



Chapter 1

The Letter

THERE WERE NINE CHILDREN IN the Rabinovitch family. The oldest, Aaron, was seventeen, but maybe we shouldn't count him because he was married and didn't live at home any more. After Aaron came the eldest daughter, Adina, then Miriam, Shlomo, Esther, Nomi, Yakov, Devorah and, last of all, the baby, Bluma.

The family lived on the second floor of 30 Lubartowska Street, in Lublin, Poland, and they had two front doors, a blue one and a brown one, because they had to rent two apartments to fit them all in.

Papa Rabinovitch was the rabbi for the Prayer House – the shtibel – on the ground floor. Every day before breakfast he went downstairs to pray. And every day after breakfast he worked in his study, reading his books and waiting for people to come to him for advice.

A frantic young father might rush in to ask him what blessing to say for a new baby. Or a housewife might want to know, ‘Rabbi, is it all right to eat this chicken with spots on its liver?’

And Papa would ponder, running his fingers through his long beard, and maybe consult one of his books, before he gave an answer.

Aaron and Shlomo were going to be rabbis too, one day. Aaron proudly stroked the fuzz of whiskers growing on his chin and Shlomo, at twelve, was already leading discussions in the shtibel.

But as for Yakov...Yakov would much rather watch the blacksmith, or even help Mama and his sisters around the house, than sit with his tutor learning the Bible.

‘Give him time,’ said Papa. ‘He is only eight.’

But Mama sighed and shook her head. She remembered Aaron and Shlomo when they were eight, standing behind their father, copying all the prayers.

Our story begins on a Thursday morning in early June. Nomi was in the dining room laying the

table for breakfast, and Yakov was following behind, putting out the butter knives. Adina, as usual, was being the bossy older sister.

‘Don’t bang the plates so much, you’ll break them,’ she warned, and, ‘Watch out, you’ll burn yourself!’ as Yakov reached past the big brass samovar that was humming and bubbling in the middle of the table.

Esther glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, and tied a napkin around Devorah’s neck. Miriam brought in the bowls of herring and boiled potato. Shlomo put down his prayer book and joined the others at the table. Adina set the teapot on top of the samovar to keep warm. Mama carried in the dish of round brown bagels, and everyone gazed at them hungrily. Bluma, in her high chair, banged her fat little hands and called, ‘Me! Me! Me!’

But nobody could take even the tiniest nibble till Papa came back from the Prayer House.

And then, suddenly, there he was in the doorway.

‘Mama,’ he called out. ‘I have heard from your brother in Warsaw.’

With a crash, Mama dropped the plate of bagels on the table. ‘Yehoshua,’ she cried, ‘what does he say?’

The children looked at their mother in surprise. Why was she so excited about a message from Uncle Moyshe?

Papa waved a letter in the air. ‘He says the matchmaker has chosen well. The Weinberg boy will be a good match.’

Mama let out a shriek, and threw her arms around Adina. ‘My first daughter is going to be married!’

Everyone gaped. Adina, at fifteen, was the right age to be married, but none of them had known Papa was speaking to a matchmaker yet.

‘What... What’s his name?’ Adina sputtered out at last. ‘What’s he like?’

‘He is Mordechai Weinberg,’ said the Rabbi, ‘the oldest son of a good, religious man in Warsaw. The father – long may he live – runs a business, and he has a generous hand for every charity.’

‘A-ah,’ crooned Mama approvingly.

‘Of course, nothing is settled yet,’ warned Papa. ‘His family still has to inspect the bride...’

‘Inspect the bride!’ snorted his wife. ‘Where else could they find such a lovely girl, such a wonderful cook? A rabbi’s daughter at that, with a fine dowry...’

‘But what is he like?’ Adina asked again.

‘Is he old or ugly?’ demanded Miriam.

‘Is he tall?’ asked Esther.

‘Questions, questions...’ The Rabbi folded up the letter. ‘His mother and his aunts are coming on Sunday, God willing. You can ask them yourselves.’

‘On Sunday!’ gasped Adina.

‘On Sunday!’ wailed Mama. ‘But that’s not possible. Today is Thursday. And tomorrow we have to prepare for Shabbes ... How can we be ready by Sunday?’

Papa shrugged. ‘Just give them a bit of honey cake and a drop of whisky.’

‘Honey cake and a drop of whisky!? Are you mad? They will think we are paupers! We need oranges, chocolates, sweets ... And who do you think will bake the cake, and clean the salon, and...? Oy, you have no idea.’

‘Mama, your salon is already so clean they could eat off the floor. Now, no more talking. Let’s wash our hands and eat.’ And Papa strode towards the washstand at the side of the room.