

Prologue

On the Eastern Front, 1917

PEERING INTO THE black: useless. No information to be had there. You have to move by inches, as if with feelers on the soles of your feet. Falling shells illuminate the trench, but little can be seen in this smoke-fouled light, a ghastly flickering brilliance less comforting even than the darkness, for it exposes your silhouette to enemy snipers. Rivka is engrossed in the placement of each step and in the information it brings her: wet or dry, slippery or spongy or solid. In front of her moves the Lieutenant Colonel, and in front of him, Natalia Ivanova Tatuyeva, her latest and best friend. At her back is the adjutant to the Lieutenant Colonel, and beyond him, Olga Stepanova Redzvenka. Up and down the line, a *verst* in each direction, they file into place: boy-girl-boy-girl, rifles at the ready, every nerve alive, every fiber awaiting the fateful word.

A sudden hand on her shoulder, warm breath at her neck. She jumps, startled. Lieutenant Filippov's pocked face swims into view. "Drink," he says, extending a metal thimble that brims with clear liquid.

"What is it?"

"Shhh—vodka."

"Our *Natchalnik* approves?" Their *Natchalnik*, their commander, is a strict disciplinarian who permits her girls no latitude. Vodka is outlawed in Russia and has been since the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914.

He laughs, a low growl. "Yashka? Her orders. Truly Yashka's. Now, be quick about it. Drink up."

Rivka downs the tasteless, bitter liquid in a gulp. Fire plunges from her throat to her belly. Filippov proceeds along the row, refilling the tiny cup for each soldier. Rivka rests her cheek against the damp, rough wall of the trench. A faint odor of spring and its loamy fields still clings to the disturbed earth. “Lord God,” she prays, “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, shield of our fathers, king of the universe, protect me this night; guard us all, for we are women unaccustomed to fighting. Yet here we stand, in defense of our country. Have mercy on us in life and in death. And may our sacrifice be for good.”

She speaks this in a mixture of Yiddish and Russian, but switches to Hebrew for the ancient prayer of Jews, whispered low so as not to be heard by the *goyim* nearby. “*Sh’ma Yisroel Adonoi eloheinu, Adonoi ehod.*” Hear, oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The sky behind her lightens. Three AM, first hint of dawn. The muscles in her calves twitch. Her heart races. Any moment now will come the signal to go over the top, to attack the German army in their trenches one hundred meters across no-man’s-land....

Part I

Women of Valor

*A woman of valor, who can find? Her worth is beyond rubies...
She girds her loins...and makes strong her arms...
She is clothed in...fine linen....*

Proverbs, 31:10

I

December 1914 *Nachum*

THESE COLD NIGHTS, she had taken to sleeping in the kitchen near the stove, but the fire had gone out. A foul smell woke Rivka. The room bore the iciness of an hour long after midnight and just as long until dawn. She had curled herself into a tight ball under the heavy quilts, where the odor found her, infiltrating her dream like the stench from a roomful of cholera cases (or so she imagined, for she'd never yet witnessed the cholera) or from the butchered intestines of a diseased pig (ditto). The smell was warm and moist and accompanied by a *huff* and then a *huff huff* that might have been the ponderous gentile butcher in his low hut, bending over the hideous porcine entrails.

She opened one eye, the one not jammed into her feather pillow, and it was met by an eye only inches from her own: an alien, dark-fringed, grayish eye with a horizontal black pupil thin and straight as the slash of the *shoychet's* knife. A damp nose began rooting itself into the bedding.

“Gittelah, what are you doing?” The little nanny goat had no business here. Were they peasants, to live among animals? She must have escaped from the pen, but how? And how had she gotten into the house? The goat gave another malodorous snuffle as the girl gathered the bedclothes around her shoulders, and then followed her to the back door, which was standing wide open.

Wary, Rivka peered out into the night. The moon had risen and was pouring its silvery light onto the patchy snow. Nothing

moved. A dog barked in the distance. An owl hooted. There's such a thing as too quiet, too still. But if a pack of marauders were hidden in the shadows, surely her neck hairs would be standing on end, warning her. She stepped into the night and whispered to the goat to follow. Down at the bottom of the yard, next to the outhouse, stood the wooden shed where the animal ought to have been penned. Light was coming from inside, the faint yellow flickering of someone's lantern. Who?

Silent as her heroine Yael when slaying the Philistine general—now, what was that general's name?—Mischa would know. She should have thought to waken him. She shouldn't be out alone in the dead of night, a girl of thirteen. She shouldn't be creeping silent as the biblical Yael upon God-knows-who doing God-knows-what. She hesitated, and the little goat prodded at her fingertips. No sense turning back now—was there—when she had the advantage of surprise against the intruder. No sense turning back (was there?) when she had a plan to arm herself with Papa's axe, hanging on three nails just inside the door.

An unearthly screech ripped the night in two. Electrified, Rivka flung open the weathered wooden door, hurling herself into the shed. Her hand, grasping for the axe, grazed wall instead. Why wasn't it where it always was kept? But over there on the ground some eight paces in front of her, Papa's axe lay on the scattered hay, fans of dark droplets spattered across its blade. Next to it squatted Mischa, his arms held out like he was about to break into the *kazatzke*, the dance of the Russian chair.

His mouth foamed words, but no sound issued. His eyes were hollowed in the lamplight, his forehead and cheeks pallid. The right fist came up wrapped in his left. His lips trembled. "I did it," he cackled.

Rivka moved toward him. Methodically, he opened the fist just in front of his face, raising the pinkie, next the ring finger, next

the third. From the socket of the next, blood splattered and ran down, bathing his hand, his arm, his shirt, blood that wanted to feed his trigger finger, no longer there.

“I did it,” her brother repeated, before fainting dead away in her trembling arms.

IN THE WOMB, Mama always said, Rivka and Mischa carried on like Jacob and Esau, scuffling and punching, and everyone expected the younger to come out grasping the heel of the elder. The younger, Rivka, came out breech and nearly killed poor Mama, for her head and shoulders were larger than Mischa’s. If dominance was what they struggled over during the nine long months of pregnancy, then Rivka proved the winner—Papa said—for she started out the larger and stronger twin and remained so. Tall, rangy, raw-boned, with straw-colored hair and cornflower eyes, she was pronounced by the *yentas* in their *shtetl* to be as big a loser for her strength as Mischa was for his delicacy. He’d been sickly as an infant, ate halfheartedly, grew slowly, and he remained small and slight with dark hair and extravagantly fringed dark eyes. He should have been the girl, it was whispered, and Rivka the boy. The twins never minded what busybodies said. He was happy being a student, star of the *cheder*, while she preferred exploring the fields and woods surrounding their village.

When Mischa was called to the Torah as a Bar Mitzvah, Mama blushed with pride. Some boys merely recited the blessings before and after the reading, which was cause enough for celebrating with honey cake and sweet wine following the morning service. For Mischa, Mama and Rivka baked *bobka* and *rugelach* and *mandelbrot*, and they set out *shnaps* alongside the wine. This princely celebration was fitting because he read the entire Torah portion, a long and important one, relating how Moses led the

children of Israel through the parted waters to freedom. When he chanted “*Who is like unto thee O Lord among the mighty? Who is like unto thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?*,” the women behind their *mehitzah* forgot their chatter. Falling silent, they sat motionless, listening. Mama wept. No boy ever in the hundreds of years of Jewish life in their village had read the entire portion himself and the haftorah as well. Maybe no boy even in Rovno, the nearest city.

Rivka nearly wrecked things, dashing outdoors as he came to the final blessings, vomiting up her guts in the snow. Sobs shook her. But everyone knew how close the twins were, inseparable all through childhood, so they jumped to the conclusion it was the nervous strain, the fervid devotion to her brother that must have overcome her. “A waste of tears,” they consoled, patting her hand. “This boy does better than the rabbi.”

They all believed he would grow up to be a great sage, study Talmud in a top yeshiva and bring renown to their little community. Little did they suspect that Mischa was not the least bit interested in Judaism. It was the study of languages he relished. Sometimes Rivka watched him studying, his body unconsciously twisting into the shapes of the letters before him on the page. Alphabets intrigued him. Their sounds delighted him. Already he’d learned the Hebrew, Cyrillic and Greek alphabets, and he was teaching himself the Roman. Finding out how distant speakers framed the world in their languages was what he wanted to do most of all. A *yeshiva bukker*, a scholar of Torah, he wasn’t, but only his sister understood this—and she wasn’t telling.

The summer following Mischa’s Bar Mitzvah, Rivka began menstruating, and news reached the Pale of Settlement of a war about to break out against the German and Hapsburg Empires. Of course, there was no connection between the two events, except

in Rivka's mind. One morning in late July, she showed Mama the smear of blood in her underwear. Mama smiled and kissed her, and then slapped her face. Rivka recoiled from the sharp, stinging blow. Blood rushed to her cheek. "What, Mama?" she cried.

Mama shrugged. "It's tradition," she said.

Later that same day they learned that Russian soldiers were being mobilized to invade Austria and Poland. And Papa informed Mischa he must choose how they would incapacitate him. This, too, it appeared, was tradition. His parents would not make the choice for him, since he would have to live with it the rest of his life. Papa as a boy had lost the toes of his left foot, for a soldier must march, and no one can march without his toes. Berel the dryman was missing an eye, the rabbi his two pinkies.

Pinkies seemed the smart choice. You could do almost anything without your pinkies. But it was rumored that when the Tsar's Army would come through taking recruits and line up the Jewish boys for inspection, lost pinkies were no longer sufficient. Near Berditchev, it was said, two boys had been taken despite this disability, boys with not a wisp of hair yet on their upper lips. No Jew would last long in a Russian regiment, proclaimed Papa. He'd be dead before a year turned over.

Nonetheless, most boys of Mischa's generation were answering the call, going off to become heroes. How else, these volunteers argued, could Jews ever expect to receive full Russian citizenship? They marched up the street, dazzling in new uniforms, the little girls skipping along beside them, throwing flowers in their path, maidens Rivka's age darting forward to wish them well, then dashing back to their gates. Mischa's friend Nachum volunteered to go. "Jews are not draft dodgers. Jews are loyal Russian subjects. We must demonstrate this to the Tsar and to the people," he told Mischa.

"They'll treat you like shit," Mischa said.

“At first, maybe. But when they see how I’ll fight, they’ll learn to respect me, and that’s how you change things, one person at a time, by your behavior, slowly, over time.”

“Slowly over time never changed things before.”

“This time will be different.”

News of the front trickled back with the draymen who’d been conscripted to transport men and matériel to the frontier. Russian armies were swarming into enemy territory, pushing back the Austrian and German troops fifty versts, a hundred versts, more. In no long time, they gained the banks of the Vistula River and were threatening Warsaw. Could the day be far off when they would sweep into Berlin? Troop trains rolled through from Rovno day and night, the cars filled to bursting with young men in uniform—more riding precariously on the roofs. They waved and called out to anyone nearby, especially girls walking along the road, as did Rivka every day, bringing Papa his lunch at the factory. “Come here, honey, give us a kiss!” She blushed to the roots of her hair.

At the frontier, they had to disembark for other trains of a different gauge. Supplies, too, had to be reloaded onto equipment that could ride the German rails. Before long, cars and men were backed up many versts, waiting. The countryside was soon stripped of horses and wagons, conscripted on the spot for military use. Papa was only able to retain his by arguing that his bootmaking factory performed a vital war service. Others were not so lucky. One cold day, Berel the drayman brought some wheat westward beyond Brody and ended up having to walk back.

The way back was clogged with refugees whose homes had been destroyed in the fighting. Some were peasants: the women and girls in their brightly colored babushkas, the men bareheaded, with wind-tossed yellow hair. Then Jews, whole shtetls of them,

uprooted and driven from their homes in the occupied towns of Galicia in Austria-Hungary. They came with what they could carry on their backs, looking bewildered and vacant, their staring children backing away when Rivka offered a piece of bread. They moved together under guard of a few soldiers. It was for their own safety, the soldiers said, that they were being sent east. Bent under the weight of their sacks, they crowded into the courtyard of the synagogue seeking food and rest.

Rivka was at the factory bringing Papa his lunch when in rode five Cossacks on stamping ponies. She nearly fainted as they made straight for her, each one a promise of harm. The lead rider dismounted, tall in his high fur hat, his bushy mustache flaked in frost, his eyes narrowed, his pantaloons billowing as he took his long, conqueror's strides. "Where is the boots man?" he bellowed.

She pointed, too terrified to speak. He ordered her to show them the way.

He was their commander, come to order a new pair of boots. Rivka watched Papa take the measure himself. The skin of Papa's hands was discolored and cracked, the joints gnarled and dark from years of working with tanned leathers, with aniline dyes and waxes. But Papa was a man of business now; he rarely ever took his place at the cobbler's bench, much less at any of the machines in his bootmaking factory.

Bowing and scraping, he inquired if they had news from the front.

"*Da,*" replied the commander, tight-lipped. He lolled in Papa's office chair, his splayed legs like two heavy logs, his feet the size of jack planes, the toenails long, ragged and yellow.

Papa brought him fine leathers to choose from. "What glory," he said, "to be part of this great Russian advance that can only end in glorious victory."

“Victory!” The Cossack spat. “Victory? A million of our fine Russian lads lost. For what? To gain two million stinking Jews!”

AT THIS TIME, Mischa still had not maimed himself, and Papa redoubled his efforts to get the boy to act before the Cossacks or the army would. The men of the village could hold a boy down, he said, and do what was necessary for him afterward. Did Mischa imagine anyone liked it? But it was unavoidable for a long life, the army being anti-Semitic through and through.

Rivka believed he'd be better off going to war. There must be compensations for the hard life one would have to lead and the terrible dangers. Not every gentile could be hostile to Jews; you might find a protector and fare all right. At least you'd have all your fingers and toes and both your eyes. You could run and dance, knead bread and tie knots and gaze in wonder at the whole wide world beyond their little village.

Mischa kept promising he'd do it himself without any help, but day followed day, week followed week, and soon it was months, and still Papa was pressing Mischa to act.

“I'll take you to the zoo,” Rivka offered. “We'll bribe the guard to let you stick your hand into the monkey cage.”

“What good will that do?”

“The monkey will bite off your finger.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I don't know. Maybe I'll put honey on it.”

“Are you crazy? You've never even seen a monkey.”

“So what? Neither have you.”

“And you disapprove of self-mutilation.”

“But Mischa, at least we'll have an adventure.”

He gave her a knowing grin. “Where is this zoo with its biting monkey?”

“Never you mind. I’ll find you one, even if we have to go all the way to Kiev.” How fine it would be to see Kiev!

The day came when Nachum returned from war. Two men in torn and filthy uniforms trudged through the sleet, shlepping him on a litter down the same street he had marched up so bravely, so expectantly, not six months before. Mischa took one look at his childhood friend, and that very night went down to the shed where Rivka found him and the severed trigger finger from his right hand.

His *right* hand, mind you. Nobody would think to ask if he was a lefty. He was.

As for Nachum, he’d never march again, for his legs were severed below each knee. His commander had sent him out to a listening post to try to hear the enemy’s plans. The air temperature dropped, the relief was delayed by a German raiding party, and he was forced to lie within a few feet of the German front line, unmoving for hours. By the time he could drag himself back and have his frozen feet attended to, it was too late. Gangrene set in, and they amputated.

“Soldiering is no occupation for a Jew,” said Papa when they all paid a visit. “They’d never send their own on duty like that. That’s what they use the Jews for.”

But Nachum, twenty pounds thinner, his cheeks gaunt, his eyes huge in his skull, stuck up for them. “The two men with me at the post that night were goyim,” he said. “They lost their legs, too.”

“All three of you?” gasped Papa.

Nachum’s eyes flashed. “What? You’re worried about business? Six boots you won’t be able to sell?”

Nachum, he was some troublemaker, even without his legs.

There was a time before the war when everyone believed Rivka was Nachum’s intended. She’d known him since earliest childhood.

He was taller even than she, very skinny, and like most Jews he walked with a stoop, his shoulders hunched as if eternally expecting a blow. He had an interest in worldly ideas: Zionism, Socialism, the Jewish Question. She tried to keep up with him, to challenge his intellect as he challenged hers. He gave her pamphlets to read with difficult titles she could not understand, such as *Auto-Emancipation*. He gave her a pamphlet that said Jews could not be Jews except in their own country of Eretz Yisroel, and another that said Jews could be good Jews and also good citizens of their host countries everywhere, and a third pamphlet that said Jews ought not to be Jews at all, if Rivka understood that one properly. She peppered her conversation with quotes from them all, and she thought Nachum favored her because of this. Mind you, nothing ardent was ever uttered, and of course it would be up to his parents to choose his intended, but his parents were willing to hear his opinion. This she knew for a fact.

A few weeks before Nachum went off to war, papers were signed betrothing him to the daughter of a wealthy grain merchant from just north of Rovno, about fifty versts distant. Rumor said she was prettier than Rivka and a good cook, with not a thought in her head. It was a marriage that was also a business deal. Nachum's father had once been a man of substance in the community, a distiller who used to pledge the largest sums in *shul* each year at *Kol Nidre*. After 1905, when the Tsar outlawed distilling to Jews, he went on making a comfortable living selling vodka clandestinely to the peasants and kosher wine openly to the Jews. With the war on, the Tsar had outlawed vodka, and Nachum's father contemplated a pauper's empty cupboards. But he was betting that the war wouldn't last long, the Germans would quickly overrun their corner of Russia, and maybe then the Jews would have a better life. Under German rule, he'd be free to distill grain alcohol, the

grain coming wholesale from Nachum's father-in-law. But what was in it for the father-in-law that he should wed his daughter to a distiller's son? Maybe the same calculation.

The first Rivka knew of the betrothal was when Nachum stopped greeting her. She gave him her usual openhearted smile, but he passed by without so much as a glance or a nod. Her best friend, Rachel Aaronsohn, hissed in outrage upon hearing of it. "He was never good enough for you," she said. "Not one of these *schnorrers* is good enough."

"Easy for you to say. You're a pear. I'm a string bean. Who wants a string bean?"

"I'm a very freckled pear."

"You're round and juicy." Rivka's eyebrows bobbed up and down, and Rachel, blushing, tossed her head, auburn curls springing around her rosy face.

She said, "Listen, Rivka. Let's make a pact."

"What? Never to marry?"

Rachel grinned. "Never to marry, until..." Until they could marry two brothers: one rich, the other wealthy; one good-looking, the other handsome; one kind and the other gentle. Their houses would face each other across a broad, tree-lined boulevard, and their children would grow up to marry one another. No child of theirs would have to disappear to avoid the army, as Rachel's brothers, ages nine, ten and eleven had disappeared—gone to visit their maternal grandparents in Lithuania, it was announced, but Rachel whispered that they'd been smuggled to Antwerp and from there, God willing, to Cuba.

And so a solemn pact was sworn between them. But from the day Nachum's engagement was announced, Mama never ceased urging Papa to arrange a marriage for their daughter. Whenever Rivka said something saucy or spoke of her hunger to see the wide

world beyond their doorstep, Mama cocked her chin, looked at Papa and said, “This one is itching for a match.”

Again and again, Papa refused. “With the war on, who talks of marriage? Bad enough if Rivka should end up a widow, with God forbid a child and no husband to care for her. Worse yet if she should find herself burdened with a living cripple for a husband. God forbid like Nachum, who can’t earn a living.”

“A disabled soldier is entitled to the Tsar’s pension.”

“Which won’t keep a cat alive.”

“She needs a husband.”

“Wars don’t last forever. Better wait and see what Rivka’s prospects will be.”

Mama would quiet down. Rivka would be left to mull over her prospects. Sooner or later, Rivka would let slip a hint of her unsatisfied appetite for unheard-of, unhomelike, and possibly unJewish experiences. Then Mama would smile at Papa in their private way. “Sooner, rather than later, understand?” According to Mama, family was everything, and the center of the family was the wife. But if the teasing twinkle in her smile meant that the things done by night in the marriage bed could stop Rivka from thinking and asking questions and seeking adventure, then Rivka decided she was in no hurry to be a wife.

Papa, bless him, merely gazed at Mama and shrugged. “The war won’t last forever.”