



PROLOGUE

1654

Thirteen-year-old Elazar stood at the bow of the ship, shielding his eyes with his hand. The sails puffed like pillows against a gold and rose sunset, yet suddenly something strange caught his eye, something out of place.

A black form was moving steadily in their direction. Was it a whale? He stared out at the gray waves that curled and rolled on and on, and then he made out the outline of a sail.

He ran over to a crewman. "Look!" He pointed at the approaching ship.

The man took his spyglass and stared through it, then raced toward the helm of the ship.

Elazar stood frozen as the approaching ship drew closer and closer, while the crew ran frantically up and down the deck.

“Tack the sails. Hurry!” the captain yelled.

Elazar spotted a black flag waving in the wind, and a chill of fear crept down his spine. The flag had the dreaded skull and crossbones. Pirates were heading straight for their ship.



CHAPTER 1

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JESSE

Jesse, please check the rooms on the first floor. They need to be immaculate and ready for our guests.”

My father walked away before I could ask who the guests were or when they were coming. Of course, it didn't matter. Still, I wished he would tell me. He never told me anything.

I strolled toward the ski lodge, the crisp October breeze brushing my cheeks. I glanced at the blue mountains in the distance and breathed in the fall scent of pine and evergreen. Soon, more snow would fall, and more guests would pour into Blue Mountain Ski Lodge.

I stepped into the lodge and carefully opened the door to the first apartment. The room was sunny, with perfectly made beds and shiny mirrors, the bathroom had soaps and

shampoo, and everything was in order. I did the same thing in the next ten rooms. Would that many guests be coming this early in the season?

I headed toward the main lodge hall, opened the door, and stepped inside the wide room. I passed the L-shaped couches and glass coffee tables and headed for the stairs, ran down the steps to the basement, strode toward the back room, and knocked on the door.

“Come in, son,” Uncle Jacob called.

“Hi, Jesse,” he greeted me, patting me on the shoulder. “How are you?” Uncle Jacob was busy tinkering with a doorknob, trying different screws. “Can’t find the right screw for this knob.”

I watched as he deftly turned the knob and used a Phillips screwdriver to remove some of the facets.

“Did you want your lesson now?”

“Yes, please.”

Sometimes I wondered how Uncle Jacob always had time to spend with me, while my father was always so busy. Of course, the ski lodge was important and needed his constant attention, but I wished my father would sometimes find time to sit and talk to me.

Uncle Jacob reached into his desk and pulled out a worn music book. Then he rose. “I just tuned the piano,” he said. “Let me hear your scales.”

I sat down on the worn piano stool, and the scales tripped off my fingers in succession, major scales and minor scales.

“Now let’s work on the music I taught you last time.”

I opened the music book and studied the notes, then carefully picked out the melody line and added the chords.

The music swept over me. I touched the keys, but the song poured from my heart.

“Beautiful! Well done! You play like—”

Uncle Jacob often made comments like this and then stopped before explaining himself. Who was he comparing me to, and why couldn't he finish the sentence he was saying? What was he hiding from me?

“Like who?” I asked.

He sighed. “You're a natural. Let's hear that Beethoven again.”

I played through the Beethoven sonata and then said, “Please, Uncle Jacob, tell me what you were going to say. I know you were going to say something, and you stopped yourself.”

My uncle cleared his throat. “It's— You play like your father's brother, Alex. Do you remember Uncle Alex?”

Of course I remembered him. I missed him. He never came to visit anymore, and I hadn't seen him since I was little. Why? I couldn't ask my father. He got angry when I asked about Uncle Alex.

“What happened? Why doesn't he come anymore?”

Uncle Jacob shook his head and then patted my shoulder. “I'm sorry, son, it's not for me to say.”

Just then my cousin Yoram rushed into the room. “Dad, Mr. Gross wants you in the dining room. There's a leak in a pipe.”

Yoram plunked down beside me at the piano. He was skinny like a pole but as tall as me. “Hey, play ‘*The River Flows through You.*’ I love that one.”

The notes flowed like a river, and my annoyance melted into the song. I could almost hear the river gurgling over rocks.

“Nice!” Yoram jumped up. “Let’s go to the pond. I want to catch some frogs to bring to school.” He grabbed a stick with a net.

“It’s okay to bring them?”

“That new science teacher asked me to bring one.”

“When did he ask you?”

“He was at shul last night. He was the tenth.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“You know you need ten men to daven in a minyan and say certain prayers. When I turn thirteen in a few weeks, I’ll count too.”

I was already fourteen and a half, so I would count now, I mused. “Dad would never allow me to go.”

Yoram shrugged.

We ran down the wooded path toward the pond. After Yoram caught a frog, we headed back to the dining hall, Yoram’s yarmulke sliding off as he ran.

“Isn’t it a pain to wear that?”

Yoram’s dark eyes reflected pity, but I would not accept pity — not from my best friend and cousin.

“I’m glad to wear it,” he said.

I raced ahead of him into the dining hall, and my father appeared. “Jesse, we have some extra unexpected guests, and we’ll need the back room. Uncle Jacob has the key. You and Yoram please go back there and set it up.”

I nodded. I never said no to Dad, but I hated setting up rooms.

We hurried downstairs to Uncle Jacob’s office, and he led us to a back bedroom we never used.

It wasn’t dusty or musty like I’d expected it to be. It was a large, airy room with an adjoining room connected by a

door. There were big beds and a cherry oak dresser with a wide mirror. Yoram whistled as he slid sheets onto the mattresses. I opened the top drawer of the dresser to dust it and found a worn-looking cardboard box. "Hey, look."

"Maybe a guest left it," Yoram said.

I lifted the lid. "No one stays in here."

Inside was a fat, worn journal. I opened it up and read the first typed page. " 'Researched retyped journal of Elazar Saltiel, 1654. Alex Bergman.' "

I stared at the last two words. *Alex Bergman*. The journal must have belonged to my Uncle Alex. How strange that we had just been talking about him. I wondered again why my father's brother was a forbidden topic in our house.

I remembered the fun times when he'd come to visit, when he'd make up stories and play the piano, and I wondered if I'd find a clue in the box about where he was now or why he'd stopped coming to visit.

"Let's see what it says," Yoram said, and we both plunked down on the nearest bed and began reading.