Chapter 2

New York City

The train gave an enormous sigh as it slipped into the Hamburg station. The day was just beginning and a soft morning fog drifted lazily over the people bustling to work. Fred looked out and saw for the first time what seemed like the biggest city he had ever seen. As the passengers began filing off of the train, Fred couldn’t help but look around at everyone like a fool. It just looked so different than Neustadt.

His ship didn’t leave for an hour so he took his time walking down to the port. The air was thicker down by the docks and everyone was rushing about to embark on numerous adventures. No one paid him any mind. In fact, no one in this city even knew he existed. It was then that Fred felt the true weight of his loneliness. Was he doing the right thing leaving everyone he knew and cared about for an uncertain and unstable future? He shook the thoughts from his mind. Each day was a new adventure and he had to look at it with bright spirits or risk failure.

The captain began calling for the passengers of the Westphalia and Fred hurried to be one of the first in line. He checked his pocket again for his ticket; he was terrified of losing it. He gripped it tightly in his hand and looked at the wording of it. It was only a Stowage class ticket, meaning he wouldn’t have a bed or a cabin for the next month and a half, but to him it was the most glamorous thing he had ever owned. He had worked so hard for this ticket and it gave him a sense of pride to hand it over to the captain of the ship. This was really happening. He boarded the ship and as it pulled away from the land he waved at the shore with the other passengers. He wasn’t waving to anyone in particular but rather the only world he knew.

They sailed through the day and the night and then through the day and the night again until everything just blurred together. It seemed as if the boat would never reach land again. So far Fred had been holding down his meager meals but he wasn’t sure how much longer he could last. He was beginning to wonder if stowing away in the drudges of the ship was even worth it anymore. He had worked so hard to save up so much and for what? Fourteen days of rocking and sickness and dismal living conditions. America had better be worth it.

The boat finally landed on July 4th 1923 but no one was around to take their papers. The rich upper class people were allowed off since they had paid to have their immigration papers processed on the ship. Everyone else had to stay put until the office re-opened the next day. It seemed funny to Fred that they were having a holiday in July. What could they be celebrating? He tried to think about all of the holidays he knew when suddenly there was a sharp blast that rippled though the air.

Fred immediately hit the deck and covered his head. He felt like the bullet had just barely missed his ear and he was too afraid to find out. Around him he heard screams and pandemonium. One of the ship captains was yelling something but Fred couldn’t understand what he was saying. The man was yelling in English. Another man got up and began translating into German. Fred uncovered his ears and heard bits of the broken translation.

“No guns…Just fireworks…celebration”

Fred stood up embarrassed and looked around at everyone else on the ship. Many were coming out of hiding and getting up off of the floor. At least he hadn’t been the only one scared of fireworks.

The sun was beating down on the ground with a hot flair. Somehow, Fred couldn’t remember Germany being this hot, though he knew it must be. The American sun felt different though, as though Germany had screen that mitigated heat but here there was no screen and the sun just bore down on your skin mercilessly. A man came around with a tray filled with small glasses brimming with yellow liquid. He and some others passed around the glasses to the refugees stranded on the boat. When the man came to him, he offered Fred a glass.

“Lemonade?” Fred gladly accepted. He smelled it before taking a sip. It was tart but sweet and had little ice cubes floating on the surface to ease the torture from the sun. He had never had anything quite so refreshing. Lemonade. His first English word. What a word to be his first.

By the time the ship reached Ellis Island where the rest of them would be processed the next day, the shooting noises were quieting down and darkness was slowly rolling in. Fred noticed that rockets began to fill the sky with bright bursts of color. He tilted his head back and breathed in the cooler night air. He almost thought he could taste the colors in the sky.

The next morning everything was quiet. He got off the ship and he kissed the ground. The morning was calm and thankfully, still cool although Fred could feel the heat biding its time.

He was ushered into a cramped building where there were officials speaking every language possible. He filled out his papers and waited in line for the German-speaking official to process him. Even though the day was early, the cramped office was already hot with the breath of other people and the fans only faced the officials. Sweat gathered in between the hairs on his forearms and he felt his upper lip begin to moisten. He shifted his weight.

After his papers had been processed, he was ushered into another room to await his physical. The doctor muttered to himself in English, knowing anything he said Fred would not be able to understand anyways. The doctor motioned for him to sit down and he took an odd looking tool from a table beside him. He motioned with his hands that he should open his eyes wide and follow the light. He then asked Frank to get up and walk. He made notes on a clipboard while Fred walked. He wondered if he wasn’t doing it right, then realized the doctor was looking for a limp. The doctor coughed and motioned for him to do the same. Fred followed his directions and after looking in his mouth he was free to go.

The final official stamped his work visa and gave him a map of Manhattan and New York City. A translator gave him directions to get to Grand Central station and warned him that if he wasn’t careful to watch he belongings they would disappear. The city was full of robbers and swindlers just waiting to prey on newcomers.

Fred found a group of other lost immigrants and joined them as they waited for the ferry. Together they traversed the many streets of New York City, which seemed dirtier than Hamburg. When they finally found the station it broke through the skyline like a castle. The other buildings in New York were tall but this one was round and seemed like something he might see in Germany. There were golden arches over the front and a grand sign that seemed more like it was advertising a play rather than a train.

He entered the station and looked around for the gate listed on his ticket. He wandered through throngs of people as sweet and savory smells drifted in and out of his brain. There was so much to eat in the station and it seemed like there was something from every country on Earth. He used one of his nickels and bought a cinnamon roll. Warm, sweet icing squirted out onto his fingers and rolled down his chin as he waited to board his train.

The train took him through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and into Illinois to Chicago. Fred kept trying to look out the window but every time he did it was as though he was in a new country. Rich hills gave way to golden fields, which gave way to lush forests and so on. The scenery was always changing and it gave Fred a sense of wonderment. What a vast country he had come to. When the train reached Chicago, he boarded a final train to take him to his final destination of Dubuque County, IA. After over a month of traveling, he was finally going to the place where he would spend the rest of his life.