Chapter 1

The First Faint Cry

Jacob Zachary always remembered the time that winter when he was three. He'd heard a strange sound in the thatch above the clay oven, and looking up, he saw flames around the chimney. Someone shouted, "Fire!" Jacob jumped from the bunk bed where he had been sitting and began to search for his shoes, under the bunks, the wooden benches, the homemade table. His mother hurried past him, shouting that she must loosen the cow tied in the lean-to. When she came back, the ceiling was ablaze. Jacob remembered her grabbing up the baby from her swinging willow basket. He remembered her throwing a blanket over him, and half dragging, half carrying him from the house, and dropping him into a snowbank.

The prickly cold made him cry. But after a while he stopped crying, hearing the excited voices of his father and his brothers, Charlie, John, and Alex, and the neighbor, Mike Bilyuk. They were shouting to each other as they carried pieces of furniture from the burning straw-thatched cabin. Fascinated, Jacob tried to watch them dodging in and out.

But the coldness soon numbed the little fellow so that the men and voices, and the crackling of the fire blurred. Then as if from afar off he heard his mother:

"Oh, my baby! My baby boy is dead! He's frozen white!"

Jacob felt himself being lifted in strong arms. He knew no more until he felt the stinging cold of icy water. He gasped for breath. They had plunged him, blanket and all, into a tub of water and snow. Then he heard his mother again, and the words came to him often through the years.

"Nothing must happen to this child. He has been dedicated to a holy mission."

Later, dried and wrapped warmly, Jacob lay on one of the neighbor's bunk beds watching his mother nearby nursing the baby, the three older boys and all the family possessions

crowded around her. He noticed a tear slip down his mother's cheek and fall on the baby's soft hair.

The child could not know the hardships the family had had setting up a new home in Manitoba, Canada, at the turn of the century. The Zacharys had come with several families from the Ukraine. They had traveled from Winnipeg, the end of the railroad line, over mere trails skirting the bogs to take up homesteads fifty miles farther on. Helyar and Vasilenna Zachary had worked side by side building the log cabin. They thatched it with bulrushes. They built a clay oven to warm the cabin and to bake in. Vasilenna wove willow wands to make bunk beds for her family.

The second summer they added a lean-to in which to keep the cow and a root cellar in which to store the vegetables produced so abundantly that year in the rich soil.

When the grain crop ripened, they cut it, bound it into sheaves, and stored the sheaves under piles of hay until a threshing floor could be made. Helyar cleared and smoothed a circular area for this, building up the sides so that it could be flooded when the first frosts came. Bucket after bucket of water he and Vasilenna and the older boys poured on the flat area to freeze. This they did over and over again until the surface became a thick, flat sheet of ice. They placed the sheaves on the threshing floor and with homemade flails they beat the grain, winnowing it in the wind. Then Mother Zachary picked up the stalks to save for thatching.

The threshing over, Helyar set up a mill to grind the wheat into flour. Just a few weeks before the fire Vasilenna had made the first crusty, whole-wheat loaves of bread from their own milled flour.

The struggle and hardship the child could not know; but now as he lay on the neighbor's bed watching his mother, he heard her sigh deeply, and he noticed tears spilling over her cheeks.

"Why do you cry, Mamma?" the little fellow asked.

Vasilenna brushed -the tears away. She smiled faintly at Jacob wrapped up on the bed. "I am thinking, my son. Do you

remember the sweet nutty brown bread that came from our clay oven?" She paused. "But now the cabin - and everything - is gone." She wiped her eyes on the corner of the baby's blanket.

Father Zachary, coming in at that moment with the neighbor, placed another piece of the saved furniture in the already crowded cabin and came over to Mother Zachary.

"Don't cry, my Lenna," he said, patting her shoulder. "In the spring I will build you a new house. A better one this time, with a shingled roof."

"Yes, I know." Mother looked up at her husband. "How glad we should be that the fire didn't come in the night, especially in such cold weather. How glad we should be that we are all safe." Then she glanced at Jacob. "I hope the boy will not suffer from his ordeal."

Father Zachary adjusted his cap. "He is going to be all right. You will see. Have we not dedicated him to the priesthood?" He went out, leaving Mother with Mrs. Bilyuk, the children, and all the extra furniture piled in the neighbor's small cabin.

Jacob started to get off the bed.

"No, don't get off the bed," Mother cautioned.

And for the next several months Jacob and the Bilyuk's small children heard over and over again, "Don't get off the bed," or "No, you can't go outside. It is too cold. Play on the bed," or "Please stay in the corner or where you are. We are getting dinner ready. We can't have you underfoot."

Jacob became more and more fretful. His face and hands and feet burned and itched as the skin peeled off where he had been frostbitten. It seemed to the child that that winter would never end.

When at last the cold began to lessen, Father Zachary came with the news that he had borrowed a tent. He would fix a rough wood floor and siding in the tent, and the family could move in until the new house would be ready, he told Mother and Jacob.

"When will it be ready?" Jacob wanted to know.

"When the spring sunshine and warm winds dry the earth, we will build," Father said. "In the meantime I will haul boards and shingles from the mill so everything will be in readiness."

Jacob watched Father unload the lumber in neat piles. Then at last one day neighbors from all around came to help in setting up the new home for the Zachary family.

In two weeks Jacob looked up at the beautiful two-story home - ready for the family to move into.

"Isn't it a fine house?" little Jacob shouted as he ran from one room to another, upstairs and down.

"A very fine house," Vasilenna Zachary agreed. "Large and light with all those windows. It is a blessing the old cabin burned down."

"Yes," Helyar nodded. "We have many blessings. There is the sawmill, and now a store has opened just two and a half miles from here where we can get our supplies without taking that long trip to Winnipeg. I will buy two steers to help haul supplies and logs. And, Lenna, the roads are so much better now. And the railroad goes beyond Winnipeg. Someday it will stretch from east to west in this great land. It passes within six miles of our place now. We are almost a part of Winnipeg." Helyar laughed as he spoke. "This year Charlie and I will find work in the mill. Alex and John can help with the garden, and soon even little Jacob will be old enough to help." Father placed his hand on Jacob's head.

"But I want to run and play." Jacob looked up at his father. "I want to watch the birds and the squirrels." Then he paused and wrinkled his brow. "Father," he went on, "why can't I climb in trees and leap from branch to branch like the squirrels do?"

"Ho!" Father Zachary's deep voice boomed. "What a question! A squirrel is a squirrel, and a boy is a boy."

Jacob went outside to puzzle over his father's words. "But why can't I be like a squirrel?" he asked himself. He ran out to the pasture and lay under a spreading tree. There were birds in the tree flitting from branch to branch. And he spied a squirrel too. Jacob watched the little fellow run out to the tip of a

branch of the big tree; then, with a leap, the squirrel landed on the branch of a young, slender tree.

"I think I could do that," Jacob said aloud.

And one day he decided to try. He pulled himself up into a tree after a squirrel. The squirrel scampered up onto another branch. Jacob climbed after it. The squirrel raced far ahead of the boy, up into the slender branches. Jacob pulled himself up higher and higher. The branch began to bend and sway, but Jacob kept his eye on the squirrel. Suddenly he heard a rending, creaking sound. He felt himself falling. With a thud the ground seemed to come up to meet him. Everything went black.

Repeated flashes of light began to zig-zag before his eyes. Like summer lightning, he thought. He sat up and rubbed his fist across his eyes. What happened? he wondered, brushing away the leaves and the grass that clung to his shirt and hair. Had he died for a while? What about those lights flashing? And what about everything going black? Was that like being dead?

Several times after that when Jacob chased squirrels, he fell. Sometimes he blacked out and then had flashing lights dance before his eyes. It was a strange and puzzling experience.

"How do people die?" he asked his mother one day after having had a fall.

His mother dropped her hoe and stared at him. "Where did you ever get such a foolish question to ask? You are just a little boy. Stop thinking about how people die. Go and play, my son."

Jacob went away frowning. The question puzzled him for days. How do people die? At last he went to his mother again.

"Such things are not for a child to think about," she said, brushing him away. "Run along and play."

But the child's curiosity grew. The next day he came to his mother as she sat on the doorstep mending. "Mamma, where do people go after they die?"

Mother put down her mending. For a moment she sat with her hands in her lap. Then she looked at Jacob and said with a smile, "Why, people who are good go straight to heaven to live with God and the angels."

"What if they were bad?" Jacob went on.

"Then they go to hell," Mother Zachary answered.

"What is hell?" Jacob persisted.

Again Mother Zachary paused before answering. "Why, hell is a place where there is a huge fire. Devils keep it burning all the time. They put sulphur and pitch on the fire so it will never go out. It is a dreadful place."

"Why don't the bad people run away?"

"There is no place to run. It is too hot. The bad people burn there without end."

Jacob sat still, his chin resting in his cupped hands. "When do people go to hell or to heaven?" he asked.

"Just as soon as they die," Mother answered quickly.

"But - but how do they die? What is it like?" He sat up straight and looked up into his mother's face.

"Why, it's like going to sleep. Everything turns black - "

"Oh, I know. I died lots of times," Jacob spoke up. "But I didn't go anyplace. After it was all dark like you said, I saw flashes of light. Then - then, well, then, I woke up."

Mother Zachary grabbed Jacob's arms and turned him toward her. "How did all this happen?"

"Oh, in the woods. Come, I'll show you." Jacob jumped up and led her to the place under the tree where she could see the broken branches and even the impression his body had made in the grass where he had fallen.

Without a word she took Jacob by the hand and led him back to the house. Once inside, she set him on a chair facing her. "Jacob, you have been playing a very dangerous game." She shook her head as she spoke slowly. "I am surprised that you haven't broken an arm or a leg. You said you died. Well, you didn't, because you woke up again. If you had died you wouldn't have wakened; you would never have come home again. But, Son, if you keep on falling like that, someday you will die. Then you will never grow up to be a man." Mother paused.

Jacob saw tears in her eyes.

"Now promise me, Jacob, that you will never, never climb so you will fall like that again."

Jacob promised. But the question of death puzzled him more than ever. If the good ones went to heaven - Why did the bad ones have to stay in hell? And just what was it like?

That night he heard his parents talking about him and his questions about life and death. "If only we had a church here and a priest," he heard his mother say with a deep sigh.

"One of these days, Lenna," Father Zachary said. "One of these days we will have a fine Greek Catholic church right in our own community." But then they turned out the lamp and Jacob heard no more.

Jacob had never gone to church so far as he could remember. In a special place in the parlor his parents had an image of Mary and the Christ Child. And among the pictures that hung on the wall was one of the "Holy Mother" and one of the blessed Saviour, a young man with sad eyes, exposing his heart encircled with thorns. Jacob had been taught that this blessed Saviour had suffered for His people, but he was not sure how or why.

It was not until he had his eighth birthday that a church was completed in the community. Jacob went with his father to the first service. Standing in the doorway, he looked down the aisle to the shrines and lighted candles. There stood the priest in his splendid robes. Father Zachary started down the aisle toward the priest, and Jacob followed, hardly daring to breathe. Father knelt down before the altar, and Jacob knelt too.

The priest put a covering over Jacob's head. "Now you must tell me all your sins," the priest said, placing his hands on the boy's shoulders.

"What are sins?" Jacob asked. "Wrong things we do. Have you told any lies?" Jacob paused to think. "I - I don't think so." "Have you stolen anything?" the priest went on. "No. I do not steal," Jacob answered firmly. "Have you stolen cookies from your mother?"

"No. I don't steal," he replied again. "Nobody steals at our house." The priest lifted the covering from Jacob's head. "You may go, my son."

Jacob got up feeling strangely dissatisfied. But the rituals and the feasting that followed made him forget. The services brought all the people in the community together so that they could show off their clothes and their possessions, and they could exchange gossip and news, and eat.

Jacob stuffed himself on the special feast days. The women brought pyrohy, a dumpling stuffed with potato and cottage cheese or meat, and served with onions and sour cream. Then there was always borsch, a soup made from grated beets, potatoes, onions, carrots, and other vegetables. And no Greek Catholic feast could ever be complete without the special bread, a kind of coffee cake, the braided sweet dough full of dried fruits and covered with poppy seeds. Jacob rolled his tongue over his lips as he thought of the food, especially that made by his mother. And her wild strawberry and wild raspberry wines were the talk of the whole community! Yes, it was good to have a new church around which to center the social and religious life. But Jacob wished he could understand more of the things the priest taught.

Someday, he decided, he would have a talk with the priest and find the answers to the things that puzzled him. But Mother Zachary kept telling him he was too young to think so many serious thoughts.

"Come eat the good food and enjoy the good company. When you are older, you can understand better," she said.

One day Father Zachary came home with the news that a school would soon open in Foley, two and a half miles away. Alex and Jacob could go to school; but since John and Charlie, the two older boys, were already working in the sawmill, they would not need to go.

On the first day of school Jacob got up before dawn. He wanted to be the first to arrive. Perhaps at school he would get the answers to many of the questions that bothered him. And he would learn English! Then he would be able to talk to the

lady at the mill who always gave him bread and molasses when he went there. She chattered away to him in English, smiling all the while, but Jacob could not understand a word she said. He dressed and was waiting when Alex came into the kitchen.

"Boys!" Father Zachary's voice stopped Alex and Jacob when they were about to leave the house. "School is a place for children to be good and listen to the teacher. So do whatever she tells you. When you get to school, sit where the teacher tells you and listen to her. Pay no attention to anyone else." Then looking straight at Jacob he added, "You are not going to chase squirrels, but to learn English. Remember that. And, Jacob, your name in English will be Jack."

The boys nodded, and Jacob gulped. School might not be so much fun after all. He frowned at the thought.

But when he arrived at the one-room schoolhouse and saw the teacher, Eva Brown, he felt all soft inside. She was the prettiest person he had ever seen. He vowed he would do anything for her. She spoke to the children, and her voice sounded sweet and bubbly like Mother's raspberry wine.

"Good morning, boys and girls," Miss Brown said, looking straight at Jacob.

And Jacob, not understanding a word of English, but knowing he must say something, jumped to his feet and blurted out, "Jack Zachary."

The children laughed, but the teacher put her hand on his shoulder and smiled down at him. And Jack Zachary knew for sure that school would be the best place on earth, next to home and Mother, with Miss Brown as his teacher.

From that day, Jacob's name became Jack to his teachers, schoolmates, brothers, and sister Mary. Only his parents called him Jacob.

At the end of the first school year Miss Brown left. No one ever took her place in Jack's heart. The following year he began to lose interest in school right from the start. The children became unruly; the teacher had no discipline. When the older ones were saucy or rebellious, she sat down and cried. Before the end of that school year she returned to Winnipeg, and a

new teacher came to the Foley school, a quick-tempered Scot, the children soon found out, with a dark complexion and a black, stiffly waxed handlebar moustache.

He smiled little and said even less. That first morning Jack sat back in his seat to watch and see what would happen when the children whispered and coughed and threw spitwads. The teacher said nothing about it all morning. At noon he went to the mill for lunch. When he returned, Jack noticed a bundle of laths under his arm.

The teacher called the children into the schoolroom. He made a speech about school being a place for learning, and he intended it to be so. There was to be no nonsense. Jack decided the teacher meant what he said. He also learned, by observing those who did not pay attention to the teacher, what the laths were for. By evening the bundle had been pretty well broken up. The next morning the teacher brought another bundle of laths. In a few days the school became a model of deportment. That year Jack began his formal learning. He began to read and write English.

The fourth teacher at the Foley school was Ukrainian. Most of his teaching he did in Ukrainian, and Jack wanted more than anything else to learn English. He rebelled.

"If that teacher stays," he told his mother, "I am not going to stay in school. I'll run away."

"Now, Jacob," Mother Zachary remonstrated, "you are joking. You must listen to the teacher."

But one cold morning in December as he and Alex and Mary prepared for school, Jack hid his books upstairs and came down with his empty schoolbag over his shoulder. While Mother Zachary finished preparing breakfast, Jack sneaked a few slices of bread and some meat into his bag along with his school lunch.

"You and Mary go on ahead," he suggested to Alex when they were ready to leave.

Waiting until Alex and Mary would have reached the crossroad, Jack started out. He took the road that led to the main highway rather than the one that led to the school. Two

miles down the road he came to Dragon's Store. The proprietor, standing in the doorway, greeted him.

"Jack, how come you're not in school?"

"Well, I need some rubbers," the boy answered. "My feet get cold walking in these moccasins."

He went into the store, and the man fitted him with rubbers and charged them to the family account. Jack said good-bye and went on his way, taking the main road to Winnipeg.

He drew his cap down as far as he could over his ears. The wind pierced through his thick mackinaw. He swung his arms back and forth and clapped his mittened hands to keep warm as he hurried on. From time to time he cupped his hands over his mouth and nose and blew a puff of steamy breath to warm his face.

By lunchtime he found his food frozen solid. He tried to eat as he walked on, blowing on the bread to soften it a little. In the late afternoon he reached Pleasant Home. Forty miles yet to go to Winnipeg!

His feet felt numb, his legs weary; but he plodded on. Just as the sun was setting he came to a settlement along the highway. The sun's rays gleamed on the windows of the homes; plumes of smoke rose from the chimneys, and Jack began to think of home - of Mother setting the table for supper, and of the warm, cheery kitchen. He was cold and hungry. Should he turn back? He gnawed a little more of his frozen bread.

No, he would make his way in the world. He would go on. Through the deepening cold and twilight Jack trudged on past the last house and through a wooded area. Then he heard the weird howl of timber wolves.

He listened and shivered. But he heard another sound. Sleighbells! Turning to look back, he saw a team approaching. Coming abreast of him, the team stopped; a big man, bundled against the weather, his face almost covered by a thick scarf, called out: "Where are you going, boy?"

"I'm looking for work," Jack answered.

"I need a boy to do my chores," the man said. "Get in the sleigh and come home with me. My name's Campbell."

Jack, cold, weary, and hungry, got into the sleigh. He puzzled over the word "chores." Whatever did that mean? The word sounded a little like "church." Perhaps the man wanted him to perform some religious duties for him, but at that moment he was too weary to care.

Mr. Campbell soon turned in at a farm. "Here we are," he announced in a loud voice. "Come on in."

Jack followed the man into the house.

"I picked this kid up on the road," he announced to the family. "He's going to help with the chores." He introduced the four older girls and then the younger children.

Jack looked around the room. There were electric lights in the house. He had never before seen a house wired for electricity. All the rooms in the house seemed to have the same kind of lights!

After supper he followed Mr. Campbell out to the barn where he learned that "chores" on the Campbell farm were no more religious than anywhere else. But here he had a warm place to stay and good food. He decided to stay and work for Mr. Campbell and earn some money.

He sent word home to his parents telling them of his whereabouts and telling his mother not to worry. But after a few weeks on the farm he began to get homesick. He wanted to be home for the Greek Catholic Christmas holiday season. A few days before January 7, when the festivities would begin, Jack took leave of the Campbells. With seven dollars in wages in his pocket and more English in his head than he had before, Jack started home.

He walked the same way as he had come, stopping at the store to buy a piece of dress material for his mother in a pretty blue pattern. The nearer he came to home, the faster he walked. It seemed he had been away so long.

The sun had set when he turned in the gate, and strode up to the kitchen door.

"Jack's home!" His sister Mary jumped up from where she had been sitting when she heard the door open and saw him standing in the doorway.

Everyone turned and stared at him. Then Mother Zachary hurried over and threw her arms around him.

"Here is a present for you, Mother." Jack handed her the package shyly.

"Thank you, Son. Thank you." Her voice sounded a little shaky. As she opened the package everyone started talking at once.

At last Alex came over and stood by Jack, clapping him on the back. "We've got a good teacher now. A Miss Burroughs. How about staying home and going back to school?"

And before school started after the holiday season, Jack decided to return to school. With Miss Burroughs's help, his lessons came easy. But by the end of the school year he had his twelfth birthday, and he was expected now to help support the family.

That summer the crops suffered from drought. Each passing day the gardens and wheat fields withered a little more under the blazing sun. Forest fires broke out all around the small community where the Zacharys lived. The brassy sun shone through the smoky, acrid air, and soot and cinders floated down on fields and freshly washed clothes as they hung limp on clotheslines. Wherever neighbors met, they talked of the drought and of the total harvest loss they feared.

On a Sunday in mid-July the priest announced that he would conduct a special mass that evening at seven and he would pray for rain. "The mass will cost the church twenty-five dollars," he announced to the waiting congregation. "Perhaps we shall have rain!"

That evening Jack trudged along the dusty road to the church with his father. He thought about the drought and about prayer and about God. Would God answer the priest's prayer and send rain?

Inside the dimly lit church, the smell of burning wax and incense almost overcame the boy. Then the priest appeared.

In a solemn voice he announced, "This is a special mass. We will pray for rain, and maybe we will have rain and maybe not. That is in the hands of God. We cannot be sure."

Jack carried out the motions expected of him in the service. But many questions filled his mind. The rain is in the hands of God. But the money is in the hands of the church. And what do the people get? He tried to put the thoughts out of his head. It was wrong to think such thoughts. He tried to listen as the service went on and on.

At last the people filed out of the church, and Jack walked home with his father and a neighbor in the gathering twilight.

"Father," the boy blurted out as they walked along, "Father Androchovich seemed so positive about the cost of the mass, and yet so doubtful about the rain. This does not seem right. I think if - "

"Hush!" his father hissed, clapping his hand over Jack's mouth.

But the boy wriggled free. "But - but - I don't see why we have to pay if we don't get rain," he persisted.

"It is a sin to question the father's intention," the neighbor spoke up. "You must not ever question that, Jack Zachary."

"You know, Jacob," his father reminded him, "you must always remember that your mother and I have dedicated you to a holy mission. You must always remember that the priest stands in the place of God to us."

Jack dared not speak of the matter again, but he couldn't help wondering about a God who drove such doubtful bargains. Or was it the priest who was so uncertain? But wasn't the priest supposed to know God?

While the whole community scanned the heavens for rain, Jack Zachary watched with particular interest. When the rain did come, it was too little and too late to save the crops. Jack said nothing, but he felt they had been cheated. Just who to blame he wasn't sure. But as time passed, the confused doubts were gradually pushed to the back of his mind.