CHAPTER 1

"I thought you were all dead. Didn't the gas ovens finish you all off?"

By "you" I know she means "you Jews."

And then I realize who it is, standing in the doorway to my Uncle Moishe's house, glaring at me as if I am some kind of disease-carrying rat. It is Brigette. She used to work for Uncle Moishe as his maid. Now, I suppose, she lives in his house as if it were her own. And the dress she is wearing—where have I seen it? Involuntarily I gasp as I realize it used to be Mother's. Black with white lace around the collar, Mother wore it for Shabbat dinners, always with a string of gleaming white pearls, her black hair braided on top of her head, pearl earrings dangling from her ears.

Father would come to the Sabbath dinner in his black suit, the table would be covered in white lace, the silver candlesticks would gleam as Mother lit the candles, illuminating the china, the fresh flowers, and our faces all scrubbed and clean waiting impatiently for a taste of Mother's famous fish, chicken soup, and roasted chicken.

Why do I have to remember such things?

"That's my mother's dress," I blurt out.

She starts to shut the door. I leap up the steps and put my foot in, so she can't.

"Have you seen anyone?" I ask. "Uncle Moishe, Fagey, Benjamin, Joseph, Rachel?"

She shakes her head.

"Anyone from *my* family? My father, my mother, Joshua, Simon, Hannah?"

She shakes her head at each name.

"This isn't your house," I say fiercely.

She shoves me back from the door and spits. "It is now! You were always a troublemaker, Ruth Mendenberg. Always."

The door slams in my face. I feel weak and so I sit down on the cold step, shivering. Now what?

City hall. If anyone did survive they would register with the local authorities. I force myself up and begin to walk away from my uncle's house. I take one last look.

I was born there, it was the family home in Ostroviec, but Father moved us to the small town of Kurov when I was only three years old, so he could start his own business, a store. Everyone worked and helped in the store—even me, but only when Mother could lay her hands on me. Mostly I'd hide in the woods reading my favorite books. I did just enough schoolwork so no one could fault me for poor grades, but any time not spent with my Zionist youth group was spent daydreaming, making up fantastic stories of dybbuks and ghosts. At night I scared even my older sister Hannah

as I whispered tales of graveyards and the walking dead to her and my older brothers, Joshua and Simon. Dybbuks were souls of the dead, wandering, searching for a human body to inhabit—sometimes I pretended to be possessed, other times I would pretend to see the dybbuks entering my sister or my brothers. The boys laughed and pretended not to be scared but I could tell that sometimes Simon couldn't sleep after one of my stories.

Father moved us to Uncle Moishe's house after the entire Jewish section of Kurov was destroyed by Nazi bombs in September 1939. But we were there for only a short time. Soon we were forced into a ghetto, a small run-down section of Ostroviec with all the other Jews of the area. That's when the roundups began.

When we lived in the ghetto Hannah often begged me to tell them stories at night. But I couldn't think of anything scarier than real life anymore. Especially after the day most of the Jews were herded into the town square and shot. Father hid us under the floorboards of the house we were staying in. Others had escaped somehow, too. Those of us who lived were put to work in factories. Until we too were taken away.

Smoke endlessly seared the sky overhead. Mother and Hannah were marched off. Perhaps it was their ashes that fell on me later in the day, as the ovens and crematoria of Auschwitz blazed and burned.

I hate these memories, they jump at me just as a

ghost in a graveyard would leap out at you from behind a gravestone, when you least expect it.

I have to ask a number of people the way; many won't answer me, but I finally reach the city hall and I am directed to an older man sitting at a desk covered with paper.

He smiles at me. "The government is trying to help," he says, after I tell him why I am there. "Name?"

"Ruth Mendenberg."

"Mendenberg. Mendenberg. Let's see." He goes through his files, searching for the name, searching to see if any other Mendenberg has registered. I try to keep my stomach quiet, try not to let the butterflies start, try not to get my hopes up. Finally he looks at me, shakes his head.

"What about your mother's side of the family?" he suggests.

"Lepidus," I answer. He checks again. Shakes his head. My legs are beginning to feel wobbly. I can barely stand. He notices and finds me a chair. I sink down into it.

"Your father's mother's side?"

"Saperstein."

Again he checks.

We try every family name I can think of. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

I feel I'm going to suffocate. The noise of the

office sounds like a roar to me, every sharp noise like gunfire. I need air. I mutter a thank you, get up, race out of the building, and sink down on the cold steps of the city hall. I am shaking. I should have asked him about a place to stay. I should have asked him for help. I'll have to go back in there. But I can't face his look of sympathy; I don't want to see him again as he shakes his head and tells me over and over that I'm all alone. I put my head in my hands. What am I to do? I have no education, I can't work. I have no one to live with. It's dangerous just to wander around. Do I return to the displaced persons camp I just left?

"*Amcha,*" a voice says. I look up. A tall young man stands in front of me. He has black curly hair, high cheekbones, big dark brown eyes, and his skin is olive colored. He looks healthy and strong—not like the usual survivors of the war.

I know what *amcha* means. "With the people," literally. It's Hebrew and is used as a code word. If someone says it to you, he can be trusted, because he's one of us, one of the people, a Jew.

"*Amcha,*" I reply. He holds his hand out to mine. Slowly I place my thin cold fingers into his strong warm grasp. He pulls me to my feet.

"Have you just arrived in Ostroviec?" he speaks in Hebrew.

I nod.

"I thought so. I check here regularly for people

like you. Come with me. We've set up a house for refugees. You look done in."

I know I should let go of his hand. But I grasp it like it is a lifeline. And he doesn't seem to mind.

"Where are you coming from?" he asks as we walk.

"First a hospital near Buchenwald," I reply. "I was sick for a long time. Then I was in a D.P. camp for a while. I tried to find my relatives through the Jewish Agency but I couldn't. Or they said they were dead. But I kept hoping. . . . I had to come back to Poland and see for myself."

He nods, as if he's heard this story before.

"I went to my hometown of Kurov first," I continue. "But, of course, there's nothing left there. Our house was bombed in the first days of the war—that whole section of town is still rubble. And then I came here. My father brought us here in 1939 to live with my Uncle Moishe. I was hoping maybe someone from my family would return here, too." I pause. "My uncle's maid is living in his house now. She's wearing my mother's dress. If I had the strength I'd rip it off her with my bare hands."

"You don't seem all that weak to me," grins my companion, as he glances at my iron grip on his hand.

I think I blush and I release his hand from mine.

"Your Hebrew is very good," he comments.

"I was in a Zionist youth group from the age of five," I reply. "My older sister, Hannah, was the president. We

were allowed to speak only Hebrew. That was her law. And my parents sent me to Hebrew school every afternoon. I wanted to learn Hebrew. I wasn't interested in much else. I wanted to go to Eretz Israel, to Palestine."

"I'm from Eretz Israel," my friend says, casually, as if it was an everyday thing.

I stop in my tracks, and stare at him. I'm actually walking with someone from that land, the land I dreamed of, the land we spoke of in the concentration camps as some sort of paradise.

"I'm a Sabra," he says. "Born there, lived there all my life."

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I've come to help people like you immigrate," he replies. "We check with the Jewish Agency to see who registers, we find people any way we can, or they find us." He looks at me. "We need you in Palestine—to help us build a Jewish homeland."

"You need *us*?" I can barely contain myself. "No one needs us. No one wants us. We're just dirt that's left over from the war to be swept away whenever possible. Dirt."

He looks me in the eye.

"I don't want to hear you talk like that again. You've survived. You've beaten the Nazis. You've ruined their plans to kill all the Jews. And now we need you in Palestine."

I know he is wrong. I haven't beaten Hitler. He's

beaten me. Before the war there'd been almost eighty in my family, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. Now? Am I the only one left? And if so, why me? I don't deserve it. Or maybe it is my punishment for being the bad child of the family. Doomed to live when everyone else has left me.

Why did I survive?