

# *Being Lena Levi*

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apostle

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*Dedication*

For Tania, who loves Mutti

*Acknowledgements*

To me, England and Israel are like two beloved daughters – one quiet and gracious, the other fiery and unpredictable. In real life, I have only one daughter, Tania, who combines both personalities. I am grateful to her for her positivity, enthusiasm for my characters, encouragement and picky reading of my manuscript.

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*PART ONE*

## Chapter One

ENGLAND, MAY 1950

Mum looked odd, kind of pasty, as she opened the front door. I slung my heavy, half-term satchel with my dirty sports kit in it onto the hall floor. I hung my panama hat and blazer on the coat stand as usual, but instead of heading for the kitchen with promises of supper, Mum tugged at the hem of my skirt, fiddled with my tie and plaits and looked me up and down.

I was filled with a kind of dread. 'What is it? What's going on?'

It was as if I woke her up. 'We have a visitor, dear.'

I followed her into the front room that we hadn't used since Peter's family from next door came for tea and mince pies last Christmas. The atmosphere was chilly, though it was a warm day.

A blur of red sweater rushed towards me with a cry that might have been pain or joy. Strong perfume wafted over me as a woman's arms grabbed me and I found myself pressed up against the soft flesh of her bosom. We remained glued together in the middle of the room. Beneath her perfume, the woman smelled of mothballs and overflowing ashtrays. Strands of her black hair tickled my nostrils.

Wondering whether I was supposed to hug the stranger back, I turned to Mum. The look on her face terrified me. I'd never thought of her as fragile before, but right then she looked like she might break into little pieces. Clearly, something serious was happening; I hadn't the remotest idea what.

'Lena,' the strange woman began to murmur. She said it Lay-Na, over and over.

No one ever called me Lena. Yet the sound of it took the bottom out of my belly and left a longing there I didn't understand, like someone strumming half-forgotten guitar chords that I loved. I pictured myself as in a dream, with my cheek on a big pillow soaked with tears, yearning to hear 'Lena'.

I winced under the stranger's scrutiny as she held me at arm's length. What was she hoping to see? Did I pass muster? Why should I even care?

Her eyes were brown and rimmed with streaks of mascara. Her hair was swept into a low bun. Her cherry-red lips matched her tight-fitting sweater. She was a young woman and beautiful, I thought – like a movie star, although her teeth were stained yellow from tobacco. Her smile lit up her whole face. I wanted to earn that smile again and again.

She pinched my cheek. 'Lena, *so gross geworden.*'

I didn't know how I understood what she said, but I knew it was German and that she was telling me I'd grown tall. Her face crumpled. She clasped me in another bear hug. Her body heaved. She wet my neck with her crying.

I turned to Mum and mouthed, 'Who is she?'

She flinched, which was not reassuring.

'Who is she?'

Mum looked desperate. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. She cleared her throat and tried again. In a voice not her own, I heard her say, 'She's your mother.'

Her words made no sense. They bounced around the room and flew back off the walls at me like a volley of stinging arrows, without meaning. Yet they turned my blood ice-cold and my body clammy. I shouldered off the woman's suffocating embrace like she was a disease.

'No, she's not!' My throat was parched. The room was closing in. I squirmed. 'Let me go!'

Still she had my hands. I snatched them away. A jumble of husky words from her followed me as I lurched through the door. I caught a glimpse of Mum as I went. She looked afraid. I'd never seen her looking afraid before.

Fighting back the black that was engulfing me, I went out of the back door. I was panting like I'd just finished a cross-country run. I glanced behind me as I sucked in gulps of air but neither mother followed; a relief but also vaguely disappointing.

Mr Price next door was strutting around his back garden, smoke rising from his pipe in choo-choo puffs. If he saw me, he'd be bound to ask in his usual hearty way how 'we' were doing at school. I scooted down the garden, crouching below the level of the fence to avoid him.

The gardens in Lanfranc Close were long and narrow. At the end of ours was a great weeping willow tree with a bad hairdo, whose trailing tendrils masked an old bomb shelter. From the outside this looked like a hump of earth covered with balding grass. The steps down to the low opening where the door once was were overgrown with lilac and buddleia.

Inside was my very own fox's lair, the place where schools for dollies gave way to daydreams growing up. No one else except Mum knew this was here. And she never came. I sat on one of the concrete benches that ran along the two longer sides. With my knees hugged to my chest, I waited for my breath to calm, but it refused to do so. It was like I could see everyone in my school closing in on me out of the dark corners of the shelter, all whispering and pointing fingers.

I hugged my knees so tight that I felt I'd throw up. The crawling thing inside me felt like guilt, but I'd done nothing bad that I could think of.

The stranger had come like a flood that swept everything I thought I knew away, dragging off my identity and leaving me without a rock to cling to. I had no past, no future and no answers, only questions. If she really was my mother, why had she left me here? What kind of a mother would abandon her daughter like that?

Come to think of it, what kind of a mother was the woman I called Mum? She always said honesty was the best policy. But, for all this to be true, she'd had to have told me a whopper big enough to turn my whole life into a made-up story. After all, it wasn't possible to have two mothers. Only one of them could be real. Right? But which one? The one who'd dumped me or the one who'd lied to me? Right then, I wanted nothing to do with either of them.

A breath of wind came down the stairs, cooling the tears running hot down my cheeks. I glanced up to see if one of them had come. But no. Both had left me all alone. Well, I had nothing to say to either of them anyway.

The new mother's eyes were half-moon shaped and brown, like mine. Mum's were grey, like a cloudy sky, like her hair. Mum was too old to have a daughter of fourteen and a half. But the other one was too young.

I wondered how I'd understood her German. I was in the Latin stream at school and had never learned German. Yet, as I bolted, she'd said, '*Du weisst wohl wer Du bist.*' And I knew what that meant: 'You know very well who you are.'

Well, she was wrong about that. I had no idea.