up for her child... the mountain you have to climb every single day. I know those struggles.”

Dr. Kopinski strides into the room and smiles at Rachel.

“So, what have you decided?” he asks.

“I don’t see the point in having the surgery this late in my life,” Rachel responds.

Dr. Kopinski doesn't look pleased; he just stares.

Lakeisha’s eyebrows arch in surprise. “Seriously? After you just told me the most wonderful story of resilience?”

Rachel bites her lip as she looks at Lakeisha.

“You should take a lesson from your ancestors,” Lakeisha adds. “They never gave up. For you to quit now... it would be a disgrace to their memory and everything they endured. A disgrace, Rachel!”

Lakeisha stares at Rachel, her anger visible. She sighs, her hand moving to touch the cross around her neck. She paces the small room, then stops, looking at Rachel again. Her voice is now slow and steady.

“The Bible says, ‘Trust in the Lord, have faith, do not despair.’ You know what that means? It means you never give up, Rachel. To do so is a sin.”

Rachel stares back at her, her expression blank.

“Remember when you told me... how did you say it? Oh yes, you felt you were letting your ancestors down. Well, I agree with you. I think you are—right now. Your grandmother’s courage and perseverance were her gifts to you. And this is how you repay her? In this respect, I think she would be ashamed of you!”

Rachel reacts as if the words are a slap in the face.

She blurts out hysterically, “Yes, but I have no one! Why should I fight to live?”

“Right now, you need surgery,” Lakeisha adds. “Your grandmother would tell you to live. Yes, to live—if only to honor all the sacrifices your ancestors made so that you could have a life.”

Rachel searches Lakeisha’s eyes as she takes this in. Her eyes well up. She looks away and stares sadly into space for a long moment, then speaks softly without looking at Lakeisha.

“Are you sure you’re not Jewish?”

“Huh?”

“Cause you’re laying all this Jewish guilt on me.”

Lakeisha laughs.

“But you’re right... absolutely right,” Rachel says, “just like the quote on the wall says. I need to live, if only to honor all the sacrifices my ancestors made so that I could have a life.”

Tears flow down her cheeks. She looks sadly to the side for a brief moment before turning her gaze to Doctor Kopinski.

“Okay, let’s do it. Let’s take it out.”

Lakeisha smiles and pats her hand.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

Dr. Kopinski smiles. “I’ll go reserve the OR immediately.”

Rachel lies in her hospital bed, her head completely wrapped in bandages. Lakeisha sits close by, a constant presence, holding her hand.

“I’m glad you decided to have the surgery,” Lakeisha says softly.

Dr. Kopinski walks in, wearing a wide smile.

“Am I interrupting?”

“No, not at all,” Rachel replies. “Come in.”

He sits on the edge of the bed, checking her charts before looking up.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” Rachel says, her voice steady.

“On a scale of one to ten, with ten being extremely painful, how do you rate your pain?”

“It’s not that bad. Maybe a six or seven.”

“Good. Good. The surgery goes well. No complications, and I have good news.” He pauses for a suspenseful moment before adding, “Fortunately, the tumor is in a good location.”

Rachel looks at the doctor, perplexed by what she considers an inane response.

“Had the tumor been one inch in either direction, it would have been inaccessible to surgery. You are very lucky, young lady.”

Rachel looks over at Lakeisha.

“There’s the one inch again.”

Lakeisha smiles in understanding.

“Fascinating,” Dr. Kopinski chimes in. “I, too, have missed death by just one inch. I remember hiding under a one-inch thick floorboard to evade Nazis.”

“Really?” Rachel asks. “I would love to hear more about that.”

Their eyes lock. He smiles.

She smiles.

Lakeisha smiles too, knowing something is about to happen.

“Well... feel better,” he says. “I’ll check in on you later.”

“Yes, please do. Thank you.”

Just before Doctor Kopinski leaves, he looks back at Rachel and smiles once more.

“He seems nice,” Lakeisha says with a smirk.

Rachel looks at Lakeisha and sighs deeply.

“Yes, he is. But I still don’t understand why I’m still alive. What do I do with my life now?”

“I think... this would be a great story for a book,” Lakeisha says. “The book would be like your child... your legacy. You could preserve their story for posterity so it won’t be forgotten. What do you think of that?”

Rachel smiles broadly at the idea.

“I like that, but my great-grandfather was a scribe... he had a gift. Who am I compared to that?”

“Well, I just happen to be a novelist,” Lakeisha says. “I know structure, and you know the story. I would be honored to co-author it, or be your ghostwriter. It’s my gift to you for saving Dijon.”

“I’m starting to think our chance meeting was meant to be,” Rachel says. “What are the odds of running into an author?”

“There you go,” Lakeisha says. “You see... you never know God’s plan.”

Lakeisha pats Rachel’s hand. She searches her purse for a pen and a pad of paper, then sets them on the nearby table.

“I’ll leave this here in case you want to jot down some notes,” she says. She takes a deep

breath and adds, “Well, I better get goin’. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Lakeisha. I really appreciate you... your concern... your help. I’m so happy to have you as my friend.”

Lakeisha smiles broadly. “And vice versa.”

After Lakeisha leaves, there is a light knock on the door.

“Come in.”

Dr. Kopinski enters.

Rachel wears a worried look, fearing he has bad news.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No,” he says. “I... I was wondering... I’m glad you decided to have the surgery because... well... I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me sometime.”

Rachel exhales deeply, relieved it isn't bad news. Her eyes light up. She imitates the flirtatious ritual her grandmother, Maria, once taught her—she tilts her head, licks her lips, and smiles.

“Yes, of course. I’d be delighted.”

Dr. Kopinski grins like the Cheshire cat. “Great. So... yeah... get well soon.”

“Yes. Thank you. I will.”

As Dr. Kopinski leaves, Rachel smiles up at the ceiling, then looks down at the pen and paper. She reaches for them. She pauses to think, then starts to write: FOR LIZZIE, 1893-1980

THE END