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THE
MENTORIS
PROJECT

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
ANGELA BAMBACE

LITTLE BY LITTLE WE WON

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Chapter One

DOVES AND BLACKBIRDS

“At first, the falling girls had seemed like birds. Bright cardinals, bone-white doves, swooping blackbirds in velvet-collared coats. But when they hit the cement, the terrible truth of the matter was revealed.”

—Alice Hoffman, 2014

March 25, 1911

Dinah Lipschitz glanced at the wall clock and felt herself frown. It was 4:45 and quitting time. All she wanted to do was go home and take a bath. Instead she had to deal with an angry sewing machine operator. One of the new girls stood before her, Italian from the look of her, though she was more insistent than most Italian girls.

“They told me \$14 a week. Not \$12,” the dark-haired young woman said. She held her pay envelope out to Dinah. “If it’s

going to be twelve, I'll give my notice now. I can get \$14 at any factory in the city."

Dinah tried not to smile at the woman's tone. She didn't much like Mr. Harris and Mr. Blanck's low wages either. "Your name?" Dinah asked.

The young woman's brown eyes narrowed at Dinah. "Elizabeth Viviano."

"It's just that new girls generally get \$12 a week."

"I'm not new. Not to shirtwaists, I mean. Just new to this company. Mr. Blanck said \$14 when he hired me. You've shorted me \$2."

Dinah admired the young lady's pluck but worked for Mr. Harris and Mr. Blanck, not for these poor girls. Dinah pulled a ledger book out from under a stack of papers and flipped it open. *Yes. There it was.* Viviano, Elizabeth. \$14.

After adding \$2 to Miss Viviano's envelope, Dinah closed her heavy account books and tucked them into her bottom desk drawer. She pulled a slim gold chain with a key on it from her skirt pocket and locked the drawer along with the cash box. Most days she locked the cash box in the company safe on the tenth floor, but after paying the girls the box contained only \$3.

Mr. Bernstein, the floor manager, ran past Dinah's desk. "Fire, fire!" he shouted.

Dinah looked up in alarm. Another darn fire. How many did that make in the last year? They had fire pails all around the room because they worked with cotton, which was even more flammable than paper. The factories that made wool jackets and skirts had it easy compared to shirtwaist factories. Ladies' waists, as they called blouses these days, were made from thin, oh-so-flammable cotton.

Across the room near the windows, she saw their head cutter, Mr. Abramowitz, throw a pail of sand on a small fire under the cutting table. The flames guttered out, smoked, then seconds later once again burst into angry red flames. It was one of the boxes where the cutters threw their scraps. Mr. Abramowitz repeated the water pail treatment with no better success.

Dinah pushed back her desk chair and stepped toward the fire before stopping herself. There were dozens of male cutters and foremen on the floor. They didn't need a bookkeeper to put out the fire. And it didn't look like much. The nearly two hundred women in the room paid the tiny conflagration no attention at all. The Triangle Waist Company was famous for its periodic scrap fires. Dinah returned to her desk and picked up the phone. She called the company switchboard up on the tenth floor. It rang once, twice, three times. No one answered.

As she listened to the phone ring, Dinah looked over at the fire. Not so little now—it was burning the cutting table and some paper patterns that hung on the back wall. *Where was Mary?* Dinah checked the clock on her desk. It was 4:46 and the fire seemed ten times larger than a minute ago. On the tenth ring, Mary picked up. Dinah yelled “Fire!” into the receiver.

“What?” Mary asked.

“Fire! On eight. Tell Mr. Blanck.” Dinah was about to demand Mary patch her into Verna on the ninth floor when Mary hung up. Dinah stared at the phone. She couldn't call the ninth floor directly. All the company calls went through the switchboard. And she couldn't scamper up there. The doors on eight were locked and she didn't have the keys. She'd told Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris she should have the keys, but they always said no. She thought they liked controlling the movements of hundreds of women, including herself.

Dinah put down the phone and stared at the fire. In the time it had taken her to make a phone call, it had gone from a small fire to an out-of-control blaze. Off to her left she saw Mr. Bernstein grab the hose nozzle and turn the water valve. His hand turned, then stopped. Nothing happened. He looked across the room to Dinah. Mr. Brown, the floor machinist, ran over to the hose stand. Dinah watched the two men confer. Brown turned the valve again. Still no water.

Bernstein handed something to Brown and ran to the far side of the room for two more fire pails. He ran straight at the fire. *Just like a man*, Dinah reflected. It was brave but not very smart. Fire pails weren't going to put out the fire and they needed to get the girls out of the building.

A handful of the sewing machine operators ran for the back door. They surged around Dinah's desk and piled up against the locked door. Dinah climbed atop her desk as the girls broke against it like a river around a small rectangular island.

Mr. Brown shoved through the tangle of young women shouting, "Make way! I have the key."

She watched as he found some space and fumbled at the lock. He pulled the door open and scrunched himself against the wall. A tide of women flowed past him and down the stairs.

From atop her desk, Dinah stared at the fire. It had taken most of the front of the room. She saw Miss Viviano trapped between the burning cutting tables and the front windows. A flaming shirtwaist pattern landed on her head. Her dark hair smoldered, then burst into flames. Dinah watched in horror as the young woman, so full of confidence just moments before, threw herself at the window behind her. The window cracked and Miss Viviano was gone. Dinah jumped off her desk and joined the exodus down the stairs. It was 4:48.



Yale heard the screech of a fire alarm before James did. Officer James Meehan of the New York Police Department admired his horse for innumerable reasons, but high on the list was Yale's ability to think for himself. Yale wheeled and galloped back down the street, weaving between the dray wagons and omnibuses as he did.

James scanned the sky for telltale signs of fire. A black mushroom-shaped cloud billowed above one of the buildings like a flashing signpost. Seconds later, Yale skidded to a stop in front of a tall brick building, out of which poured a river of lady factory workers. Meehan threw Yale's reins to the first man he saw and bulled his way into the building. A stream of women came down the stairs at the back of the tiny lobby. The stairs looked less than a yard wide. Meehan thought of himself as a strong man, but the tide of desperate female humanity that packed the stairs proved almost too much for him. He turned himself sideways and pushed his way up the stairs, wondering what kind of person would build a building this big with stairs this narrow. He could hear cries of "Fire!" up above, but the women on the stairs were eerily quiet.

He made it to the second floor, then the third and fourth. The clot of women, most of them not older than girls, loosened. At the seventh floor landing he discovered why. A pretty, dark-haired girl lay slumped against the wall, her legs sprawling across the tiny square of space. Astoundingly, the women backed up behind her were carefully stepping over the supine girl's body rather than trampling her in their haste to get out. He grabbed the girl and yanked her up. A man appeared on the tiny landing and wordlessly took the girl from him. The stream of women

surged down the stairs, sweeping the man and his burden before them.

Meehan pushed his way up more flights of stairs until he found the doorway that issued all these people. Fire danced and screamed less than fifteen feet from the door, but there were less than a dozen women still waiting to get out. A wave of heat billowed out the door, making it hard to breathe. A man in the grimy overalls of a machinist held the door open, his face red and wet with heat and determination.

Meehan grabbed one of the man's overall straps and leaned into him. "Is that all of them?" he asked. The man shook his head, his eyes as wet as his face, and looked back into the burning room. A girl stood there, between the window and all the flames, her back toward them. Meehan stepped toward the flames before realizing it was hopeless. Flames leapt up and the girl disappeared.

Feeling sick and ashamed, Meehan pulled the man into the stairwell and shut the eighth-floor door behind them. "Is that all?" he yelled over the roar of the fire.

The machinist pointed up.

"More upstairs?"

The man nodded.

A door to the upper floors stood closed behind them. Meehan grabbed the doorknob, turned, and pulled. Nothing happened. "Keys," he yelled at the man.

The machinist leaned in to Meehan and shouted, "No, only bosses have da keys."

Over the flames Meehan heard someone pounding on the other side of the door. Then screams of terror pierced his ears. Meehan hit the door with his shoulder. Once. Twice. A third time. On the third strike the machinist joined him. The tiny space kept

either of them from taking much of a run at it. Meehan stood back and kicked at the door with his booted heels. The door didn't budge. Either the door was made of sterner stuff than a building, or the press of women on the other side was keeping it closed.

Behind them smoke leaked out from under the door they'd just closed. "Time ta go," the machinist yelled. He grabbed Meehan's collar and hauled him back toward the stairs. As they descended, the cries of women behind the locked door drifted away into the smoky air. It was 4:55.

Sara emerged from the dressing room to see Dinah standing on her desk. *That's odd.* Then she saw flames on the far end of the cutting tables. *Damn fires. This is the third one this year.* Mr. Abramowitz, the head cutter, grabbed one of the red fire pails that lined the far wall and threw a bucket of sand on the flames. Black smoke billowed up as the orange-red flames stuttered out. Sara exhaled a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding. Fire pails always came to the rescue.

"Tessa if you don't hurry we're going to miss the first act," she called to her sister. To celebrate the end of the workweek they were going to see show at a nearby vaudeville house. Sara looked back at the fire. It wasn't out after all—it was bigger. She turned and hustled back into the dressing room. "Fire! Everybody out," she yelled. A dozen young women milled around the tiny room, some dressed only in their slips and stockings. *Where was Tessa?* Sara scrambled for the bathroom at the back of the dressing space. "Tess?"

"Give a girl a minute," Tess called out from behind the closed bathroom door. "I've had to go for hours and there was a line."

“There’s a fire, Tess. It’s not real big, but we ought to get out of here before we get stuck here answering questions like the last time.”

Sara glanced back at the dressing room. Rosie and Gussie were nearly dressed, but Margaret, Ethel, and Violet were still in their work clothes, probably waiting for their turn in the bathroom. “Grab your clothes and get out of here,” she hollered at them. Why the company didn’t put in more bathrooms, she’d never understand. They knew they hired women and they knew women had to use the facilities more than men, but still Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris insisted one bathroom per floor was enough, though over two hundred women worked on each of the three floors. More bathrooms and the girls would waste time fooling around, Blanck and Harris argued. Sara thought they wasted more time standing in line at lunchtime and after work. But that was their time to waste, so the bosses didn’t care. They weren’t allowed to use the bathroom between lunch breaks and quitting time anyway.

Tessa emerged from the bathroom with a grin and swept up her bag. “Let’s go, slowpoke,” she said. The sisters grinned at each other.

They emerged into a room that was different from how Sara had left it just minutes before. Flames engulfed the far corner and screaming girls crowded near the door. Sara froze for a second. Mr. Harris insisted they keep the doors locked during business hours, though she had no idea why. Did he think they’d sneak out and go to Coney Island? Or steal a yard or two of cheap cambric fabric, even though dozens of cutters kept their eyes on the girls?

Sara looked back at the flames. The other stairs lay behind

the fire, so that way out was no good. Then she remembered. She grabbed Tess and yelled at the other young women milling around the dressing room, "Follow me."

She made for a bank of windows on the left side of the room and pushed one up. Or tried to. The window wouldn't budge. She yanked Tessa's purse from her arm and swung it at the glass. Tessa screamed, half in surprise, half in outrage. The glass cracked. Sara swung again and the glass shattered. Pushing the purse at the sides of the window, Sara knocked the shards out of the frame. Just beyond the window stood a narrow fire escape in an L-shaped airshaft created by the way the building came together with the building next door. Sara slung Tessa's purse over her arm and stepped out onto the sloped ladder and began climbing down. She moved as quickly as she could, but Tessa stepped on her hands. She looked up to tell Tess to be careful, only to catch a shower of rusty dirt in her face. Her foot came to a solid place. Sara turned her head and looked down. She was on a tiny platform, no more than eighteen inches wide. Behind it the rusty ladder continued to each floor, meeting another small platform. Worse, the ladders seemed to go on and on. Somewhere, a fire alarm began to bray.

Sara climbed down to the next platform and made a decision. The fire was on the eighth floor and now she was on the sixth floor. Beyond the window stood a cavernous room. The shades were down but Sara could see empty cutting tables through the gloom. Another factory—closed for the day or forever, she wasn't sure. The Triangle Shirtwaist girls arrived at work before everyone else each morning and were still working when everyone else went home. She pulled Tessa's purse from her arm and shoved it at the window. The glass cracked and fell inward.

"This way," Sara screamed up at Tessa. She flung herself over

the windowsill and into the empty room. Tessa climbed in right behind her. The two of them helped girls in through the window—first Gussie, then Ethel, and then the others.

The last one in line, a redhead Sara didn't know, looked at her with huge eyes and said, "The whole floor was on fire by the time I got out. No one else could get over this way."

Someone burst into tears.

Someone else wailed, "We're going to die."

"No we are not," Sara shouted. "Listen up. This room is set up just like the ours. So that means there's a door over there." Sara pointed across the empty room.

The young women charged across the room, darting around cutting tables and sewing machine stands to get to the door. Gussie got there first. She grabbed the knob and pulled. Nothing happened. "It's locked," she wailed.

The other girls crowded behind her, the closest ones striking the door with their fists. The doors on the eighth floor opened inward, probably because the stairwell was so narrow. This one probably did too. They weren't going to be able to shove the door open. Someone yelled and then everyone did. Sara glanced at her watch, pinned to her white cotton shirtwaist. Five minutes ago she'd been thinking about vaudeville.

And then she heard it. A sound. Like a knock. Sara took a deep breath and hollered, "Quiet!"

The girls quieted.

The sound came again. Definitely a knock.

"We're locked in," Gussie yelled.

"Get away from the door," a male voice called.

A thump came as someone hit the door. The door shuddered. And then a louder thump and the scream of a doorknob tearing loose. The door flew open, whacking Ethel as it did. She

slammed back against the wall without a sound. A uniformed policeman, cheeks ruddy with exertion, stood in the doorway. Mr. Brown, the man who fixed the sewing machines, stood behind the policeman.

Sara stood back as the girls crowded out the door and followed the policeman down the stairs. Mr. Brown stood aside and waited. Sara came out last. She looked at Mr. Brown and then up the stairs. "Is everyone out?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Most of the girls on the eighth floor are out."

"Most?"

"Three got caught on the far side of the fire." He paused and wiped at his eyes. "Poor wee things."

"And the ninth and tenth floors?"

Mr. Brown shrugged before his face brightened with thought. "Are there more on the fire escape?"

Before she could admit she had no idea, Mr. Brown raced across the room. Sara followed hard on his heels. As they approached the broken window, a monstrous screech of metal rent the air, and then another, as if the building were groaning out its death throes. Terror-filled screams filled the spaces between. Sara stuck her head out the window and looked up. The eighth-floor shutter had somehow come loose and blocked the fire escape. Flames shot out the windows at both the eighth and ninth floors. Dozens of women, trapped on the narrow metal ladder, smoldered and smoked and screamed.

The building gave another horrendous screech as the fire escape tore loose from its moorings. Mr. Brown pulled Sara away from the window, but not before she saw a mass of burning, screaming women plummet past the sixth floor. The machinist grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward the stairs. Behind

her, Sara heard the roar of the fire. It sounded like a ravening beast. She supposed that was exactly what it was.

On the ninth floor, Lucia Maltese tried to find her little sister and mother. She'd finished straitening up her workspace at the coveted first sewing machine table, the one nearest the Greene Street windows, when the cry "Fire!" echoed through the room. She pushed back her chair and turned to peruse the room, more curious than afraid. The Triangle was notorious for its little fires. Why, the factory had burned up three times the past ten years, though those fires always started at night. Lucia wasn't alone in thinking Mr. Blanck and Mr. Harris purposefully set fire to their factory to collect the insurance money.

Her eyes found not a neat, easily contained fire, but a whooshing, sucking blaze shooting from the windows at the back of the room, near the bathrooms and dressing rooms. Mamma and Rosarea were back there. Rosarea, just fourteen years old, had a sewing machine near the back of the room, as befitted a new hire. Mamma sat with her to watch over her and help when Rosarea invariably fell behind.

Flames billowed out the windows that let out onto the rear airshaft, caught the nearby sewing tables, and began leapfrogging across the room. Women ran, screaming and pushing. There were 278 sewing machines on the ninth floor, though this morning about two dozen of them had stood empty. As she watched, dozens of women ran for the Greene Street door, just behind where Lucia stood. Everyone knew it was locked, but there was no place else to go.

Fire filled the room with smoke and heat. Lucia climbed up onto her sewing table and began leaping table to table, heading

for the back of the room. She'd get Mamma and Rosarea and try for the fire escape. Or the back stairs. Or the elevator. The bosses didn't let the women use it, not even the pregnant ones, but fire obliterated the rules. Lucia stopped and surveyed the room. *There.* Mamma stood by the dressing room door. *But Rosarea?*

Lucia leaped across the remaining four sewing tables, taking care not to catch her feet on the common drive shaft that ran down the length of each table. When she reached the last row, she jumped down into Mamma's waiting arms. Poor Mamma, she usually looked barely older than her daughters, being only fifteen years old when she'd had Lucia, her firstborn. Now anxiety made her appear decades older. The fire licked down a sewing table toward them.

Mamma pulled her toward the rear door. The area was already crowded with women. "I was going to try the fire escape," she yelled at Lucia over the noise of panicked women and roaring flames, "but I waited for Rosarea and now it's too late." She pointed to the left side of the room, now engulfed in flames. "Just a minute ago, girls got through there."

"Where's Rosarea?" Lucia shouted.

"Bathroom," Mamma yelled back.

"I'll get her." Lucia looked over at the rear door and saw a miracle. The elevator door opened. A dozen women poured into it. Lucia pointed so Mamma could see. "Go. I'll be right behind you." Mamma tried to hold on to her but Lucia shoved her toward the elevator. There was Papà and the boys to think about—they'd fall apart without Mamma.

Lucia snatched up a handful of cut fabric and held it up to her mouth before turning back toward the fire. It had nearly reached the dressing room door, its heat and acrid smoke

sickeningly thick. Lucia lunged for the dressing room. Inside the tiny room, a knot of women held each other, some wailing, some pale and silent in the smoking room. She grabbed Bertha, a slim Jewish girl who sat near Mamma and Rosarea. "Have you seen my sister?" Lucia asked.

Bertha pointed at the toilet room.

Lucia shoved Bertha toward the door. "They're taking people out on the elevator."

Bertha turned and yelled at the knot of women, "Head for the elevator."

Lucia headed for the toilets. "Rosarea!" she yelled.

"In here!" Rosarea shouted.

Lucia found her sister in the last stall, cowering behind the white porcelain toilet, rosary beads clutched in her hands.

Lucia stared at her sister. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Praying."

"Praying? In a fire?" Lucia wanted to shake Rosarea. Fourteen was old enough to have grown some common sense, or at least that's what Lucia thought. "Let's go. Mamma's at the elevator."

Lucia hauled her sister out of the bathroom. Flames filled the doorway, licking at the frame and the interior wall. Rosarea screamed, yanked her hand away, and fled back to the bathroom. One young woman grabbed two of her friends and half yelled, "Hail Mary, full of grace."

As flames ran across the dressing room walls, Lucia nearly laughed. Rosarea had been right all along. Prayer was all they had. She followed her sister back to the bathroom. They were crouched behind a toilet, holding each other, when the fire took them.



When the alarm bell sounded from the street, Joseph Zito and Gaspar Mortillalo were sharing a cigarette and waiting for the end of the day. As the elevator operators, their job was to ferry the bosses and management types from the tenth floor, where the company offices were, to the ground floor at quitting time. They also moved prodigious amounts of freight up and down the elevator, with shipments of fabric, lace, and buttons going up and finished shirtwaists, skirts, and cloaks going down. It was the elevator that had allowed New York to grow so tall.

Gaspar checked his pocket watch to find it was 4:47. The klaxon call of the alarm made conversation impossible. He looked inquiringly at Joseph. Together they stepped out onto the sidewalk. A knot of onlookers stared up at the building. Joseph and Gaspar did the same. Smoke billowed from windows near the top of the building.

Gaspar turned and ran for the elevator. Joseph followed him. They engaged the levers that started the elevator upwards. Less than a minute later they stopped on the eighth floor. The doors opened to a knot of young women. Thick black smoke rolled into the elevator car. Fire raged on the far side of the room.

Women surged into the elevator car. Gaspar pushed women to the back, crowding them together. Ordinarily, the elevator held twelve people or 1,500 pounds, but Gaspar thought it could hold more. More women crowded in, most of them silent. Gaspar figured if he'd been trapped in a burning room, he'd be screaming in fear. Women were tough. Certainly, his own wife was stronger than he was. Look at the way she had the baby and then got up and cooked dinner.

Once the elevator could hold no more, Joseph closed the doors, assuring the women left behind they'd be right back. In seconds they were in the Washington Street lobby. One woman

kissed Gaspar on the cheek before she left. Joseph grinned at his partner and engaged the lever again.

The doors opened again on the eighth floor to find everyone gone. Gaspar saw that the door to the stairs stood open. The fire had engulfed the entire left side and front of the room. The two men looked at each other and silently agreed. The elevator doors closed and they ascended to the ninth floor. When the doors opened again, they found what seemed like hundreds of women. This time the fire raged much closer to the elevator and was encroaching on the dressing rooms. Again they packed the elevator car. When Joseph had counted to twenty-eight, the elevator could hold no more. He shoved a cluster of women back, but they pushed forward. "We'll be back," he screamed.

Gaspar and Joseph took the elevator down, unloaded the women, and went up again. By the sixth or seventh trip, they were loading women whose clothing smoldered from the sparks that swirled just outside the main body of the fire.

On the tenth or eleventh trip, as they were about to go back up, a New York City policeman grabbed Joseph by the coat collar. "No more. It's too dangerous," the policeman yelled.

Joseph pushed the man away and pulled the door closed.

When the doors opened again, both men knew they'd made their last trip. Heat flooded into the already hot elevator cabin. Before them, flames engulfed the dressing room and most of the sewing tables. And still dozens of women crowded before the elevator. Gaspar could see more women, cut off behind the fire, backed up against the windows. They watched as a young man broke one of the windows, grabbed a young woman around the waist, kissed her, and dropped her out the window. The young man watched for a second or two before stepping after her.

Women crowded into the elevator car, piling on top of each other in a desperate attempt to fill the car to its ceiling. When the car could hold no more, Joseph and Gaspar had to shove the remaining women back. Together they closed the doors. Joseph felt a sob wrench out of him as they descended. In the quiet elevator, someone patted his back.

Caterina Maltese watched the elevator go. She looked back across the burning floor, toward the dressing room. Lucia and Rosarea hadn't come out and now she'd waited too long. She looked back over at the windows. Girls and women were leaping from them. The fire roared so that she could barely think. Flames shot out of the dressing room. Her girls were in there. Her babies. She felt heat on her head a second before her dress caught fire. Four women pried the elevator doors open, only to find an empty shaft. One of the girls leaped for the cable, missed, and fell. Another tried it and caught the cable. She began sliding down. Other girls tried. Some caught the cable. Some did not.

And then there was no one between Caterina and the empty elevator shaft. She was the last living person on the ninth floor. Was it better to die in a fall than to burn? Caterina looked across the expanse of elevator shaft at the cable. Did she even want to try? With her girls behind her, what was the point? Caterina looked down at her hands. She was thirty-nine years old, but her hands were worn from twenty years of factory work and New York cold. She crossed herself, said a prayer to the Madonna for her daughters' souls, and stepped into the elevator shaft. The bodies of the previously fallen cushioned her landing, but not enough.

Chapter Two

MISERY LANE LOVES COMPANY

“Our birth is nothing but our death begun, as tapers waste the moment they take fire.”

—Edward Young, 1718

March 25–26, 1911

The can jounced down the sidewalk with a satisfying clatter. Angela Bambace watched it bang off a light pole and come to rest in front of Mr. Catiglioni’s fruit stand.

From behind a stack of melons, the bald grocer frowned at her. “What you gotta make such a terrible sound for?” he said.

“Cause I’m mad,” Angela replied. She stopped in front of Mr. Catiglioni and picked up her can. Good cans were worth keeping.

“Whatsa matter, then?” He waved his hand out over the melons at the failing light. “No more snow, no more cold; the sun shines, does it not? Is a good day.”

“No, it is not,” Angela said. She put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot.

Mr. Catiglioni came out from behind his melons and pulled an apple from his apron pocket. He held it out to Angela. “You wanna tell me about it?”

She took the apple and examined it. Its skin was a bit wrinkled and it felt a little soft, but that’s what apples were like in March. She bit into it and opened her mouth to tell Mr. Catiglioni her sad story, but he wagged his forefinger and shook his head. Angela chewed, swallowed, and tucked the rest of the apple into her coat pocket.

“Today I was at school, even though it’s Saturday, on account of the nuns were handing out parts for the Easter pageant,” she said.

“So that is why you not help your *madre* today?”

“Mamma said she wanted me to be in the pageant.” Angela tried not to smile. She was still mad, but not at Mamma. Mamma always wanted Angela to do school things, unlike other mothers who wanted their daughters to quit school after eighth grade and go to work. “I know the big girls are going to get all the good parts, like the Holy Mother.” Angela paused. “And they want Marie to be an angel, even though she wasn’t there today. She’s home sick and she gets to be an angel. The sisters like her best. Everyone does. And I wanted to be Mary Magdalene.”

Mr. Catiglioni watched Angela’s eyes light up at the thought of playing Mary Magdalene. “Is only fair that the big girls play the important parts. Someday soon you’ll have your turn. Right?” he said.

She huffed out a sigh and said, “But I’m almost thirteen.”

“See? One day some younger girl will be mad at you.”

Angela squeezed the can so tight it made a little crunching

sound. “That’s not what I’m angry about. I didn’t think an eighth grader would get to be a Mary. Not really. But the pageant needs ever so many Roman soldiers.”

“And you wanted to be a soldier?”

“They get swords!” she said. “Not real ones, of course, but wooden ones. And they have sword fights. That’s so much better than angel wings. The angels just stand around looking holy.”

“And the sisters only let boys be soldiers,” Mr. Catiglioni said. Angela sighed and nodded.

Mr. Catiglioni led Angela over to an upturned produce crate. He sat on one side, leaving room for her on the other. She sat and laid the now-dented rusty can in the little basket her skirt made between her knees.

“Sometimes we don’t get what we want. But you know what I think?” he asked. Beside him, Angela shrugged her shoulders. “We have to be patient with God, because we do not know his plan. What is it the Bible says? The meek shall inherit the earth.”

Angela leapt to her feet. The can clattered to the ground, forgotten. “The meek are sheep. That’s what the sisters want me to be—a sheep,” she said, stomping her foot again. “I don’t want to be a sheep. People eat sheep. I want to be a soldier and have sword fights.”

As Mr. Catiglioni opened his mouth to answer Angela, a man came running up the street. He stopped in front of Mr. Catiglioni and gasped out, “Phone?”

The grocer stood. “In the back. It takes a nickel.”

Sweat stood out on the man’s pale face as he jogged to the back of the store. Mr. Catiglioni and Angela watched him dig in his pocket for a change purse, thrust a coin into the phone, and dial a number. Both knew they were being impolite, but neither could help themselves. Phone calls were rare, both because you

could buy half a loaf of bread with a nickel and because few people wanted to have private conversations in the grocer's market. Angela had never made or received a phone call, nor had anyone she knew.

"Is she there? Helen!" the man yelled into the phone receiver. "Because there was fire. A bad one. At one of the factories in lower Manhattan."

Mr. Catiglioni raised an eyebrow at Angela.

"I don't know which one. Down by Little Italy. I'm not sure. But they say there's bodies all over the street. Is she there?"

Angela watched as the man sagged like a balloon with the air let out.

"Thanks, Mamma. I love you too," the man said, then hung up the phone and leaned against the wall. His shoulders shook.

Angela looked up at Mr. Catiglioni. He patted her shoulder. After a minute, the man wiped his face and turned to face them.

"Can I help you, young man?" Mr. Catiglioni asked, his tone as gentle as he'd been with Angela.

"My sister. She was home. Thank the Blessed Mother, she was home," the man said, wiping at his face one more time. "You haven't heard? There was a bad fire at one of those damn clothing factories. They say hundreds of girls are dead. No one knows which factory and my sister works at Allied Cloaks."

Angela looked up at Mr. Catiglioni. Everyone knew only the poorest women worked in the clothing trades—and the poorest women in New York were mostly Jewish and Italian. And here they were, standing in Italian Harlem. The grocer gave Angela a little push between her shoulder blades. "Go on home, little one. Your Mamma will be worried."

Angela looked from Mr. Catiglioni to the man and back again. "But," she protested.

“No buts, little one. Go home. Tell your mother what you heard. She’ll know what to do.”

Angela trudged up the sidewalk for home, thoughts of swords and sheep temporarily replaced with worry. Behind her, the rusty tin can lay forgotten on the sidewalk.

Sometime after supper, Angela heard a newsboy down on the street. She ran to the second-floor window, shoved it up, and peered out into the dark. Her sister, Marie, poked her head out too, even though she’d been home sick with a cold all day. Angela pushed her back. “Mamma will spank you if she sees you out of bed,” she said.

Marie stuck her tongue out at Angela, but stepped back from the window. Marie was less than two years younger than Angela, and everyone liked her. She was the good girl. Marie wouldn’t have minded being a sheep.

“A hundred forty dead,” cried the newsboy. “The *World* has it first.”

Angela grimaced. The *New York World* always had the most scandalous news. That meant the newsboy was Silvio Ricci. He lived on the sixth floor with his mother and a half dozen brothers and sisters. None of the Ricci kids went to school.

Mamma charged in from the kitchen, holding a dishtowel. She thrust a penny into Angela’s hand. “Hurry,” she half whispered. Angela looked back over her shoulder. Papa slumped in his chair like always. *Il Progresso*, a New York newspaper printed in Italian, lay collapsed on his chest. They both understood it was not a good idea to wake Papà. He was a lot older than Mamma, more like one of the many grandpas in the building than the dads, especially with his gray hair and wrinkly skin. And he was

sick a lot. With what Angela didn't know, but when he didn't feel good he'd sleep a lot and wake up cranky.

Angela caught up her coat and ran out the door, down the stairs, and out to the street. She thrust her way through the knotted crowd around Silvio and pushed the penny into his hand.

Silvio's face shone with excitement as he handed her the one-page special. "Someone's gonna pay for this," he said with a tight grin.

Angela agreed. Someone would pay. But not the rich men who ran the factory. Those kind of men never paid, not in New York. It was probably the same all over the world, but all she knew was New York City. Sure, she'd been born in Brazil and lived her first year in Calabria, but she didn't remember any of that.

Angela ran back up the stairs to the apartment. At least they lived in a decent building in Italian Harlem. Everyone knew only the poorest and most desperate lived in Little Italy, down in lower Manhattan. It helped that Mamma had only three children and that Papà made good money as a waiter—when he was working, that was. Mamma worked hard too. She did piecework for a hat factory, bringing home cloth that she stitched together at the kitchen table. Angela would wake up in the middle of the night, hear the soft whir of the sewing machine coming from the kitchen, and know everything was all right. When Papà was having one of his dark times, he slept all the time and only worked weekends. Mamma seemed to never sleep at all.

Mamma waited in the hall, holding baby Shelley's hand. Light from the apartment spilled out, making the little boy's dark hair glow. If the nuns could see him now, they'd want four-year-old Shelley to be an angel too. And one day he'd get to be a soldier and have wooden sword fights.

"Here," Mamma hissed and held out her hand. Angela

handed over the broadsheet. The two of them hustled into the kitchen. She gestured Angela to a chair and plopped Shelley into her lap before pulling the gaslight down close to the table. A tiny shard of pride shot through Angela. Lots of kids had parents who couldn't read or even speak English. Mamma could read Italian, Portuguese, and English. Papà could only read Italian.

Shelley squirmed, his weight reminding Angela that he wasn't really a baby anymore, but nearly five years old. Still, he was a little boy, while she was nearly a big girl. Nearly.

Mamma groaned, "It was the Triangle Company. Mrs. DeLuca's sister works there." Mamma straightened and sighed. "Stay here. I have to go see Annie." Mamma hustled out of the apartment and ran upstairs.

Angela wrapped an arm around Shelley, hugging his warmth to her. Marie stepped into the kitchen doorway. She coughed a wheezy, hacking sound and swayed on her feet.

Angela stood, still holding her little brother. "Come on. You should be in bed," she said to Marie.

Angela led Marie into the apartment's only bedroom. Mamma and Papà slept in the living room, their bed pushed up against the far wall. Shelley's cot was in there too. Mamma said the girls got the bedroom because they needed to go to bed earlier and rest for school. School was important to Mamma; she and Papà argued about it all the time. Papà thought it was time Angela went to work, but Mamma said her girls would graduate from high school. "Education is the only way to get ahead in America," she said. Papà thought going to school was a kind of laziness, though Angela wondered what he knew about it. He worked half as much as Mamma and knew half as much too. Angela knew one thing for sure—you didn't get ahead by sleeping in your chair all day.

She got Marie and Shelley tucked into their beds and went back to the kitchen to wait for Mamma. After what seemed like hours, Mamma finally opened the door.

“You should be in bed,” Mamma sighed. “Annie wants to go down there. Now.”

“Where?” Angela was confused. Where did Annie DeLuca want to go in the middle of the night?

“To the factory. It’s down by Washington Square Park.”

“Way down there?” Angela asked.

Mamma sighed and said, “Albina didn’t come home. Annie thought she was out with friends. You know, how the girls do sometimes on Saturday after work. But she should be home by now. Annie fell asleep and didn’t know Albina hadn’t come home. What with the baby and all, it’s no wonder.”

Angela nodded her understanding. Annie DeLuca was a new wife with a new baby. She lived two floors up with her husband, Carlo, and her sister, Albina. And the new baby, Rosina, whom they all called Rosie. Carlo wasn’t home, though; he’d gone back to Italy after the baby was born to tell his family there, and Annie’s too. He had a good job as a bookkeeper and could afford to travel to Sicily once a year. They’d all thought Annie had been lucky to catch him.

“I want to come with you,” Angela said.

Mamma heaved a sigh. “I suppose you should. Marie can watch Shelley. Annie will want to bring her baby with her. If we find, you know, the worst, you can help.”

Angela did know. If Albina was dead, someone would have to hold Rosie while Mamma held Annie.

They took the Second Street elevated train south, riding down

Manhattan Island with Central Park on one side and the East River on the other, though it was too dark to see much of anything but streetlights and the occasional wagon. New York City never really slept, but in the middle of the night it got pretty quiet. Annie sat ramrod straight on a bench opposite Mamma and Angela. Angela clutched the baby to her chest, but didn't even look around when they stopped to let passengers off and on. As they traveled south, more people got on the train than got off. By their tense faces, Angela guessed they were all heading for the same place.

They left the train at the Astor Place station and walked the rest of the way amidst a crowd. They walked one block west, one block south, and then turned west again. Tall brick buildings lined the streets, some of them tenement housing, others business buildings gone dark for the evening. Angela smelled the smoke before they turned the corner onto Greene Street and saw the burning building. She tightened her grip on Mamma's hand.

Spotlights illuminated the brick structure, which looked fine at first. It was only when Angela looked up, prompted by all the people around her who were doing the same, that she saw the burned wreckage of the upper floors. She, Mamma, and Annie came to a crowd of people pushed up against a barricade. By the look of things, they wouldn't be getting any closer to the building. Mamma pushed them to the front. Off to the left, another set of barricades ran across a narrow alley between the burned building and its neighbor. A stout policeman, cudgel out, stood at the ready, while firemen and more policemen scuttled in the alley.

Angela strained her eyes, trying to make sense of what she saw. It looked like a monstrous dead spider, all tangled legs and broken parts. She looked up again and realized what it was—the

fire escape. It had fallen off the building and now lay in this narrow alley like a dead thing.

Two firemen approached the barrier from the fallen fire escape with something gray and bulky stretched between them. As they came to the mouth of the alleyway, the big policeman drew back the barrier and let them pass. The two firemen had a cloth-wrapped laundry bundle between them. Then Angela realized it was not laundry. It was a person, dead, wrapped in a sheet.

She stared down the alley in horror. According to the newspaper, the fire happened over six hours ago, but they were still removing bodies. How many women had died in this alley for it to take so long to remove them?

Mamma waved her hand at the stout policeman. "Sir? Sir?" she asked.

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Yes, Ma'am."

Angela noticed he had an Irish accent. The Irish did not care for the Italians. Mamma said it was because they'd been in America longer and had been at the bottom of the pile for so long that they were happy to have someone else beneath them. Sister Margaret said it was because the Italians would work for so much less and drove the Irish out of the good factory jobs. The Irish had good reason to hate the Italians, or so Sister said. Angela wasn't sure there was such a thing as a good factory job, but some were less bad than others. Also, Sister Margaret was Irish.

Mamma smiled her best smile at the policeman. "I'm sorry to bother you, officer, but could you tell us where we, uh—" Mamma's voice faltered. Behind her, Annie burst into tears.

The officer heaved a sigh that suggested he too would like to cry. "Ma'am, we're moving the dead down to a warehouse on Charities Pier. Do you know where that is?" he said.

“I think so. Down by the Lodging House?” Mamma asked.

“Yes, Ma’am. You go there if you have a missing loved one.” Now it was the policeman’s turn to falter. He coughed into a dirt-smearred handkerchief. “Worst thing I’ve ever seen.”

Mamma looked down at his nametag. “Thank you, Officer Meehan. I appreciate your help.” She grabbed Annie and turned to go.

“God bless you, ma’am,” the officer called after them. His voice wobbled in the night air.

For a second, Angela wanted to kick Sister Margaret.

They wasted two hours circling the building, trying to find a way to get closer. Annie, eyes ringed dark with exhaustion, wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Maybe she’s just hurt,” Annie pointed out. “She’ll be in the crowd looking for her friends, just like we are.”

Mamma admitted that Annie had a point. The newspaper extra said over four hundred women worked at the Triangle Factory. If 140 of them were dead, that meant 260 of them had gotten out. So they combed the crowd on Greene Street, stopping to ask all the young women if they’d worked in the building and if they knew Albina Caruso.

“She’s a little thing,” Annie kept saying. She’d gesture at Angela and say, “No taller than this girl.”

No one knew Albina. They did meet several people who’d worked in the Asch Building, but no one who’d been on the upper floors, where the Triangle Company had its factory. They tried the crowd on Washington Place too, but with no more luck than Greene Street. At one point they sat on a curb and waited while Annie fed Rosie.

Angela watched the passing people, eyes peeled for Annie's sister. Across the street, the fire truck's ladder loomed in the night sky, reaching only halfway up the building, abandoned as useless.

Albina, or Albie, as she liked to be called, was a lot older than Angela. She'd graduated from St. Cecilia's at least two years ago. Before she finished school, Albie used to walk home with Angela and Marie. Twice she'd bought the sisters ice-cream sodas at the drugstore just down from Mr. Catiglioni's little market. For a big girl, she'd been nice. And pretty, like her sister Annie—tall and slim, with wavy dark hair and big black eyes.

They trudged back to the Astor Place station and took the train back the way they'd come. They got off the train at Twenty-Third Street and walked up to Twenty-Sixth, where they ran smack-dab into Bellevue Hospital. Massive and imposing, the hospital was a complex of interconnected buildings. Everyone in New York knew Bellevue because it took in everyone, even people with no money.

A line of ambulances stood outside the Twenty-Sixth Street entrance, the horses' heads down in exhaustion. Angela figured they'd transported the injured people from the fire, so maybe they should check the hospital for Albie. Mamma and Annie agreed it was a good idea. They turned and headed for the hospital's main entrance on First Avenue, passing through curlicued wrought-iron gates on their way to the front door.

They stood in a line that led to a white marble front counter. The lady in front of them, an older, gray-haired woman with a girl not much older than Angela, turned around to ask, "Did you have someone in the fire?" She had a thick Yiddish accent.

Annie explained that they were looking for her sister.

"I'm looking for my daughter Julia. This is my granddaughter Esther, and I am Mrs. Rosen," the woman said.

They introduced themselves. Two men lined up behind Mamma, Annie, and Angela and joined in the conversation. One said his name was Max Segalowitz and the other Josef Redsky. They were both looking for daughters who'd worked at the Triangle Factory.

"Awful place," Mr. Segalowitz said. He'd pulled his soft cap from his head and was wringing it in his hands. "I wanted Rosie to do piecework at home, but no, she insisted on going out to work. More money, she says, but I think she likes the girls she works with better than the money."

"I know what you mean," Mr. Redsky chimed in. "My Beryl is a real firecracker. She didn't want to stay at home. No fun, she'd said." He chuckled a little. "Did you know she liked to be called Ben? Can you believe that? A girl named Ben? She's a firecracker, my Beryl."

The line moved inexorably forward until it was Mrs. Rosen's turn. The attendant looked at a sheaf of papers and shook his head. She burst into tears and stepped aside. Annie went next, buttressed by Mamma.

"Albina Caruso," she whispered.

"Pardon me? You'll have to speak up," the attendant said.

"Albina Caruso," Mamma repeated in her loud, take-charge voice.

The man checked the first page and shook his head. "Not here. Next!"

They made way for the two men. Angela could see the clerk looking and shaking his head. The seven of them met up at the hospital's front door. Mr. Segalowitz slapped his much-abused

hat atop his head and motioned for the doors. “Shall we, ladies?” he said.

Dawn had just begun to lighten the eastern sky when they left the hospital. Mr. Segalowitz walked them to a bakery, where they bought a bag of soft rolls—or tried to. When the counterman learned why they were out so early, he refused to take their money. Then he made them sit down at a table and brought them small cups of espresso, into which he poured spoonfuls of heavy cream. They ate and drank in silence. Annie fed Rosie again before a lady baker whisked the baby away for a change of diapers. Angela could hear the women at the back of the bakery cooing and fussing over Rosie. They dawdled awhile in this safe space, knowing they were in no hurry to arrive at their last destination.

The sun was coming up over the East River when they left the bakery. They walked to the pier, past the nearly new Municipal Lodging House, which served the area’s homeless men, to the warehouse that stood at the end of the pier. A line of people had formed alongside one of the warehouse’s exterior walls.

They took their place at the end of the line. An ambulance pulled away from the building and another pulled up in its place. Two men in ragged clothes came out of the warehouse, removed a bundle from the wagon, and carried it inside. Another wagon pulled up, piled high with long wooden boxes. More ragged men came to unload the wagon.

Angela realized they were unloading empty coffins. She left the line and walked over to the railing at the edge of the pier. She was standing there, leaning over the railing so she could see the water, when a young man came up and stood next to her.

He tugged the brim of his cap and nodded at her. “You know what they call this place, don’t you?” he asked.

“The police officer said Charities Pier,” Angela said.

“Ah, that’s its name, but that’s not what they be calling it. It’s really Misery Lane.”

Angela turned to look at her companion. He wore round glasses and the studious look of a Yeshiva student. Sister Margaret said the Jews were worse than the Italians, who were at least Catholics. Sister Margaret wasn’t a very nice person. Though, to be fair, not all the Sisters thought that way. It was just that Sister Margaret taught seventh and eighth grade.

“Why’s it called that?” Angela asked. She had her suspicions, but she wanted to hear what the young man would say.

He waved his arm behind him. “Well, first there’s the Lodging House, which was meant just to take homeless men. But there’s so many homeless families, the place is full of fear and sadness. Did you see they’re using the homeless men to cart the bodies from the fire?”

Angela nodded.

“Can you imagine having to do that for money? And there’s all the sick people who get dumped at the hospital.” He twirled his finger around his ear. “You know, sick in the head. What a misery that must be, not to have your head right. And those people can’t take care of themselves either. And then the city morgue is just up the street. It’s where the poor end up, just before they get dumped in some potter’s field somewhere. And there’s this place.” He waved at the warehouse. “This is where they brought the bodies when the General Slocum exploded.”

“Huh?”

“It was six, no seven years ago,” he said. “You’re probably too young to remember. A thousand people died when a steamship caught fire and sank.” He jerked his head back at the warehouse. “And then there’s Blackwell’s Island.”

Angela looked out over the river, north to the notorious island. The sun had risen, lighting the asylum's spires so they looked almost pretty. "I heard they don't keep the lunatics over there anymore," she said.

"No. It's a workhouse and prison now. Another terrible place to put the poor."

Angela stared at the boy. "How do you know all this?"

He smiled a grim smile. "My rabbi taught me. As a Jew, it's my job to care about the poor and work to fix the world's problems."

Angela gazed out over the water to Blackwell's Island. "That sounds like a good job. You'll always have work."

He barked out a laugh. They talked for a little while longer. His name was Yosef and his mother was in the line too, with Rabbi Weiss. They were looking for his older sister Jessie.

After a while, Mamma called Angela over. They'd made it to the head of the line. Angela waved back over her shoulder at her new friend and walked into the warehouse of death.

The building didn't have any electric lights. Instead, more homeless men held kerosene lanterns over the double rows of bare wood coffins. People were directed to walk down one side and back on the other. A police officer at the door said, "Don't just look at faces. Look for familiar clothing, shoes, watches—anything. If you need a better look, one of the men with lanterns will help you." As they shuffled into the haze, Angela heard the officer repeat himself. He kept saying the same words over and over.

As she stepped into the room, the smell hit her. Burned, rotten meat. And smoke. And something else. Something mean and

miserable that said, “Go away from this place.” The warehouse was full of people, policemen, men in suits with clipboards, and all the people in line, but it was quiet. No one spoke above a whisper. They were in the realm of the dead now.

Angela was about to ask Mamma why they shouldn't look at the faces when she saw the first dead girl. Her skull was misshapen and her face was slashed with dozens of inch-long cuts. In front of her, Annie began to snifle. Mamma took Rosie out of Annie's arms and handed her to Angela. Angela held the baby close, grateful for Rosie's warm innocence. They took small steps past one corpse, then another and another. Angela figured out the first girls in the line must have been the jumpers. The newspaper told how girls, desperate to escape the fire, had jumped from the eighth- and ninth-floor windows. Angela hadn't believed it. The *World* liked to exaggerate—or so she thought then. Not anymore.

About halfway up the line she saw her first burned girl. Or that's what she guessed the charred thing in the box was. It could have been anything, really. It was both worse and better than the girls who still looked like themselves. Some of the burned girls had watches or shoes laying on their torsos, as if the police or someone had pulled identifying items off them and laid them where people could see. The line stopped as someone called out for a lantern. A man came over and held a light over a coffin.

People leaned in. Someone pointed and nodded. Someone burst into tears. Angela didn't know how to feel—was she sorry or happy that they hadn't found their missing loved one?

Some of the girls' hair had come undone and was draped over the top coffin boards. Angela thought doctors or someone must have done this, so people could see the hair. Could she recognize Mamma by her hair? Or Marie? Angela thought so. Dark

liquid oozed out of some of the coffins. Blood, she supposed. She tried not to step in it, but then Rosie would fuss and she'd forget to watch her feet or she'd be looking at a girl or a black thing and she'd feel the stickiness on the sole of her shoe.

When a body was identified, the clipboard men would rush over and take the survivor aside. Papers would be filled out while the rest of the line shuffled by. It occurred to Angela that someone ought to have set up some tables in another part of the warehouse for this part of the procedure, someplace more private. *Maybe there were no tables? Why not?* Her brain wandered away from the horror in front of her, thinking about where they might find tables and chairs, when Annie stopped and pointed.

"Noooo," she moaned. One of the lantern men stepped over and cast his light on the corpse. Despite herself, Angela leaned in, careful to keep baby Rosie's head turned away. Even she could see it was Albina. She'd been one of the jumpers. *Was that better than burning? Maybe. But what about that plunge to the street? What did the girls think about? Did it hurt when they landed? Or did they die right away?*

A clipboard man pulled Annie out of the line. Mamma and Angela followed. What was Albina's full name? Date of birth? Religion? Your name? Address? Where do you want her sent? The man listed a half dozen mortuaries. Annie looked helplessly at Mamma. Mamma picked one. The man said thank you and walked away.

They stood there, unsure what to do next. Then Mamma put her arms around all of them and whispered, "Let's go home."

As they left the building, Angela saw that the line had grown, curling down the pier and into the street. A clot of well-dressed young people stood in line, their smiling faces bright with excitement. A pink-cheeked girl blew a bubble of gum,

popped it, and laughed. Angela realized they were there to see the dead—not to find a loved one, but for the thrill of seeing something forbidden.

Mamma walked over to them. “This is not a carnival. Look around you,” she said, waving her arm at the anxious people in line and the bereaved ones who’d been inside. “You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

The bubble-popping girl stared open-mouthed at Mamma. Before any of them could speak, Mamma walked away. Then she did something shocking, something Angela had never seen her do and never would see her do again. Mamma turned back toward the fun-seekers and spat at their feet. As she walked away again, Angela and Annie followed her down the pier. Halfway to the street, Annie burst into tears.