

THE LONELY ROAD • 1

AS THE CARRIAGE ROLLED around a bend in the lonely road, the coachman pulled sharply on the reins. The armed guard sitting beside him reached for his pistols. A short distance away, a man lay face down and motionless in middle of the road. The coachman halted the carriage and secured the reins. He exchanged glances with the guard.

“What do you think?” he said. He shivered in the cold afternoon air.

The guard drew his pistols. “I don’t know. Let’s wait a minute and watch.”

“It’s cold.”

The guard was annoyed. “Just wait a minute. You won’t freeze.”

“It’s not safe,” said the coachman, pointing to the right. “There may be men lurking in the woods beyond that field. This may be a trap.”

One of the horses snorted and pawed at the ground, and the other one followed suit. The coachman grabbed the reins and calmed the horses, then he secured the reins again.

“What should we do?”

“Can you drive around him?”

“No, he’s blocking too much of the road. I’ll run him over.”

“Can you drive through the field?”

The coachman shook his head. "The road is higher than the field. If I drive down the slope, the carriage'll tip over."

"Then run him over. We can't take any chances."

"Are you sure? I've never killed a man. It's a mortal sin."

"He's probably dead already."

"But what if he's alive?"

"Then you'll give alms and repent. Just confess to the priest, and he'll fix you all up. Drive!"

The coachman took the reins in his hands and reached for the whip. The carriage door opened, and Chaim Tomashov stepped out. Although he was over eighty years old, he stood tall with shoulders squared, a distinguished man in an expensive coat. His sparse hair and wispy beard were white as snow, but his arms were thick and muscular.

"Why have we stopped here?" he called out. "It'll be dark soon, and we're still a good distance from Pulichev. Why aren't we moving? What's going on?"

"There's a man lying on the road," said the coachman.

"We can't stay here," said the guard. "Please get into the carriage, boss. We have to get moving."

Pistols gripped in both his hands, the guard scanned the roadside for any sign of a threat. Three loaded muskets were at his feet. Behind them, to the east, he saw two horsemen approaching. As they drew closer, he recognized them by their colorful uniforms as Polish cavalrymen.

The riders came alongside the carriage, one on either side. The leader, a burly man with a bulbous red nose, looked from the two men on the driver's bench to the elderly Jewish traveler standing on the road.

"What's happening?" he asked, addressing his question to Chaim Tomashov. He turned to the guard and jabbed his finger at him. "And you! Put down those pistols before someone gets hurt!"

The guard lowered the pistols to the floor next to the muskets.

Immediately, the riders pulled their own pistols from their waistbands and pointed them at the coachman and the guard.

“Get down here,” the red-nosed rider commanded. “Both of you. Down on the ground! And make sure I see your hands at all times.”

The coachman and the guard climbed down. They raised their arms and stood next to their employer. Meanwhile, the form of the man lying on the road ahead came suddenly to life. He stood up, dusted off his clothes and ambled over to the carriage. He was exceedingly fat and florid, and he carried a pistol in one hand and a dagger in the other.

“Good work,” said the leader. He dismounted and passed the reins to the fat man. The second rider also dismounted and handed over his reins. The two riders approached their prisoners.

“Who are you people?” said Chaim. “You’re obviously not Polish cavalymen. What do you want?”

The leader chuckled. “You figured it out. Very good. No, we’re not cavalry.”

“Where did you get those uniforms?”

“You ask many questions for an old Jew. But if you must know, we bought them from a shop in Lvov. Would you like to know exactly which one? Perhaps you’d like one for yourself.”

“We have to hurry,” said the fat bandit. “Someone might come along.”

The leader gave him a dark look. “Who’s in charge of this band, you tub of lard? Hold your tongue and wait for my orders. Otherwise, you can lie down on the road again, and we’ll run you over.”

The fat bandit flushed and drew back a step, and the leader turned to Chaim Tomashov.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“Chaim Tomashov.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Krakow.”

“What’s your business?”

“I’m a cattle merchant.”

“Indeed? You look like a rich Jew.”

“I’m not rich. I work hard to provide for my family. I have many mouths to feed.”

“Well, the most important mouth you have to feed right now is mine. And my comrades, of course. Give me your money and your valuables, and then you can be on your way with our blessings and best wishes.”

“All I have is six *groszy* and a bag of food.”

The leader shoved his pistols into his waistband. He grabbed Chaim by the shoulders and leaned in so close that Chaim could smell his sour breath and see the dark hairs on his bulbous nose.

“Don’t lie to me, you filthy Jew,” he growled. “Six *groszy* won’t get you to Krakow. Give me your money. All of it. Right now!”

“Believe me, sir. That’s all I have. We’re on our way to Pulichev, which is close by. I’ll get more money there for the remainder of my journey.”

The leader smacked Chaim on his face so hard that he fell to the ground, a red welt on his left cheek.

“Get up!”

Dazed, Chaim struggled to his feet.

“I’m telling you the truth,” he stammered. His breath came in short gasps. “I can’t give you what I don’t have.”

The leader pulled his pistols from his waistband and pointed them at his prisoners.

“Search the old dog, boys,” he barked at his henchmen.

The two henchmen searched Chaim and found nothing of value, except for six *groszy* in his coat pocket. The leader was furious.

“Search the carriage,” he commanded. “Rip it apart!”
The henchmen searched inside the carriage inch by inch.
“Hurry, boys! We can’t stand here all day.”

The henchmen opened the baggage, spilled the contents onto the road and rummaged through the piles of clothing, papers and personal effects. They checked the carriage body and even climbed underneath to inspect the undercarriage. They found no money and no valuables.

The leader was furious. He swung his pistol at Chaim and struck him a vicious blow on the side of the head. Chaim crumpled to the ground, blood streaming from his scalp.

“Let’s go,” growled the leader. “Take the money and the food bag. And take this old dog’s coat. I’ll find a customer for it.”

He mounted his horse and waited impatiently as the others grabbed their meager booty and handed it to him. The two henchmen mounted the second horse, the fat bandit’s arms around the rider’s waist, and they all rode off to the east.

The guard ran to retrieve his weapons, although the time for their use had passed. The coachman tended to his fallen employer.

“Are you all right, boss?”

Chaim’s eyes were closed, and he made no response. The coachman checked if he was breathing. The breaths were shallow and faint, but steady. The coachman shook him and slapped his face. Chaim’s eyelids fluttered open. He looked around in confusion, and then he remembered.

“Are they gone?” he managed to croak.

“Yes, they are. We’re safe for the moment, but we have to get moving. Let me help you back into the carriage. That gash looks pretty bad. Lots of blood. You need to see a doctor, boss. Maybe we can get to Pulichev before nightfall.”

They were not able to outrun the night. The carriage rumbled into Pulichev by moonlight. It came to a halt in front

of Rav Mendel Strasbourg's home. The coachman jumped down and banged loudly on the door. The door opened, and Rav Mendel peered out suspiciously. Rebbetzin Sarah stood behind him at the kitchen door with a worried look on her face.

"What's going on?" asked Rav Mendel. "Who are you?"

"I've got your friend Chaim Tomashov in the carriage outside," said the coachman. "He's in bad shape."

The coachman and the guard lifted Chaim from the carriage and helped him into the house. Rav Mendel ran to make a place for him near the oven, and Rebbetzin Sarah brought clean towels and a basin of warm water. The coachman and guard stepped outside to await further instructions.

The door opened, and Rav Shloime Strasbourg entered.

"Father, what is going on here?" he said. "Who is that in the bed by the oven with his face covered by a bloody towel?"

"I'll let our guest speak for himself," said Rav Mendel.

"Hello, Rav Shloime," said Chaim. "How've you been? I thought I'd pay your family a visit on my way back to Krakow. We had a little trouble on the road."

"Are you all right? Should we wake the doctor?"

"Your father is doctoring me quite well. I'm fine. Just a little headache. Well, not so little. Don't be alarmed by all the blood. The scalp bleeds a lot. It's not as bad as it looks."

"What happened?"

"Armed bandits dressed as Polish cavalymen robbed us a few hours ago."

"How did you get hurt?"

"We have to let our guest rest, Shloime," said Rebbetzin Sarah. "We'll hear all the details in the morning. Right now, we have to get some food into him and let him go to sleep."

"Do you have a Siddur, Rav Mendel?" said Chaim. "I want to pray. I have to thank the Almighty for saving my life. It could have been much worse. Those men looked like they

wouldn't hesitate to kill. I could have been shot, you know. It is a miracle that I'm alive." He chuckled. "Maybe he didn't want to ruin my coat."

"Well, we're all happy that you're here alive and not too badly hurt."

"So am I. So am I. Can you help me sit up?"

"You can pray lying down tonight," said Rav Mendel. "And Shloime, please go see to the men outside. Give them some coins, and tell them to stable the horses and go to an inn. They should come by tomorrow afternoon."

A half-hour later, Chaim Tomashov was sound asleep.