



# Prologue

*Arrival – 1950*

‘Happy birthday, Tola!’

Mama is holding out a small cake towards me. It is decorated with pale pink and white icing, and there are candles on top, which flicker and smoke in the draught from the kitchen window.

For a moment I am unsure what to do or say. Today, 7 September 1950, I am twelve years old, but this is the first birthday cake I have ever received. It looks so pretty and so delicious – so perfect – that I almost don’t want to touch it. I know how hard my parents have saved to

buy this cake; we have very little money and they are incredibly careful how they spend it.

‘Go on,’ Mama says. She glances over at Papa, who is standing at her side, smiling proudly. ‘Blow the candles out. Make a wish.’

*What do I wish?* There are so many things I could ask for, so many that I barely know where to start. I wish that we could stay here in our little apartment forever, that we never have to move anywhere again. I wish that it wasn’t just the three of us – that my grandparents and my aunts and uncles and my cousins were here with us to enjoy this celebration. I wish that Mama wasn’t always so sad, so that when I lie in bed late at night I don’t hear her crying through the thin bedroom wall. But most of all, right now, what I most wish for is that I had some friends, even just one.

I puff out my cheeks and blow as hard as I can, the flames bending, resisting and finally surrendering to my breath. When all the candles are out, I close my eyes. ‘I wish that . . .’

‘Shush,’ Papa says. ‘Don’t tell us, or it won’t come true.’

Mama places the cake on the kitchen table, and I watch as she takes a large knife and starts to cut it into tiny pieces, so that we can eke it out for longer. As the smooth pink icing parts and crumbles, I see that the cake underneath is brown – chocolate, my favourite. Although she is still smiling, Mama’s eyes are watery, and I know that she is blinking away thoughts of her family. Papa gently places his hand on her shoulder, and she sighs.

‘Go on, Tola, you have the first slice,’ she says.

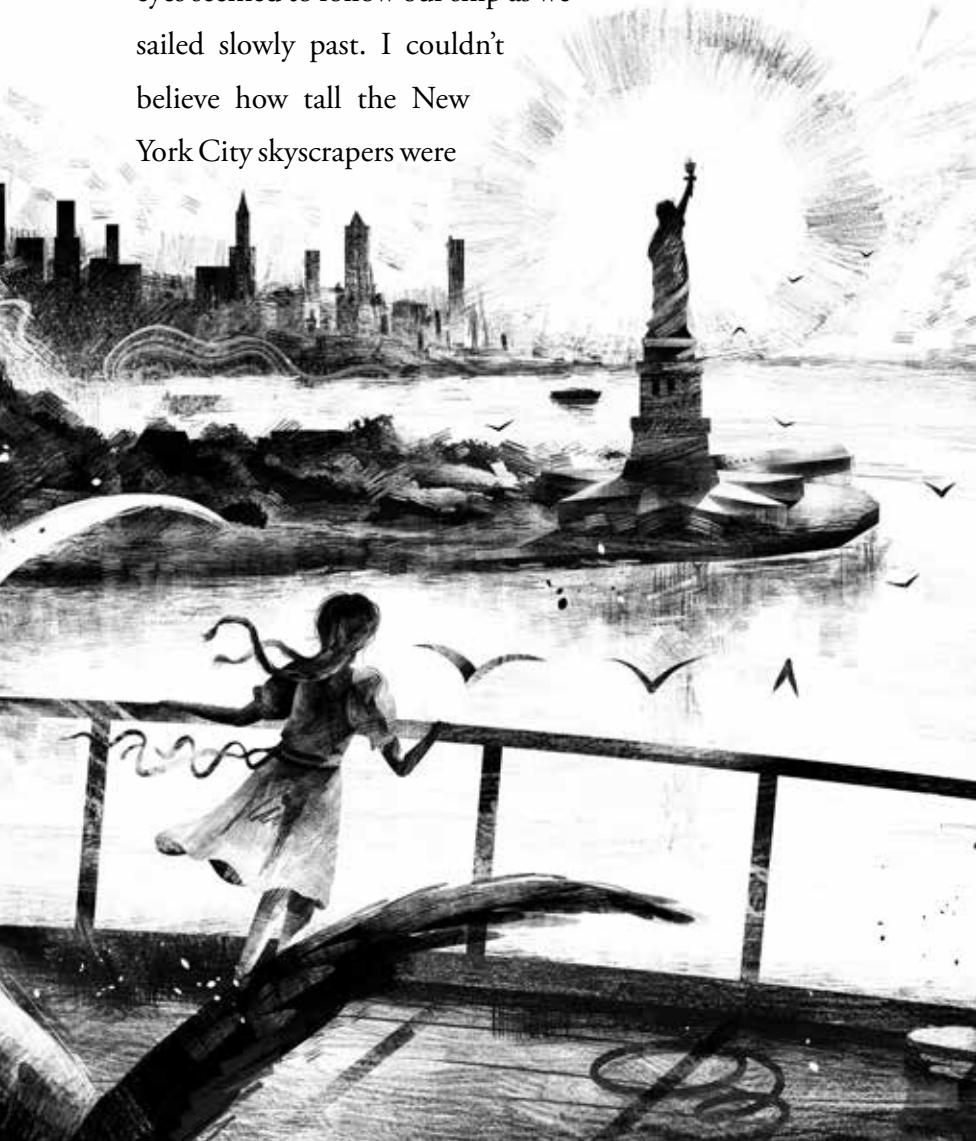
I don’t need to be told. I have already grabbed it, greedily, stuffing too much into my mouth. It tastes incredible. I know so well what it is like to be hungry, but today I will eat like a queen.

Just five months ago, Mama, Papa and I arrived in New York. I remember my awe at seeing the skyline for the first time as we came into the harbour. Mama was very sick after the many weeks at sea, and was lying on a mattress on the deck, when Papa sent me to the front of the ship.

‘Go to the bow and take a look at the Statue of

Liberty,' he told me. 'It's a sight you'll never forget.'

I had only ever seen the statue in photographs, and I gasped when I saw just how big she was and how her eyes seemed to follow our ship as we sailed slowly past. I couldn't believe how tall the New York City skyscrapers were



either, and how they really did reach into the clouds. The city could not have looked more different from the dirty, bombed-out European landscapes I had known before. As we passed under Liberty's shadow, I prayed that life would change for the better in our new home.

For the first few weeks we lived in a hotel in Manhattan. Then Papa found a job, and we moved to our apartment in Astoria, Queens, an Italian neighbourhood made up of small family houses with well-kept gardens. Ours was the only apartment building on the block. We had one bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom – there were also curtains and even a radio. It felt so luxurious that I didn't mind having to sleep on the couch in the living room.

But outside the apartment, life was hard. Everything in New York was so strange to me: the clothing, the cars, the food, the noise, but most of all the language. Incomprehensible sounds came out of everyone's mouths, and at times I wondered if I would ever be able to understand them. I spoke only a few words of English at first; at home we had always spoken Yiddish. I could also speak a little Polish, but that wasn't any use here either.

When I started at school, the principal said I had to join the fourth grade, with children two whole years younger than me. I'm tall for my age, so I towered over the nine-year-olds, which made me stand out even more. The other kids made fun of me because I looked weird, with my long braids, second-hand clothes and worn shoes, and because I had a foreign accent. Sometimes my classmates would approach me slowly, cautiously, as if they were examining a strange creature, before running away, giggling. Or they'd push each other towards me and yell something I didn't understand, before laughing right in my face. It was so humiliating, but I knew it could be much worse. At least nobody was calling me a 'dirty Jew' or trying to kill my family again.

The kids in my street were no different. They stared at me like I was an alien. I longed to talk to them, to join in with their games, but I didn't even know how to play. For the whole first summer here in New York, I felt lonely, scared and confused.

But I couldn't tell my parents how miserable I was. We had all been through so much already, and I felt it was now my job to make them proud and happy. Although

five years had passed since the Second World War ended, our wounds were still very raw.

Now I am turning twelve, and I think – *I hope* – things are going to get a lot better. It's a new school year and I've been moved to seventh grade with children my own age. I don't have to sit on tiny chairs any more and my teacher has shown me how to hold a pencil properly. I am starting to understand more English words too, which means people treat me like less of an idiot.

That's partly because of the wonderful book Mama gave me. It's a large picture dictionary, and I guess you could call it my first friend in New York. I spent the summer sitting on a wooden chair outside my apartment block, memorising the pictures and reciting the words phonetically, even if I was pronouncing them incorrectly. And every evening, when she returned from working at the shoe factory, Mama and I would go over the words I'd learned that day.

At night, after Mama and Papa have gone to bed in their tiny bedroom, I have the living room all to myself – it's the first time I don't have to share a room with anyone, and, best of all, I can listen to the radio for

hours and hours, late into the night. For most of my life, radios were forbidden; they could kill you if they found you with one. Just having a radio makes me feel free.

One Friday afternoon, a month into seventh grade, the principal summons me to his office. I am nervous, wondering what I might have done wrong. Beating back frightening memories from the past, I steel my nerves. But to my relief, a pleasant woman greets me with a smile and motions me to sit with her.

‘Hello, Tola,’ she says.

I nod, but I don’t say anything. I sit as still as possible, braced for punishment.

‘Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble. I’ll come right out with it. We’ve noticed that you don’t have friends yet, Tola, and that you always seem to be alone. I’d like to help you.’

I feel the heat rise up into my cheeks.

‘I know it’s hard to fit in when you’re new and come from . . . somewhere else. But there are things you can do to help yourself. Here, girls your age don’t have such long braids.’ She gestures to my hair and makes her

fingers into scissors, in case I don’t understand. ‘Perhaps you would consider cutting them off?’

It’s not really a question; more of a command. Subconsciously, I find my hands rising up to my head and fiddling with my braids, twisting them round and round my fingers. I haven’t had my hair cut in five years, not since it was all shaved off in the concentration camp. My long hair means so much to Mama, and I know she will be horrified.

‘There’s also your clothes.’ She points to my long, shapeless dress, which I already know stands out at school, compared to the other girls’ fashionable dresses. But I haven’t dared ask my parents for any new clothes because I know they can’t afford them.

‘I can help you find some appropriate clothing from a local store,’ she continues. ‘And you should definitely get some long sleeves to cover your arms.’ She places her hand on her sleeve in the exact spot where I have my tattoo and shakes her head.

‘Nobody wants to think about that. It just makes people uncomfortable. Keep it covered up, try to forget about what happened and don’t mention your

experiences to anyone. OK?’

Now I feel guilty. So it is *my* fault I don’t have any friends; I’m scaring them away because they think I’m a freak. Maybe if I do what she says, people will like me. I nod again, feeling like I want to sink down through the chair and into the floor.

She smiles. ‘Finally, I’m going to suggest something else.’

She launches into a speech, and I hear my name mentioned a few times, but I’m still reeling from her earlier comments, and I can’t seem to make anything out.

‘So that’s agreed then?’ she says.

‘Yes,’ I say, because that’s what she expects. Although I’m not sure what I have agreed to.

At first Mama refuses to cut my hair. It takes me two full days of arguing to convince her it has to be done because the important woman at school has asked me to do it. Finally, with a deep sigh, she fetches scissors and agrees to give me the fashionable short hairstyle every other girl in the neighbourhood has. But as she slices off my

braids, Mama once again has tears in her eyes.

On Monday morning, I go into school wondering if my new hair will win me popularity or more stares. Of course, with my long legs, light eyes and fair hair, I still look nothing like the other girls, who are petite and dark.

My teacher, Mr Eagan, nods approvingly when he sees my transformation. But as the day progresses, he grows increasingly impatient and irritated with me. ‘Susan!’ he says finally, looking me straight in the eye. ‘Why aren’t you listening? I asked you a question.’

Susan? All of a sudden, it dawns on me exactly what it was that I didn’t understand on Friday afternoon in the principal’s office. My name has been changed to Susan. Mr Eagan writes it down for me on a piece of paper and I take it home to show my bemused parents. I have a brand-new identity: I’m not Tola from Poland any more. I am an all-American girl – Susan Grossman.

Weeks go by, and sometimes I remember to answer to my new name, but I can’t get used to it. It doesn’t feel like it belongs to me.

One day, during break time, a girl in my class comes

over to me. I know her name is Lilly. She is short and pretty, with dark curly hair, and she wears dresses with white collars. We've never spoken before but I can tell she isn't like all the others; she has kind eyes. She often turns round and smiles at me in class, especially when my new name is called out and I forget to answer.

'Why did you change your name?' she asks. 'I like Tola!'

I'm taken aback by her directness, and too shy to answer, so I just shrug my shoulders.

'Well, I don't think it's fair,' she says.

After a few days, when I am less afraid to talk to her in my broken English, I tell Lilly just how uncomfortable I am with my new name. I explain that in Judaism babies are traditionally given the name of a deceased, beloved relative so that they aren't forgotten. I was named Tola after my maternal great-grandmother.

'You should tell them you want to be Tola again then,' says Lilly, matter-of-factly.

And that's exactly what I do. I march up to Mr Eagan and say, 'I'd like my own name back, please.'

He begins to shake his head in protest, but then

appears to change his mind. He's probably fed up with having to call out 'Susan' three times before I respond. 'OK then, Tola,' he says.

And that is the end of Susan.

After that, Lilly and I become very good friends. She is kind and generous, which makes me feel less like a stranger in a strange land. Her mother bakes cookies, which she brings to school, and she insists on sharing them with me. My English is improving by leaps and bounds too, partly thanks to Lilly, who helps me with my pronunciation. I begin to take out books from the school library. At night they replace the radio, as I read more and more fiction. A new world is opening up to me, one where children are not starved or beaten, where parents don't just disappear.

By the time Thanksgiving arrives – a day celebrating American independence – I have been in the country for over a year.

'What are you doing for Thanksgiving dinner?' Lilly asks. I stare back blankly. My family only celebrates the Jewish holidays; we don't know anything about Thanksgiving. 'I think you should come to ours,' she says.

I'm both surprised and delighted to be invited to Lilly's house for the first time.

Mama seems pleased too, but she's also anxious. 'Eat everything but the meat,' she cautions.

I nod. I know that I must only eat meat that is kosher. Even if it makes me stick out more, I hope Lilly's family are as kind as she is and will understand.

After school, on Thanksgiving day, I put on my best dress and walk the few minutes to Lilly's house. I'm overwhelmed by how huge it is, how many windows it has, the fact that there are steps leading up to its front door, and a porch, like the houses in my storybooks. But it's when I go inside that I'm really enchanted. The dining-room table is enormous and laid out with dishes, glasses, knives and forks, all polished and shiny. There must be room for twenty people at least. I can't take my eyes off it.

'Is our whole class coming?' I ask.

'Class?' Lilly laughs. 'No. Just my family.'

I meet Lilly's parents when I arrive – they are warm and affectionate, like her – and I know that she has an older brother and sister, and two younger siblings too,

but who are all the other people? A wave of sadness and longing washes over me. Family. I know I once had a large, happy family too, before the Second World War changed everything.

Lilly notices my discomfort. She takes my hand and leads me upstairs to her bedroom. It looks like something from a fairy tale, all pink, frilly, bright and filled with books and dolls and clothes.

'Don't your parents have any family over for Thanksgiving? Do they mind that you are here?'

I pride myself on never crying – in public, at least – but today I can't hold back my tears.

'We have no family,' I whisper, afraid to be overheard. 'They were all killed. Murdered.'

We can hear the sound of laughter from downstairs, but Lilly stares at me in silence. A long time seems to pass before she whispers, 'How?'

I have been told never to talk about what happened, and I haven't, not to anyone. But I feel I can trust Lilly, and I need to tell someone. The pressure to keep all the horrible memories, all the pain inside, is too much for me. 'I . . . I . . .'

‘Lilly!’ her mother calls. ‘It’s time for you and your friend to come down for dinner!’

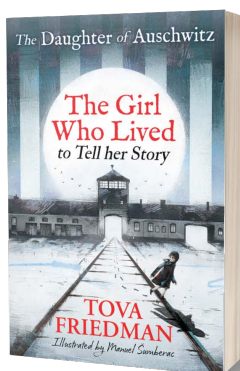
‘We can talk about it later,’ I say, composing myself. ‘Or tomorrow, when we’re off school.’

She nods and takes my hand. ‘OK. But I want to know the whole story.’

‘Yes, I will tell you everything. I promise. But, be warned, it isn’t easy to talk about, or to hear.’

This is what I told her . . .

Read more of Tola's story in



[Purchase here](#)