

## CHAPTER I

### **HOMeward BOUND?**

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**H**er name is Lea, though in more trying times she's been Lila, Lodzia, and even a fugitive from the Reich. These days she's just Bubbie—Grandma. She was born in 1911, in Lodz, Poland, a run-down industrial town about a half-day west of Warsaw. She was the youngest of three children, whose parents had returned to Poland from the United States, where they had taken a failed stab at show-biz production. Isaac, Lea's father, had tried to organize and promote a Jewish theater company. One problem—there were no Jews in the rugged American West.

He had dragged his wife, his young son, and a scrappy little circus dog halfway around the world to find his fortune in California. Maybe fame, maybe gold—whatever was to be, America was where it all would happen. That's where he would find his dreams—in America.

But after five years of failure, he had bounced from town to town, odd job to odd job, only to end up penniless on a rickety freighter back to Poland. By that point, he and his wife, Esther, had their second child—a daughter named Evelyn—and another was coming. Soon.

Esther's delicate condition allowed her certain privileges on the ship. The crew cleared space for her alongside the cargo hold, where she and a few other women cared for their children. It was the only place in steerage that wasn't packed shoulder to shoulder with people.

You see, in 1911 there were a whole lot of people coming to America, but there were also a whole lot leaving. For every eight people who ventured to the land of opportunity, one would return to the squalor from whence he crawled, because maybe life was actually better there. If ships bound for America were ships of dreams, then the ships leaving were

ships of broken dreams—rat-infested steel tubs brimming with desperate, shattered souls.



But Isaac Winter wasn't the sort to wallow. He kept busy on deck, entertaining onlookers with his violin, and he ran card games to round up a few bucks. His little dog, Zola, a spotted circus outcast, stayed at his ankle—always.

As for Esther, she couldn't sit still long in steerage, knowing that Isaac could be up to no good on deck. She gathered the children and went topside to put an end to whatever nonsense he was up to. He was leaning over a rail, staring intently at a woman on the deck below, when she found him.

*That son of a bitch! He's at it again,* she thought. Isaac was known to flirt. "If you spent half as much time looking for work as you do for wine and women, I swear I'd be the richest woman in all of Poland!"

Isaac tried to settle her. "No, no, look over there, down below, it's Millie Plotkin, the actress." At that time, Millie Plotkin was a pretty famous actress in European Jewish circles, which really wasn't such a big circle, but to someone striving to break into the business, she was big news.

"Come, Esther, let's go speak with her," Isaac begged, knowing damn well her usual answer.

"I have no interest in meeting theater actresses," Esther snapped.

Isaac tried again, for appearances' sake. "Please, Esther, darling, maybe she'll be interested in working with me."

"Working! What you do isn't working. It's hustling! Working men bring home money. They don't sit around the parks all day with filthy little animals."

As you've probably figured by now, Esther was a woman who wasn't afraid to speak her piece, or shout her piece, as the case may be. She was on a singular mission: to make Isaac a proper husband.



See, their marriage had been arranged by their parents, some say as a last measure of spite in a bitter family feud, but it was probably just bad judgment. Nonetheless, if she was stuck with a lemon, she was determined to make lemonade. Isaac would learn the stock of righteous Jewish men, like leading prayers at the dinner table and crying the ancient rites at the synagogue.

But after eight years of Esther shoving prayer books under his nose, the closest Isaac ever came to giving a religious invocation was shouting, "For G-d's sake, woman, would you let me drink in peace?" As for services, he tried going a couple times but was never quite welcome there after he swindled the rabbi out of his gold watch in a card game.



"You hear that, Isaac?" Esther bellowed. "The men are making a minion for that little boy who died from typhus. I want you to go with them to pray—and don't you dare bring any cards."

Isaac thought for a moment. "I'll tell you what, I'll make you a deal. I'll go to the service if you can survive two hours without nagging me."

"Fine." Esther was up to the challenge.

Needless to say, two hours later, while pious Jews were ensconced in prayer, Isaac and his dog were halfway to the bottom of a bottle of bourbon on deck. That's where he saw her again—you know, the not-so-famous, famous actress.

He blurted a snide comment, loud enough for her to hear, but directed away so as to appear as though somehow his remark wasn't meant for her. "I saw your play *The Witch* in San Francisco. I think it could have been much better."

She was captivated by the criticism. "Oh really, how's that?"

"It would've been better if you played the lead. Nadia Gould doesn't have nearly your beauty and depth of character. Besides, she's gotten so

fat, the set shakes when she makes her entrance. Of course, that's not to say that casting Nadia as the star of a play called *The Witch* was an altogether bad idea."

The actress chuckled. She stared at Isaac for a moment and then at her cigarette. She tried to appear more interested in the cigarette than in Isaac. "Are you always so full of shit?"

"Was I that really that transparent?" he whispered.

"Like glass." She took a drag of her cigarette. "So, do you really think I'd have been better than Nadia?"

Isaac slid closer and stole a drag. "I think you'd have been amazing."

It was right then that he heard it, a shrill cry in the distance drawing nearer—"Isaac Winter, I curse you! May you be turned on your head, buried deep in the ground, and then sprout back up like an onion!"

Esther had a gift for finding a party—and stamping it out. As usual, her timing was impeccable.

So it ended. Isaac slithered back to his family without another word. He had given up long ago trying to explain his indiscretions. The actress disappeared into the crowd—forever.

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## IMPARTING IS SUCH SWEET SORROW

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*Family brunch can be an exercise in comparative misery. Distant relatives twelve times removed travel from far up the street to re-live old wrongs and resurrect fights long forgotten. They stop for fish and a few short words, quibble over quiz shows and return to their worlds full from the day and the morning's quarrels. I guess it's a brief break from the South's summer heat, which blisters and boils, festering new waves of old complaints.*

**Bubbie:**

*Oy, this heat!*

*It always starts like that. Eyes half-closed, head tilted to the sky, she fans herself with last Sunday's TV Guide.*

**Bubbie:**

*I should have stayed in Poland. Maybe they tried to kill us all the time, but at least over there you could go outside vit-out fainting.*

*Not to be outdone, Leon shouts above a tenderly played Tchaikovsky.*

**Leon:**

*Why the hell did your parents go back to Poland? I don't know why any Jew in his right mind would ever go to Poland. They're the biggest anti-Semites in the world—the Poles—worse than the Germans, worse than the Russians. At least the Russians treated us all the same—they shipped us all to Siberia. Da, it's nothing but ice and bugs the size of your head—Siberia. You think this is miserable—spend week in gulag with no boots or coat.*

**Bubbie:**

*Ach, Poland vas no picnic either. I remember when I vas a little girl, the president from Poland got a Jewish mistress. Vell, this mistress wanted to make things better for the Jewish people. So she asked her boyfriend, this president, to put the Polish children together mit the Jewish children in school. Anyvay, what's he gonna say—this mashugina president? He listened to the mistress and made a law that all the Jewish children had to leave the Jewish schools and go to Polish schools. Bap! Just like that—the next day we vere all in Polish schools mit the Polish children, and they gave me a Polish name—“Lodzia.” Ach, Leon, these Polish kids vere so mean. They spit on us, they hit us, they tooked our shoes and coats and pushed us into the snow.*

**Leon:**

*It's all Reagan's fault.*

**Bubbie:**

*What do you get that it's Reagan's fault? Ach, that's another story—Reagan. Anyvay, I promise mineself then that I'm going to go to America—No matter vat, I'm going to follow my sister to the greatest country in the world—America.*

*I just don't get it. They're actually arguing over whose life was more miserable? Maybe there's a certain satisfaction in sharing your troubles and, I suppose, sheer ecstasy in knowing that they're even worse than the next guy's.*

*For me, I just try to tune it out and turn on the TV. The couch is cozy and \$25,000 Pyramid© is buzzing in anxious anticipation*

*of the Smolensky Sisters—loud, pumpkin-shaped Brooklyn women, who must be seen to be explained.*

*So, for now, I wait. I've been through enough of these to know that it's all just beginning, and by the start of the Dating Game©, it'll all be over, and each of us, if we listen close, will leave a little fuller. See, my perspective is just different from theirs. I know no atrocities. I live in a warm, sunny place where time is measured by the television set, and life could never be any different than the world I'm just beginning to know.*