

FIERY GIRLS

A Novel of the 1911 Triangle Waist Company Fire

Heather Wardell

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www.heatherwardell.com

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

Rosie

August 22, 1909

"ROSIE LEHRER!"

Fear holds me still for a moment, then I realize that if I take too long, I might lose my chance. If I even have a chance.

My legs shaking so much I feel almost as though I'm still on the ship, I manage to walk forward to the girl, a little older than me, who called my name.

"I'm Cecilia Greenstone, Rosie, and this man here is your inspector," she says in Yiddish, gesturing to the stern-faced man in a black suit who sits, perched on a high stool, with one hand resting atop a messy stack of papers on a small desk before him. "I will be your interpreter. Unless you speak English?"

"Not well enough— I mean, I did try to learn, but—" I bite my lip. "Yiddish, please." Not that it'll matter what language we use, once she learns the truth about me.

She nods. "Yiddish is fine. Please do speak as loudly as you can."

I already was.

"Have you any relatives here already?"

"No," I admit, trying to hide the trembling of my hands in the folds of my skirt. "No, I do not."

Should I keep my eyes on Cecilia? It would ordinarily be polite, since she's the one speaking. But I know that the questions she asks aren't hers, they're the inspector's. He's the one who matters. But he terrifies me.

Cecilia moves a little closer, cupping her hand around her ear. "Will your husband—no, you're only sixteen. Your father, then? Will he arrive soon? Or perhaps a brother?"

I shake my head, misery sweeping over me.

She moves closer still and lays her hand on my shoulder. "Rosie, it's all right. Answer the questions and I'll be able to help you."

"You won't," I say, fighting back a sob. "I'm not allowed."

"Not... what do you mean?"

"I am *alone*," I admit. "I came here alone. My parents didn't know... we thought I could... but... on the ship..." I stop, unable to find words to describe the horror I felt when, on the very day my ship departed, I learned that a girl alone would not be permitted into America.

Cecilia squeezes my shoulder. "It is all right, Rosie. No, you can't leave Ellis Island alone, but you won't have to. If you do well, if you answer my questions carefully, I have people who can help you."

I want to believe this. I *need* to. But I've only just met her.

"Trust me," she says, looking into my eyes and nodding as if she can see what I'm thinking. "Trust me, Rosie. I promise you. I work with the National Council of Jewish Women, and we can find you a room and a job and—"

The inspector barks a few words, which I can't quite hear, and Cecilia turns back and answers him. He pulls his mouth to one side as if he doesn't like what she said, but he gives a sharp nod.

"We must go through the questions quickly, Rosie. Do your best."

My father would call me foolish, but I find myself trusting her. "All right."

"And be loud!"

I've been raised to be a quiet girl, a good girl. But here, I must be different. With so many potential immigrants in this huge high-ceilinged hall, each with an interpreter helping an inspector decide whether they should be allowed to enter America, everyone's almost shouting to be heard over everyone else, and I need to make myself do the same. I need to take a deep breath and shout my answers, though the air stinks of the fear of people who haven't bathed for weeks.

But how, when I'm so scared I can hardly speak at all?

Cecilia nods encouragingly and gives me a small smile, barely a twitch of her lips, and I try to calm myself by looking only at her gentle face below her thick brown hair swept up beneath a pretty gray hat.

I think she cares about me.

I think the inspector does not.

Men in uniform never care about Jews, it seems to me, unless they're deciding how to get rid of us, and his cold eyes and set jaw frighten me.

"Rosie, tell me, why have you come here?"

I take such a deep breath that my corset creaks then push out my words as loudly as I can. "I am here to earn the money to bring my family to America. My parents, my brother, my two young sisters."

She raises her eyebrows and I know she's thinking the same thing I am: it will take me years to earn passage for five people.

She doesn't say it, though. Instead, she asks a few more questions, about my background and what I know about America, then gives me a smile that reminds me of how my mother can tell me I have managed to impress her without speaking a word.

As my heart begins to fill with hope, she turns and says something to the inspector.

Though I can't hear her, he obviously can, because he answers her then waves his hand toward the staircases behind him as if shoing away a fly.

"You passed," Cecilia says to me, still in Yiddish. "Welcome to America, Rosie."

To my shame, my eyes fill with tears and I barely manage to hold back a sob.

I have spent nearly two weeks worrying in every waking moment. Though I tried to be optimistic, I couldn't. I was certain that once we reached New York I'd be put right back on the stinking horrible ship and forced to return to Belostok, to Russia. To the Pale of Settlement, where we Jews are forced to live. I've had nightmares every night about it.

But Cecilia told me I would be allowed in, and she was right.

I trusted her, and I was right to do so, and the relief is almost too much to bear.

The inspector looks unimpressed at my reaction, so I swipe at my eyes and find a few English words. "Thank you, sir. Thank you."

He nods and again waves me away, and Cecilia takes my arm so she can guide me past the inspector who is now calling another hopeful immigrant from the endless lines.

Once we reach the head of the stairs, she says, "I know it's frightening being an immigrant, Rosie, I am one myself, but you are a heldish maydl. You will do well here."

Nobody has ever called me a brave girl before, and it fills my heart with sunshine. "I want to. I..." I have so many questions swirling in my mind. When my parents told me I would be moving to America, I somehow never thought about how it would all work. They told me to go, so I went. Now that I'm here, though, everything I don't know overwhelms me. How am I to do this alone?

"So, let me tell you how I can help you," Cecilia says, leading me toward the staircase. "I know a house for immigrant girls, with good food and clean rooms for a fair price. The workers there will help you find a job, and they also have classes to teach you English and other things about America."

The money my parents sent with me felt like a fortune at the time, since I'd never had any money of my own before. But after hearing people on the ship talk about how much they brought, and what they would have to spend, I feel like a pauper. "How... I would pay how much?"

"Only two dollars a week," she says with a smile.

I feel my shoulders relax. I heard people expecting to pay three or even four dollars.

"Yes, it's good, isn't it? We have some rich ladies who help us, so the cost isn't too much. Do you have dollars with you?"

I grimace. "Roubles. I'm sorry."

"It's all right, there's a money exchange here."

She pauses as we squeeze past a woman dragging several crying children and a huge old suitcase down the stairs. I wonder if we should offer to help, but Cecilia doesn't, so maybe that's not done in America.

Once we can walk together again, she says, "You'll need a job. Can you sew?"

I nod. "My mother is a seamstress. She taught me everything, starting when I was six."

"Excellent. There are many garment factories near the house, so that will work perfectly."

She sounds relieved, and I didn't even tell her that my mother taught me to sew every seam perfectly because that felt like I'd be bragging. Knowing how pleased my parents will be when I use my skills to begin sending money back to them, I can't help smiling.

Cecilia pats me on the shoulder. "I have someone from the home here." She stretches up to look over the mass of people, some anxiously staring up the stairs and others loudly reuniting with newly-arrived loved ones. "Where *is* she... oh, there. Come with me."

We struggle through the crowd until Cecilia stops in front of a girl of about my age with her hair, nearly as dark as mine, pinned up under a straw hat with a red ribbon. "Rosie, this is Julia Kessler. She came

here a year ago, and now she works and lives at the home I told you about. Julia, Rosie Lehrer is here from Russia on her own. She needs to exchange her money, and she'll need a sewing job once she's settled in."

"Of course, Cecilia," Julia says, giving me a shy but sweet smile.

Cecilia nods at Julia then at me. "Good luck, Rosie. And again, welcome to America!"

Before I can find so much as one word to thank her, she's heading back toward the stairs.

Going up to help another immigrant, no doubt. Without her, I could never have answered the inspector's questions. Cecilia saved me from being sent back to Russia, and she'll save others today too. Though she's not much older than me, she is a young woman while I feel very much a girl. Will I become like her? I hope so, but it's hard to imagine.

Julia clears her throat and says, "Are you ready?" and I nod and follow her. She helps me get my two leather-handled cases back from where they were stored while I waited to be inspected, then guides me to the money exchange and watches carefully to make sure I get what I should for my roubles. Only ten dollars, which doesn't seem like much after how hard my mother worked to save those roubles, but since I get half of it in coin it looks like more.

Julia and I carry my two cases out of the building and onto a wooden ferry boat. It's like the one that brought me from the ship to Ellis Island, but this time, instead of everyone yelling only in Russian or Yiddish, people are yelling in every possible language. Yelling, and crying and laughing too, and pointing with great excitement at the enormous Statue of Liberty.

I'm not yelling. I'm too stunned. I am finally here. America. New York City. Those magic words have appeared in so many letters sent back to Russia from girls who left home for a better life, and now *I* will be writing those letters.

"So, Rosie," Julia says into my ear, "why did you come to America?"

"To earn money to bring over my family." That was the only answer I gave during my inspection, but I'm more relaxed now so I add, "And because of my aunt."

"Oh, is she here? Or coming soon?"

I shake my head. "She died two months ago." The first and only time I ever saw my father cry was when he told me and my brother of his sister's heart attack, and I have to blink back my own tears as I realize how very far away I now am from my family.

Julia squeezes my arm. "I shouldn't have asked."

"No," I say quickly. "I like talking about her. I miss her. She worked in a garment factory, as I'll be doing here, and she was loud and exciting and fun."

Julia leaves a quiet respectful pause then says, "And why did that make you come here?"

"My parents decided to send me, two weeks after Aunt Ida died. Because she wasn't that old, and they think she might not have died if she'd been in America. They think it's safer than Russia so—"

"Which it is."

Julia gives an embarrassed giggle at having interrupted me, but I don't laugh with her, because she sounded both angry and sad when she spoke. "Was Russia not safe for you?"

"I didn't mean to tell you, not now, but I came here to bring over my family, same as you." She swallows hard. "But then... six months ago there was a pogrom at home. My whole village..."

Horror sweeps over me. The word means "devastation", and from what I've heard about the violent riots against Jews, it is the right word. "There's nobody to bring over now? I'm so sorry."

She nods and whispers, "Thank you," then takes a deep breath. "But America has been good to me. I've learned English, and so much more. You will too, at the home. Girls get to learn here."

I'm still shaken by Julia's loss, but I am happy to hear this.

Back home, the czar allows only three Jewish children for every one hundred boys in a school, and those places are all taken up by the richest people. My family isn't rich, so none of us have been to a school. My brother Meyer spends all day at the synagogue studying Torah, as my father does. For my two younger sisters and me, the only education available, other than a little reading and writing, was learning to sew skirts and shirtwaists at our mother's side as she toiled for factory owners.

Of course, that's all we need, since we'll have the same lives as every Jewish woman: get married, raise children, take care of the home, and earn as much money as we can to support our husbands in their religious studies. Aunt Ida, at thirty-five, was the oldest unmarried woman I've ever met, and my father frequently told her it was more than time she found a husband, so she would have done so eventually.

Once I make enough money and my family arrives in America, my father will talk with the men at our synagogue here and find me a suitable husband, and I will take care of everything while that husband studies.

But until then, I am alone in America, able to do whatever I choose. At home, when I so much as expressed an opinion Mama would snap, "Don't you be like Aunt Ida!" I never understood why, since I thought Aunt Ida was wonderful, but there's nobody to snap at me here. I can have my own opinions.

I briefly thrill at the thought, but then fear sweeps me at the idea of choosing my own way.

Luckily, Julia nudges me. "Ready for your first English lesson in America?"

I nod, happy for the distraction and also for the chance to test myself. From the day my parents told me I'd be coming here until the day I boarded the ship, I spent every possible moment trying to learn English from a book, but I'm not sure I'm pronouncing things properly.

"I," she says, poking herself in the chest, "am Julia Kessler."

"I," I repeat, poking myself as she did, "am Rosie Lehrer."

"Gut!" She smiles at me, then translates the Yiddish to English though they sound nearly the same and says, "Good."

"Good good Julia," I say, being silly and hoping she will realize I know that.

She giggles, and I do too, and by the time our ferry reaches the dock we have practiced saying, "I'm hungry," "please help me", "thank you", "you're welcome," and "I can sew very well."

"Those will get you started," she says, returning to Yiddish as we clutch at the rail to keep from falling on the rocking deck. "And don't forget the classes at the home too."

Lessons from the book are coming back to me, so I say carefully in English, "That is good. I go to classes. I can sew very well, so I work in a factory. Thank you."

"Nearly. You *will* go to classes and you *will* work in a factory."

"I will," I repeat, recognizing what she's added to my words. "I will do those things."

"Well done." She grins and grabs one of my cases. "Let's speak English, then. I will carry this for you."

Hauling my other case, I follow her off the ferry into a crowd of men shouting about things to buy or places to stay in every language. I do my best to keep up with her, but when we're briefly separated a man grabs my arm and says in Yiddish, "Little girl, you want a place to sleep? A job? I have both. Very good. I'll take care of you. Come with me."

I try to pull away, but he won't let me go. Scared, I push my case against him as hard as I can, and I manage to free my arm from his grip just as Julia arrives and snaps at him, "She's with me."

The man turns away without a word and begins making the same offers to another girl behind me.

Julia catches that girl by the hand and pulls her along with us until we're out of the crowd. The other girl breaks away and runs off, and Julia calls, "Wait!" after her but the girl doesn't look back.

"What was he going to do with us?"

I forgot to speak English but Julia's staring after the departing girl and I'm not even sure she noticed. "If you were lucky, a lot of sewing for almost no money."

"And if we weren't lucky?"

She turns to me now, her eyes sad. "Nothing good."

I take a breath to ask her to explain, then decide that maybe I don't want to know, especially since we don't know where the other girl is going and how she got off Ellis Island alone. It must be hard to do Julia's job and only be able to help a few of the thousands of immigrants. It must feel, as my father always says of an impossible task, like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon.

Instead of upsetting Julia and probably myself too by asking for more details, I say in English, "What happens now?"

What happens, I soon find out, is that we take a subway and a streetcar, my first time on both, to a teeming street which would, except for its smell of rotting garbage and sweating bodies, fit in perfectly back in Belostok.

If it weren't so busy.

I've never seen so many Jewish people in one place, more than the entire population of my tiny village. Street peddlers shout about how theirs are the crispest pickles or the most attractive eyeglasses, and throngs of old women in black skirts and long-sleeved shirtwaists pick through the wares. Men of all ages, also in black but with thick beards and payot curls on each side of their heads below their hats, stand in groups talking, and children laugh and shout as they play tag and stickball among the crowds and the horse-drawn wagons.

"Good to see something familiar, right?"

I nod, but Julia is wrong. I want everything here to be different, and so do my parents. More, I want *me* to be different, and how can I be if my world is the same?

The other workers at the clean bright house are as kind as Julia and Cecilia, and soon I find myself in a room with a narrow white metal bed with brown blankets, a wooden bedside table topped with a gas lamp, a pink-flowered pitcher and bowl sitting on a washstand with a white towel and washcloth hanging on its side rack, and a small wooden cabinet. Though none of these things are large, they almost completely fill the tiny room so only a bit of the scuffed hardwood floor shows.

I look around, amazed that this space that smells so clean and fresh is all for me.

"It's all right, I hope," Julia says in English, staring down at her black leather boots. "We don't have any larger rooms."

"Oh, no, it is good! I never had a room... alone," I say, not sure how to word it in English. I shared a room even smaller than this with Rachel and Tessie at home. It will be strange to sleep without my sisters' snoring and muttering at night, but probably wonderful too. "It is very good."

"I'm glad, Rosie. I'm glad you now have a room to yourself."

"To your—to *myself*."

She nods. "That's right. Well done. Now, we won't be eating dinner for another hour, but I can get you something right away if you're hungry."

I shake my head. Seeing the bed, the first one I'll ever sleep in alone, has made me realize exactly how tired I am. "I think I might sleep a little."

"I did the same thing when I arrived here myself two years ago," she says. "A rest would be good for you, but you'd like to wash up first. It'll feel good."

I'd rather sleep, but I haven't had any hot water to wash with since I left Russia. "Thank you."

She grabs the washstand's pitcher. "I'll be right back."

I've only managed to take off my battered hat and pull my two skirts out of my first bag when she returns, and looking at my clothing makes me compare it with hers.

Julia's skirt, a deep rich brown that swirls at her ankles as she turns away from replacing the pitcher on the washstand, isn't so different from my black ones although its color is prettier. Her waist, though... while it has long sleeves and a high collar like mine, it's pure white with beautiful lace and pleats on the front, not plain like the three black ones I made and brought. I know I need to send home most of my earnings, but I would love to buy at least one piece of American clothing to store in my new cabinet. But would my parents approve?

Julia flutters around, fluffing the pillow and blanket on my bed and helping me shake out my clothing and spread it across the cabinet to air, but long after all of that is completed, she still lingers.

Why? Doesn't she realize how tired I am?

I'm about to ask her why she hasn't left when I remember that she was an immigrant too. Maybe on her first day in America, she wanted someone to stay with her. That's not what I need, but how can she know that?

Warmth fills my chest at her kindness and concern and I say, in Yiddish because it's easier to find words, "Don't you have something else to do, Julia?"

My face goes hot as I realize how abrupt my words sounded, not at all as I meant them, but our eyes meet and she smiles.

"I know, I should let you sleep, and I should go back to Ellis Island in case Cecilia has found another girl for me to help, but I remember how scared I was on my first day."

I smile back, relieved she understood what I meant even though I didn't say it well. "I'm grateful for your help. And I'm not scared anymore. Because of you. If everyone in America is as kind as you, it will be a wonderful place to live."

She blushes. "Well, you rest now. Come down whenever you wake up and we'll find you some food."

I promise her I will, and she turns down the gas lamp and at last leaves me alone.

The moment the door closes, I free my heavy black cotton stockings from their clips on my corset and roll them down and off, then give my legs a good scratch. That done, I pull off my skirt, waist, and corset cover, then unhook my corset and drop it with a sigh of relief onto the bed.

After a few deep breaths, I remove my drawers and my chemise, which are sweat-stained and smelly from being pressed against my skin by the corset since early this morning, then use the hot water and soap Julia provided to clean myself as best I can.

She was right, it *does* feel good to wash, though I can't stop yawning throughout.

Once I've dried off and put on the cleaner of my two cotton night-gowns, I draw back the blanket and settle into bed.

And before I can reach to turn off the lamp, I am wide awake.

Wide awake, in a bed in America, all by myself. It's so hard to believe: I am here, alone, for at least two years. In that time I will need to work hard, of course, but I will also make all of my own decisions for the first time.

Thinking of decisions makes me sit up, slip out of bed, and dig in my bag to find the letter my father wrote for me to read on the ship, my frustration rising again at all his rules.

Only work for a Jewish man. Never be alone or in a compromising situation with that man. Never work on the Sabbath. Keep kosher.

I know all of this, Papa, I know.

That last one, though, I might have broken on the ship. The crew began providing us meat on our eighth day and I ate though I didn't know what it was because I was nearly out of food. What would my father have had me do, starve?

Not wanting the letter to come into my new life with me, I wrap my hand in my night-gown's fabric to carefully remove the possibly-hot glass shade from the gas lamp, then turn up the gas until the flame is at its largest.

Shocked at what I'm doing but not wanting to stop, I ease the paper's edge into the lamp.

The flickering light begins to lick at the letter's corner.

Then, far faster than I expect, the fire bites at the paper like I bit at the meat on the ship in my hunger, and flames race toward my hand.

I drop the paper to the floor and snatch up one of my shoes, crushing the fire like a meshugener until the leather sole of my shoe has defeated it.

Then I fall onto my back on the bed and laugh until tears pour into my ears.

Yes, I might indeed be a crazy person. That *was* a crazy thing to do. And I destroyed my father's words, which I would never have done at home. If he knew...

But of course, he never will. And for the first time in my life, I have solved a problem all by myself. One I caused, yes, but still.

Besides, I tell myself as I wipe up the paper's ashes with the already-filthy hem of today's skirt, it's like they say at home.

Whenever bad things happen, when the people who hate Jews attack us and set fire to our homes and businesses, even when people's wooden houses simply burn down, everyone talks of how wonderful it would be to move to America.

And they have one big reason why:

"In America, they don't let you burn."

CHAPTER TWO

Maria

August 9, 1909

ALONZO'S HANDS SLIDE UP MY NOW-BARE LEGS, and I moan and roll my head on the pillow he made of my stockings.

"Bella," he murmurs, pushing up the loose leg of my drawers and pressing his mouth to my thigh. "Beautiful girl."

I grab his hair and pull him up so we can kiss, and as he rises he takes hold of my skirt and pulls it up too, all the way to my waist.

With his mouth locked to mine I'm surrounded by his clean soapy scent, which blocks out the aroma of horses and hay warmed by the blazing sun. I'm almost sorry: those once-disliked smells have come to remind me so much of my time spent kissing and touching Alonzo here in the spare stall of his parents' stable that I insist upon taking care of our own horse at home simply so I can breathe in the scent and remember how wonderful every moment with him is.

His hand slips under my gathered-up skirt's hem and moves under the waistband of my drawers, and as it slides lower I whimper and clutch at his back.

"You can't, Alonzo," I make myself say. I always have to stop him, and I never want to. "You shouldn't..."

"I should," he murmurs into my ear. "I love you."

The whole world seems to stop for an instant then delight floods through me so I feel like I'm glowing even brighter than the sun. I love him, and I have for months, but I never once thought... "You do?"

"Of course," he says against my neck. "And you're leaving Italy tomorrow so this is our last chance." His hand moves a little lower. "Do you really want me to stop?"

"I..." A wonderful shiver runs through me. "Do you truly love me? Will you marry me? Will you—"

He kisses me, stopping my words, then whispers, "I'll do whatever you want."

"Then no," I say, so happy I can hardly breathe. "No. Don't stop. Please."

I feel his other hand fumbling at his waistband, trying to free himself. We're going so much further than we ever have before, and though I know what I should do, what any good girl would do until she's married, I can't, I *can't* stop him as I should. I saw him watching pretty Serena yesterday while she flirted with his best friend and I don't want to lose him to her. Or anyone. Besides, this feels too good to stop.

And he loves me, I know that now, and I love him so much, and tomorrow I leave for four long years away from him. Before I go, I so badly want his touch and his kisses and—

"Maria!"

I gasp and push at Alonzo's shoulders to get him away from me, but he's already scrambling away on his own, leaving me exposed so I have to struggle to get my skirt down while still on my back. "Vincente," he says, clutching his half-undone trousers and looking up at my furious brother, "we weren't doing... I mean..."

"I know exactly what you were trying to do," Vinnie snaps, his anger making him look much older than Alonzo even though they're the same age, "and you won't with my sister. Get out of here!"

I expect Alonzo to tell Vinnie what we agreed to here, to tell him that it's all right. He doesn't, though. He turns around, without even looking at me, and runs out of the stable.

"You don't understand!" I get quickly to my feet and straighten my skirt. "Vinnie, we're in love, we're going to get married, and—"

"Idiot," Vinnie says. "Little idiot. You know nothing."

"I do! I do know."

"Get your—" He waves at my stockings. "Whatever you took off, put it back on. And fast. Before they get here."

"They?" I read the answer in his eyes, and horror makes my body shake so I can barely grab the stockings and rush to hide behind a wall to put them on. "Mamma and Papà are coming in here?"

"Not if we get out first, so *hurry*."

I do hurry, as much as I can, but getting my stockings' black cotton fabric attached to their clips and then tying the laces on my shoes seems to take forever, so when we leave the stable we meet our parents at the door.

"Maria, you didn't—tell me you didn't let him—"

My mother sways as if about to faint, and Papà grabs her arm as Vinnie says, "No, I got here before he could."

"He's going to marry me!"

Mamma closes her eyes, her lips moving without sound as they do when she prays, then she opens them and turns on me. "Stupid fool! That will never happen. His parents expect him to marry Alessandra. You know this."

I do. I also know that Alonzo thinks Alessandra is dull and ugly, and I know that his parents only want him to marry her because her money and social position will make theirs even better. He won't do it. He loves me. He will marry me. He said so.

I tell them this, and Mamma's hand flies out and slaps my cheek.

Hot pain races like wildfire over my face. She's never hit me before, nobody ever has, and though she is much shorter than me, and so old at forty, her blow hurt.

She doesn't seem sorry, either. "Thank God you're leaving tomorrow and won't see that boy again for years. And you won't see him when you come back either. I won't allow it. He'll never marry you, and you'll be his... his..."

Papà squeezes her arm, and she stops looking for a ladylike way to call me a most unladylike person as he says, "It's all right, Francesca. In four years, everything will have changed, and while they're in America, Vinnie will take care of her."

Papà didn't want me to go with Vinnie to America, saying that four years without his little principessa would be too long. Mamma, who's never once thought of me as a princess, insisted that I go with Vinnie and make money too. She says four years is enough time for us to earn enough to buy a much bigger restaurant for Papà and improve our current one for Vinnie to take over.

Vinnie is going to work at building tunnels for trains, which the Americans call "subways", beneath the roads, and I am going to sew. I don't mind embroidery work or helping to make my own dresses so I'm sure I won't hate having a job, and I do like the idea of coming home rich. Everyone says the streets in America are paved with gold, and even the seamstresses can earn five or ten dollars a week which is a fortune compared to what they earn here.

But Alonzo! I will be twenty when I return and he'll be twenty-two, and—no, I won't wait that long. I have to find a way to fix this now, not in four years, because I cannot leave Alonzo for Serena and Alessandra and all the other girls to fight over. He loves me, but—

"Maria, you won't see Alonzo again," Mamma says, giving me a look so ferocious I'd almost rather she'd hit me once more. "You will not. You will go home and take your bath and finish packing and practice your English and you will *not* sneak out to see that boy. And don't you even think about trying to bring him to America."

I blink hard as if I'm about to cry, using that action to hide my sudden delight at having a plan presented to me, then hang my head

and look up at her, letting my lower lip tremble. "I know, Mamma. I'm sorry."

Papà, who always believes me, wraps his arm around me and pulls me close. "She's a good girl, Francesca. And she'll be a good girl in America too. And then in four years she'll come back to us."

ONCE I'M SURE EVERYONE IS ASLEEP I slip out of my bedroom and move quietly toward the front door, ready to claim I need to use the privy if anyone wakes. I am lucky, though, and in moments find myself alone outside in the dark silent night.

I did finish packing, although I only had a little left to do because I've been steadily doing it for weeks while also making sure Vinnie did *his* packing, and Vinnie and I spoke English all evening while our parents sat beside us with no idea what we were saying until we translated for them, and I even let Mamma scrub my back in the bath as she always wants to.

I *am* a good girl for doing nearly everything she said.

Besides, I probably wouldn't have thought of sneaking out if Mamma hadn't mentioned it, so really it's her fault that I'm out here now.

I'm glad to be out, and not only because I'll see Alonzo soon. The rich black sky is full of stars, and the spicy-sweet smell of the tomato plants I brush past in our garden mixes with a hint of sulphur from Mount Vesuvius, on whose western slopes my village rests like a meatball on a plate mounded with Papà's spaghetti. I will miss this, in America. It's a good memory to take with me.

I hurry along, letting one foot stay on the dirt road and the other on the grass beside it so I don't get lost, until I reach Alonzo's house, where I use the shadows of the lemon trees to get myself unseen to where I can toss a pebble at his window.

It takes four pebbles to get one up high enough, but the window finally opens and his face appears like the gorgeous moon in the dark sky.

"Who is—Maria?"

I move closer. "Oh, Alonzo, I'm so glad to see you."

He shoots a quick look back over his shoulder. "You can't be here. You—How'd you know which room is mine?"

I feel my face growing hot but know the dark will hide my blush. "You said once yours is the only one on this side of the house."

He didn't say that *to* me, only in front of me, and it was over a year ago, and I see his smile grow as he realizes how much attention I've been paying to him. "Well, you found me," he whispers, his voice making all of me feel as hot as my face. "Why?"

I wasn't expecting such a blunt question and for a moment I can't find words. Then I say, "You... you said we'd get married."

He draws himself a little back into the house. "Now? We can't."

"Of course not now," I say, surprised at his foolishness. Why don't men have any sense? "It's the middle of the night! No, in America. Once I have earned enough money from my job there, I'll send you a steamship ticket and you can come over and marry me, and we'll stay there and have children and be together every day and it'll be wonderful. Won't it?"

The darkness around us must be playing tricks with my eyes because his face seems to change, to grow hard and cold, as I speak, but before he can answer me I hear his mamma from inside the house call, "Alonzo, what are you doing at that window?"

He looks back over his shoulder. "Nothing, Mamma, just getting some air." Turning again to me, he whispers, "Go now!"

"But will you—"

"Yes, yes." He flaps his hand at me while also glancing over his shoulder again. "I will. Please *go*!"

I scurry off into the deep shade beneath the trees as Alonzo shuts the window and disappears, but I don't leave. Instead I wrap my arms around myself and pretend he's holding me.

He will be, as soon as I earn the money we need. I'm supposed to come home with that money, in four years, but I won't. I'll stay in

America and send Alonzo money for his ticket. Then he'll come to me and we'll marry and start our lives together. In America. The land of freedom, of gold-paved streets and happiness.

I can't wait.

CHAPTER THREE

Rosie

August 23, 1909

"ARE YOU SURE?"

I nod at the worried Julia. "I have a very good..." Unable to find the English words I want, I say, "I won't get lost."

"Good sense of direction?"

I smile at learning a new phrase. "Yes. A very good sense of direction. And I could use some air."

"But it would only be another hour or two before I could take you."

I have been waiting since the morning for her or one of the other workers at the home to have time to guide me around the neighborhood, and after the train and the ship and Ellis Island I've had more than enough waiting to last me a lifetime. "I'll be fine. I'm itching for a long walk."

"After all that sleep, no wonder."

We both laugh. When I woke up this morning shocked that I had slept right from the late afternoon into the next day, she admitted that she did the same thing on her first day in America.

Her laugh fades, and she looks at me with a frown for one more moment then gives in. "If you get lost or anything else goes wrong, ask at a shop. Tell them you're at the immigrant girls' home on Grand Street. They'll know how to find us."

I nod and hurry out before she can change her mind.

Standing on the crowded street, I take a few deep breaths. The air isn't exactly fresh, what with the sun heating up all the people, plus the smells of the delis and butcher shops and the horse droppings on the road. But it's air that's not in a house, or in the steerage class of a ship or in the crowded spaces of Ellis Island, so I like it anyhow.

A strange humming sound fills my ears, familiar but also not, and it takes me a moment to realize it's a sewing machine. No, not a machine, but hundreds. Thousands? Julia told me that many of the buildings in our Jewish neighborhood contain garment factories, but I didn't expect to be able to hear their machines from the street. How loud must it be inside one of those factories?

Knowing I'll need to find out soon, I make my way along the sidewalk beside the dirt road, looking at the signs on the shops and buildings as I pass. Here one advertises a luxurious bath for thirty-five cents, over there are hats for two dollars all the way up to the amazing sum of my full ten dollars, and across the road furnished rooms can be had for fifteen cents a day.

I frown at that last, wondering if the immigrant home is taking advantage of me since I'm paying more, then realize the fifteen-cent room likely does not include food or the English classes and other activities I can get at the home.

But though it seems like a good place for me, I can only afford it for five weeks, and even then only if I don't spend my money on anything else. That'll be difficult, because I will need money for lunches at work and to get to and from work, and because I've already seen that my clothes from home are different from what most of the girls here are wearing.

So has a peddler near me, apparently, because when she catches my eye she calls to me in Yiddish, "Wouldn't you like this lovely waist of mine? Only fifty cents."

She holds it up toward me so its long sleeves spread out to both sides and don't hide the front of it, and it *is* lovely. The fabric is pale blue, and the garment has lace and tucks on both sides of its pearl-like

buttons and more lace at the cuffs of its long sleeves. It reminds me of the one Julia wore yesterday, except hers was white. So much prettier than the black ones I brought.

My feet move me closer to her cart without my deciding to go, and she says, a smile creasing her wrinkled face, "And this beautiful belt maybe? I can give you both for only sixty cents, a good girl like you."

One of the girls at breakfast was wearing the exact belt she is pointing to, I think, brown with three lines of gold thread running its length, and I'm tempted. It, along with a new shirtwaist, would make my dull black skirts look so much better.

But I've got only twenty-five cents in my pocketbook, and I know I should haggle. At least, I would at home. Here? Maybe people don't do that in America.

Feeling again the weight of everything I don't know about my new home, I mumble an apology for wasting her time and turn to go.

"Fifty, then," she says, "though I'd lose all my profit for the day."

Peddlers in Belostok use that exact line, and I have to fight to hold back a smile. She *is* expecting me to haggle, and she might be sorry because I'm good at it. I can always tell somehow when a peddler really is at their lowest price.

I turn back slowly and take my time running my eyes over her wares. "Fifteen," I say, "and not a penny more."

"And I thought you a good girl! Forty."

"Hmm." I keep studying the waist and belt and don't say another word. She does want to sell, or she wouldn't have dropped her price so much, so in a moment or two she'll—

"Thirty, though my daughter will starve tonight."

She probably doesn't even have a daughter. "Twenty, more like."

She heaves a dramatic sigh. "Twenty. It'll be the death of me, but twenty."

A little flicker of satisfaction at my victory rushes through me, but it's gone the moment my fingers touch the coins in my pocketbook. It's a good price, but should I be shopping at all? I have no job and I don't

know how long it'll take to get one, and I know my father would consider this wasteful since I have clothes already.

Her "Well?" makes me realize I've frozen in indecision.

"I..." I withdraw my hand from my pocketbook. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"I won't go lower," she says, although I'm not sure she's telling the truth.

"It's not—I'm new here, just yesterday, and I don't have a job, and—"

"And you're wasting my time," she says and turns away, but though her words are sharp, her tone isn't, and I think she understands.

"I'll come back when I get a job," I say.

"With sixty cents you'll come back," she retorts, and I can hear laughter and kindness in her voice though she's pretending to be angry.

"Fifteen, maybe," I reply, and walk away chuckling as she calls, "Sixty-five!" after me.

My amusement fades almost immediately, though. When my mother sent me to buy fabric or bread or a hat for my father, she gave me the money and told me exactly what to get. I've never had to choose how to spend money before. How will I survive alone in America if I can't even decide when to spend twenty cents?

I walk on, wishing I had a new waist and belt in my hands, then almost trip over my feet at the sight of a beautiful straw hat with vibrant red roses in a shop window. I've always loved red roses, and the hat has the softly up-curved brim of Julia's hat from yesterday. Hers looked so wonderful on her dark hair, and I'm sure this one would on mine. I would walk so proudly, with that on my head. I would look like an American girl even with my black waist and skirt.

I peer in at the tag.

Four dollars?

I turn my back on the shop, feeling an almost physical pain, and make myself a solemn vow: I will not go back to the home today without a job. I'm sure Julia would help me later, but I want to do it

alone. It will be part of learning to be a strong confident American. One who can afford to buy herself clothes, even if she doesn't do so. One who knows whether she *should* buy herself clothes. One who can make choices and feel certain they're the right ones.

By the time I had my breakfast this morning, there were only a few girls who were not already at their jobs, those who were ill or pretending to be for a rare weekday of freedom. While we ate our dark bread and drank our coffee, they wanted to know about me. I did feel strange, having several girls listen to me at once, but though I stumbled through my words with embarrassment I managed to tell them why I had come to America. In return, they told me all about working here, and especially that the English factories pay better than the Jewish ones, mostly because they are generally bigger and not crammed into one apartment.

My father wants me to work for a Jewish man, so I should, but he also wants me to earn as much money as I can. Those two wants, I don't think I can fulfill them both at once.

As for what I want, since my work with my mother was in our tiny house I want something different, and I want the most money for my labors.

Excited and scared, and hopeful I'm making the right choice, I walk up and down the streets looking at the factory signs until I see a sign reading "Imperial Waist Factory" in front of a large building with several men speaking English outside.

"Hello," I say, terrified, then blush despite myself as they all turn.

"Hello," one says, but I feel that he's making fun of me. Then he says a lot more, all in English I don't understand.

"I can sew very well," I say, then manage to add, "Job, please?"

He speaks again, but I get none of it. Wishing I had waited for Julia, wishing myself anywhere but here, I say, "Job? Please? Sewing?"

The man snaps something at a younger man near him, then he turns and walks back into the building followed by all the other men as the

younger one tells me, in Yiddish, "He says you should learn English properly first. Learn English, come back, and maybe."

"How much does he pay?"

He blinks, obviously not having expected that. I don't know why: of course I should know what I would earn. "Four dollars a week. If you sew as well as you say, maybe five. Only maybe."

"I will learn and come back," I say, dazzled by the idea of five dollars a week all to myself. Then I add, in English to prove I can, "Thank you."

He nods and disappears into the factory.

I walk on, saddened by my failure then saddened further when I realize I will never have five dollars 'to myself'.

My parents borrowed nearly fifty American dollars from their bank in Russia for my travel here, and I have to pay that back as soon as I can. Once that's done, what I send to them will go toward bringing over my family. To have them all here will cost over two hundred dollars, and that doesn't even count renting an apartment for us and buying food and American clothing for everyone once they arrive or what I'll need to survive on my own during the time I'm here alone. It's an unbelievable amount of money to earn.

Apparently I must learn English, and learn it well, in order to get a good job, but that'll take time too. I'll have to work for one of the Jewish sweatshops until I manage it. So no big factory for me now, just the same cramped home workshop in which I've toiled my whole life.

My head, topped by its old dull hat, hangs as I walk sadly on down the street. But when I see a little boy hauling mounds of black fabric on his shoulders I remember what I heard at breakfast about how the shlepper boys carry garments-in-progress back and forth between various apartment sweatshops. Hoping this one might lead me to a factory, I speed up and follow him for a few blocks until he drags himself into a multi-story building.

I don't quite reach it before the door closes behind him. But fortunately the front door doesn't have a lock so I can get into the building, and his burden makes him slow enough on the dark steep stairs that I follow him easily up the three flights to where he knocks on a door.

A man opens the door and says, "It's about time you got here, Hyrum," in Yiddish, then takes the fabric from the boy before loading him up again with black garments from a pile inside the door. "See you tomorrow. Earlier tomorrow."

The boy nods and departs, and the man looks up and sees me. "And you? What do *you* want?"

"I'm Rosie Lehrer," I say, feeling more comfortable since I know I can speak Yiddish to him. He doesn't seem kind, but I don't need kindness, I need a job. "I am looking for work. I have been a seamstress since I was six. Do you have a place for me?"

He narrows his eyes and pulls at his long black beard. "What do you make best?"

"Skirts." It's not true, I'm better at waists, but I suspect the boy was carrying away skirts, and I *can* make them. Hoping he believes me, I add, "My mother in Russia trained me."

His eyes narrow further, then he says, "New to America?"

"Yesterday," I say, scared he knows I lied about the skirts but hopeful.

"Very new! Then welcome, and a job you shall have."

My knees feel weak but I don't think he'd like me grabbing the wall of his apartment. "Thank you. Thank you, sir."

"I am Mr. Saltz. And you will be here at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, Rosie," he says, pointing back into the apartment. "And every day but Saturday. Yes?"

"Yes," I say, my heart soaring. I have done it, and all on my own. The first step toward becoming... well, whatever I will become. "Yes. I will be here."

"Good," he says, and closes the door. I hear him telling someone inside, "I've hired a new girl. She starts tomorrow," and a woman answers, "Finally," but I turn and hurry away down the stairs before he comes out again and sees me listening. I don't think he'd like that.

I have done it: I am an American girl with a job, and I will make money!

As I stand blinking after emerging from the dark hallway onto the bright busy street, I realize I forgot to ask how much money. Well, I will find out tomorrow. And even if it's only three or four dollars a week, that is all right for now. Everything is all right. I will work during the day and study English at the home in the evenings, and eventually I will have earned all the money I need and I will bring over my family and we will be happy.

And maybe, if I do *very* well, when I marry the husband my father finds for me I'll be wearing that lovely hat with the red roses.