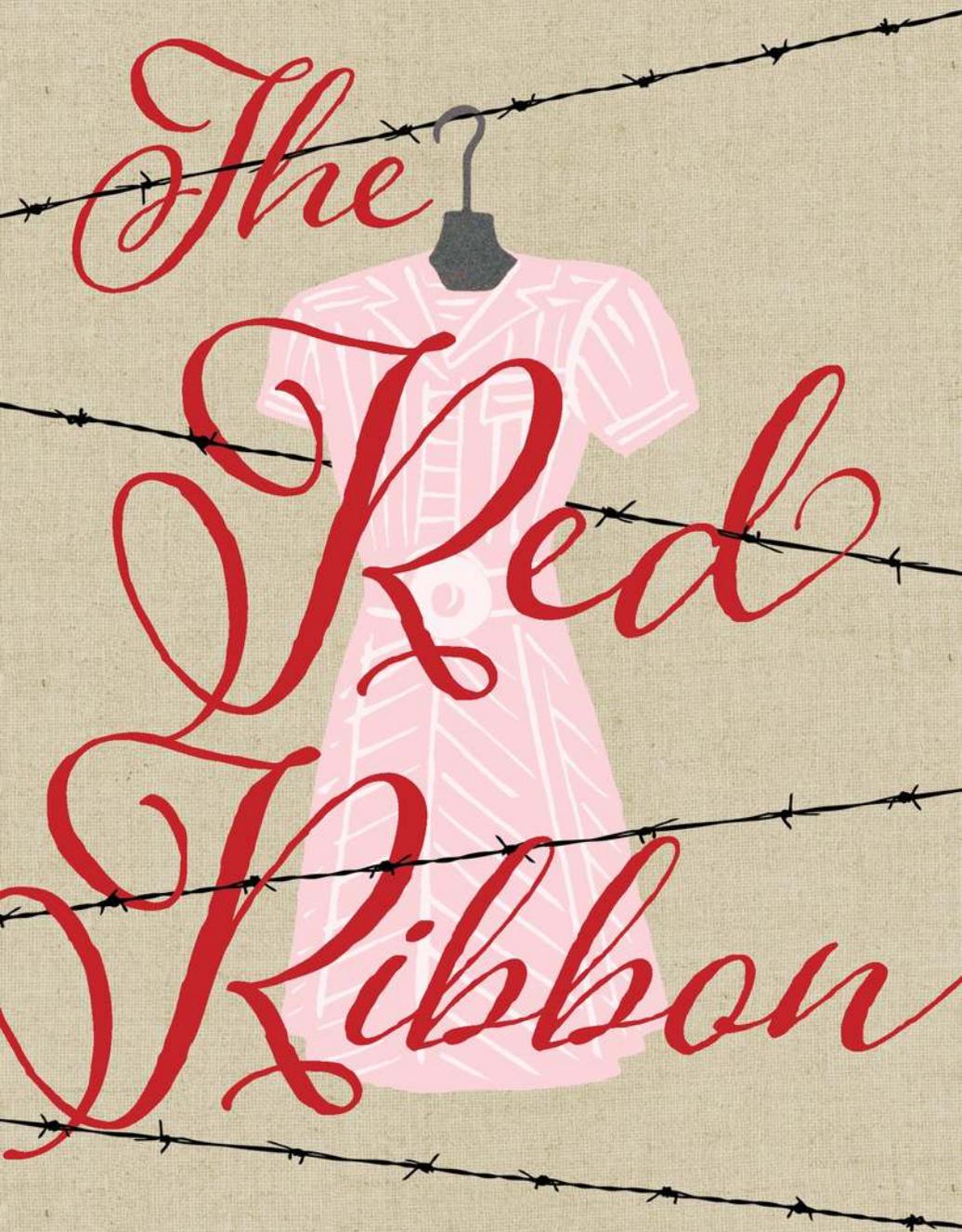


Within Auschwitz lies a sewing workshop like no other.



LUCY ADLINGTON

*The Red
Ribbon*

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Ribbon*

LUCY ADLINGTON



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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*In memory of my grandmother, born E. R. Wild,
and in tribute to the original Betty*

“Life is our cry. We have kept the faith!” we said;
“We shall go down with unreluctant tread
Rose-crowned into the darkness!”
—Rupert Brooke, “The Hill”

Green

It was really hard to run in such stupid shoes. The mud was thick as molasses. The woman behind me had the same problem. One of her shoes got stuck. That slowed her down. Good. I wanted to arrive first.

Which building was it? There? No—here. This one. I stopped dead. The woman behind nearly ran slap-bang into me. We both looked at the building. It had to be the right place. Should we just knock now? Were we too late?

Please let me not be too late.

I stood on tiptoe and peered through a small, high window at the side of the door. I couldn't see much, mostly my own reflection. I pinched my cheeks to get a bit of color and wished I had a dab of lipstick. At least the swelling around my eye had just about gone down, although the greeny-yellow bruise was still there. I could see straight; that was the main thing. Thick waves of hair would've hidden the rest. But . . . you make the best of what you've got.

"Are we too late?" the other woman wheezed. "I lost one of my shoes in the mud."

When I knocked at the door, it opened almost immediately, making both of us jump.

“You’re late,” snapped the young woman in the doorway. She looked us up and down with hard eyes. I looked back. Three weeks away from home and I still hadn’t learned to grovel properly, no matter how much I got hit. This bossy girl—not much older than me, really—was all angles, with a nose so sharp it could’ve cut cheese. I’ve always liked cheese. The crumbly sort you have in salads, or the creamy cheese that’s nice with fresh bread, or that really strong stuff with green fur that old people like on crackers . . .

“Don’t just stand there!” razor-face scowled. “Get inside! Wipe your shoes! Don’t touch anything!”

In we went. I’d made it. I was at the grandly titled Upper Tailoring Studio, otherwise known as a sewing workshop. My idea of heaven. The moment I heard there was a job here, I knew I had to get it.

Inside the workshop I counted about twenty heads bent over whirring machines, like fairy-tale characters caught in a spell. They were all clean; I noticed that straightaway. They were wearing plain brown overalls—nicer than the sack-thing slipping off my shoulders, that was for sure. Wooden tables were scrubbed bone white and covered with patterns and threads. In one corner were shelves of fabrics, showing so much unexpected color I had to blink. In another corner there was a cluster of headless, limbless dressmaker mannequins. I heard the hiss and clunk of a heavy iron and saw specks of lint floating by like lazy insects.

No one looked up from their work. They were all sewing as if their lives depended on it.

“Scissors!” came a cry from nearby. The worker at the nearest machine didn’t even pause. Her foot kept working the treadle, and she eased the fabric under the needle even as she picked up the scissors. I watched them get passed along the table, hand to hand, then *snip*, set to a length of forest-green tweed.

The sharp girl who’d opened the door snapped her fingers in my face.

“Pay attention! I’m Marta. I’m in charge here. *The boss*—understand?”

I nodded. The woman who’d come in with me just blinked and shuffled her one-shoe feet. She was pretty old—about twenty-five—and as twitchy as a rabbit. Rabbits make good gloves. I had slippers lined with rabbit fur once. They were really cozy. I didn’t know what had happened to the rabbit. I suppose it went in a stew . . .

Time to focus.

“Listen carefully,” Marta ordered. “I won’t say all this again, and—”

Bam! The door opened once more. The spring breeze blew another girl inside, one with hunched shoulders and round cheeks, like a squirrel that’s just dug up a hoard of nuts.

“So sorry.”

The new arrival gave a shy smile and looked at her shoes. I looked at them too. One was a sickly green satin slipper with a metal buckle, the other a leather brogue with broken laces.

We'd all been tossed random shoes when we were first given clothes here, but hadn't this little squirrel even managed to bargain a proper pair? I could tell straightaway she was going to be useless. Her accent was awfully, awfully . . . *you know*. Posh.

"I'm late," she said.

"No kidding," Marta replied. "Seems we've got quite a *lady* in our midst. How very kind of you to join us today, *madam*. How can I be of service?"

"They said there was a sudden vacancy at the Tailoring Studio," Squirrel replied. "That you needed good workers."

"Damn right I do! Real dressmakers, not *la-di-dah* ladies. You look like the sort of princess who's sat around on a cushion embroidering lavender bags and other useless frivolities. Am I right?"

Squirrel didn't seem offended no matter how much Marta sneered. "I can embroider," she said.

"You'll do what I order!" replied Marta. "Number?"

Squirrel put her feet together nicely. How did she manage to look so poised in that mismatched footwear? She was *not* the sort of girl I'd normally mix with. Even though she was dressed so badly, she probably thought I was too common. Beneath her.

She recited her number with perfect enunciation. Here it was all numbers, not names. Me and Rabbit reeled off our numbers too. Rabbit stuttered a bit.

Marta sniffed. "You!" She pointed to Rabbit. "What can you do?"

Rabbit-woman shivered. “I . . . I sew.”

“Idiot! Of course you do, or you wouldn’t be here. I didn’t put out a call for seamstresses who can’t sew. This isn’t some excuse to slack off from doing tougher jobs! Are you any good?”

“I . . . I sewed at home. My children’s clothes.” Her face crumpled like a used handkerchief.

“Oh god, you’re not going to cry, are you? I can’t stand snivelers. What about *you*?” Marta turned to glare at me. I shriveled up like chiffon under a too-hot iron. “Are you even old enough to be here?” she scoffed.

“*Sixteen*,” said Squirrel suddenly. “She’s sixteen. She said so before.”

“I wasn’t asking you, I was asking *her*.”

I swallowed. Sixteen was the magic number. Any younger, and you were useless.

“She’s, er, right. I’m sixteen.”

Well, I would be. Eventually.

Marta snorted. “And let me guess—you sew dresses for dollies and can just about stitch a button on, once you’ve finished your homework. Honestly! Why do they waste my time with these cretins? I don’t need schoolgirls. *Get out!*”

“No, wait, you can use me. I’m a, um—”

“You’re a what? A mama’s girl? A teacher’s pet? A waste of space?” Marta started walking away, with a little dismissive flip of her fingers.

Was that it? My first real job interview—failed. That meant going back to a job as kitchen maid or laundry scrubber

at best. At worst, quarry work or . . . or no work at all, which was the worst thing that could happen.

My grandma, who has a motto for every occasion, always says, *When in doubt, chin up, shoulders back, and be bold.* So I straightened to my full height, which was pretty tall, took a deep breath, and declared, “I’m a cutter!”

Marta looked back at me. “You? A cutter?”

A cutter was a super-skilled sewer responsible for creating the shapes that would turn into actual clothes. No amount of decent dressmaking could save a garment botched by a bad cutter. A *good* cutter was worth her weight in gold. I didn’t need gold. I just needed this job, whatever it took. It was my dream job—if you could have dreams in a place like this.

Up to that point the other workers had ignored us. Now I sensed they’d been listening in all along. Without missing a stitch, they were waiting to see what would happen next.

“Yes,” I continued. “I’m a trained pattern-drafter, cutter, and tailor. I . . . I do my own designs. One day I’ll have my own dress salon.”

“Ha! That’s a joke,” Marta sneered.

The woman on the nearest machine spoke without even taking the pins from her mouth. “We need a good cutter, since Rhoda got sick and left,” she murmured.

Marta nodded slowly. “That’s true enough. All right. Here’s what’s going to happen. You, Princess, can take over

doing ironing and scrubbing. Those soft hands of yours need toughening up.”

“I’m not a princess,” said Squirrel.

“Move!”

Marta looked me and Rabbit up and down.

“As for you two pathetic excuses for seamstresses, you can have a trial. I’ll be blunt: there’s only room for one of you. *Only one*, do you understand? And I’ll chuck you both out if you fail to meet my high standards. *I trained in all the very best places.*”

“I won’t let you down,” I said.

Marta seized something from a nearby pile of clothes and tossed it to Rabbit. It was a linen blouse, dyed such a fresh shade of mint you could practically taste it.

Marta gave her orders. “Rip the seams and let it out. It’s for a client—an officer’s wife—who drinks her cream by the jugful, so she’s rounder than she thinks she is.”

Cream . . . oh, cream! Poured over strawberries from my grandma’s best green-flowered jug . . .

I caught a glimpse of the label inside the blouse collar. My heart almost stopped beating. It was the elegantly scrolled name of one of the most revered couture houses in the world. The sort of place where I wouldn’t dare even to stare in the windows.

“And *you*”—Marta slapped a piece of paper into my palm—“another client, Carla, has asked for a dress.

Semiformal, for a music concert or something this weekend. Here are her measurements. Memorize them — I want the paper back. You can use the number four mannequin. Get fabric from over there.”

“What?”

“Choose something to suit a blonde. Scrub yourself first at that sink and put overalls on. In this workshop, cleanliness is essential. No grubby finger marks on the fabric, no bloodstains or dust. Understand?”

I nodded, desperate not to start crying.

Marta’s thin lip curled. “You think *I’m* severe?” She narrowed her eyes at me and jerked her head to the far end of the room. “Just remember who’s standing in the corner.”

At the back of the workshop there was a dark figure propped against the wall, picking at her cuticles. I glanced once, then looked away.

“Well?” said Marta. “What are you waiting for? The first fitting’s at four.”

“You want me to make a dress from scratch, before four? That’s—”

“Too hard? Too soon?” she jeered.

“That’s fine. I can do it.”

“Go on then, schoolgirl. And remember, I’m expecting you to botch up, big time.”

“I’m Ella,” I told her.

I don’t care, said her blank expression.

* * *

The workroom sink was one of those massive ceramic things, with green streaks under the taps where the pipes had wept. The soap barely lathered, but it was better than nothing—which was all I'd had for the past three weeks. There was even a towel—a *towel!*—for drying hands. Seeing clean water coming out of a tap was mesmerizing.

Squirrel, right behind me waiting her turn, said, “Looks like liquid silver, doesn't it?”

“Shh!” I frowned, conscious of the shadow of that dark figure at the far end of the room.

I took my time washing. Squirrel could wait. Even if I wasn't posh like her, I knew how important it was to be clean and well presented. Appearances matter. When I was a kid Grandma always made a *tsk-tsk* noise if I came in with grubby hands and dirty nails, or a suspicion of grime in hidden corners. *You could grow potatoes behind your ears!* she'd say, if I hadn't done a thorough rub with the washcloth.

Clean hands mean clean work was another of her mottoes. She also liked muttering *Waste not, want not*. And if anything mildly bad happened, she'd shrug and say *Better than a smack in the eye with a wet kipper!*

I never much cared for eating kippers, not when the house stank of fish for days afterward, and there were always bones, even when Grandma said, *Don't worry, it's boneless*. So you'd start in on the flesh, and then you'd gag as one of those spindly bones pronged the back of your throat. You'd have to hold up your napkin to root it out without revolting everyone else at the table. You'd put it on the side of your

plate and try not to look at it for the rest of the meal. But you'd know it was there.

Since coming to Birchwood I'd already decided I was only going to see things I wanted to. Every second of my first three weeks had been horrible—things far worse than kipper bones. I'd been like a golem—a girl without a soul—shoved this way and that, waiting, standing, squatting. Now, in the sewing workshop, I suddenly felt human again. If I truly narrowed my mind, I could believe that nothing in the world existed except making this dress for my client, Carla.

A fitting at four. It just wasn't possible. Not designing, cutting, pinning, tacking, sewing, pressing, and finishing. I was going to botch it, just as Marta had said. I was going to fail.

Don't think failure, my grandma would say. You can do anything you set your mind to. Anything. Except bake. You make lousy cakes.

As I stood there, close to panic, I felt eyes on me. It was Squirrel, over at the ironing board. She was probably laughing at me. Why wouldn't she?

I turned my back on her and went *clomp-clomp* in my stupid too-big shoes to the shelves of fabric . . . and promptly forgot all about Marta and her threats. It was just so wonderful to see colors that weren't *brown*: three weeks of nothing but wood-brown, mud-brown, and other browns too horrible to mention.

Now there were rivers of material for my fingers to wade into. Marta had said this Carla was blond. Out of Birchwood's brown, green grew in my mind: a good color for blondes. I tugged at folds and bales of fabric, searching for the perfect shade. There was moss-green velvet. Silver-spangled gauze the shade of grass in moonlight. Crisp cottons with leaf prints. Satin ribbons ripe with light . . . And my favorite—an emerald silk that rippled like cool water under dappling trees.

Already I could see the dress I would make. My hands began sketching shapes in the air, fingertips touching invisible shoulders, seams, and skirt gores. I looked around. I needed things. A table and paper. A pencil, pins, scissors, needle, thread, sewing machine, BREAKFAST.

"Excuse me." I tugged on the sleeve of a sapling-thin girl swaying past. "Can you tell me where to get—"

"Shh," the girl said. She put two fingers to her lips and mimed a zip fastening them shut. She had ridiculously elegant hands, like a nail-polish ad but without the polish.

I opened my mouth to ask why talking was forbidden, then thought better of it. The dark figure in the corner didn't appear to be watching or even listening, but you never knew.

The thin girl—Giraffe, I labeled her—signed for me to follow her along rows of workers to the far end of a trestle table. She pointed to an empty stool. Three women were already sitting there. They hunched up to make room for me. One of them was Rabbit, nervously pulling the mint-green blouse inside out and peering at the seams.

I sat down with my silk. Now I needed to make a pattern. A girl farther down the table had a roll of pattern paper and a stubby pencil. I took a deep breath. Got up. Mimed that I wanted the paper. The girl bristled, just like a hedgehog. She pulled the paper closer. I put my hand on the roll and pulled it hard. Hedgehog tugged. I tugged back. I won. I took her pencil, too.

Marta was watching. Did I imagine she smiled? She gave a little nod, as if to say, *Yes, that's how it works here.*

I rolled the paper out. It was plain brown, shiny on one side and faintly striped on the other. The sort of paper we used to wrap sausages in. Lovely plump sausages with bits of chopped onion, or sometimes tomato sausages, violently red in the frying pan. Or herb sausages flecked with green basil and thyme . . .

My stomach growled.

Grandma always used newspaper for patterns. She could sketch out a complete dress or suit pattern in seconds, straight onto the pages of the local gazette. Then she'd snip through the headlines, the ads for medicinal tonics and the racing results. You never needed more than one fitting with Grandma's patterns. Me, I had to squint a bit first and do a few faint trial runs. Usually I had Grandma looking over my shoulder when I cut. Now I was on my own. I could hear a clock in my head ticking. First fitting at four . . .

Right. The pattern was drawn.

"Hey," whispered one of the hunched women opposite.

She was wide and squat with blobby skin, like a frog. “Save me any scraps of paper, will you?” she asked.

Frog was doing buttonholes on an apple-green wool coat. It was the sort of coat that’s just right for spring if you can’t decide whether it’ll be warm or cool. We used to have an apple tree in the front yard of our house. It always seemed like *forever* before the blossoms became buds. One year the branches were loaded with fat fruit, and bent just like my back as I sewed. We had apple crumble flecked with caramelized sugar, flaky pastry apple turnovers, and even apple cider, which made me hiccup from the bubbles. When the War started, one of our neighbors chopped the tree down for firewood. They said Our Sort didn’t need trees.

“The *paper?*” Frog broke into my thoughts.

I glanced around. Was saving paper scraps allowed? Before I knew how to reply, Frog had made a face at me and turned away.

I swallowed and called, “Scissors!” in a croaky voice. And then louder: “Scissors!”

Just like I’d seen before, a sharp pair of fabric shears was handed—slowly—along the tables. They were a decent set of steel scissors with double-sided handles. Grandma would have approved.

I swallowed again. “Pins?”

I’d already caught sight of Marta’s pin tin, tucked in a pocket of her overalls. She came over. Counted out twenty. I told her I’d need more.

“My grandma says it’s best to put them head to tail on silk so it stays in place.”

“You’re making the dress up in *silk*?” Marta said it like I’d signed my own death sentence. “Don’t wreck it!”

She sniffed and moved off. I envied her. She had a roomful of people twitching to follow her orders. Plus decent shoes, a nice-ish dress under her overalls, and *lipstick*. She was a prominent. Prominents had privileges and power — just enough power to rule over the rest of us. Some prominents tried to be fair. Most loved being bullies, just like those kids at school who thought squashing others made them bigger and better. Out in the wild, if Marta was an animal, she’d be a shark, and we’d all be little fish in her ocean.

Little fish get eaten. Sharks survive.

The pins weren’t the right sort. Not the tiny “li’l” pins that Grandma taught me to use for silk, so in the end I didn’t dare put too many in, in case they left holes. The scissors terrified me too. Usually I love the sound of scissors cutting, and the flutter of excitement that goes with it. This time I felt pure fear. Once fabric is cut, it can’t be uncut. You have to be so sure where you want those flashing blades to slice the weave.

I put my hands flat on the table until they stopped shaking. I was standing to do the cutting, but my legs felt weak. Grandma liked to do her cutting on the floor, where there was more room. I wasn’t convinced the floorboards in the sewing workshop were clean enough for that. Instead I

spread the silk on the table, pinned the paper, marked on darts and tucks . . . and prepared to do the deed.

When you start cutting, use the middle of the blades of your scissors and cut with long, even strokes. If only it was that easy. Today the fabric slithered like a snake in a meadow, winding between weeds looking for a mouse to eat. There were no mice in the workroom — no crumbs for them. No food for us either. Just air and lint and a touch of dust.

Rabbit eyed my scissors. Stealthily her hands crept across the workbench toward them. I snatched them up and began snipping at imaginary loose threads. Rabbit swallowed and whispered, “Please may I . . . ?”

I pretended not to hear her. I don’t know why. When I couldn’t stall any longer, I passed the scissors over.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, like I was the spirit of selflessness.

It made me cringe to see her snipping clumsily away at that couture blouse. It had a white lace collar over the green, like cow parsley flowers in a hedgerow.

I guessed it was afternoon by the time I’d finished cutting and piecing together the dress. There’s no lunch in Birchwood, so nothing to signal midday. When I’d been working outdoors I only knew it was noon when the sun was at its highest and hottest. That was the halfway point between breakfast and supper. In the clockless sewing room, time was marked by the clank of scissors set down on wood, the sigh of needle-pulled thread, and the tireless *whirr* of

the machines. Every so often there'd be a tinkle of metal falling to the floor, and Marta would call, "Pin!" Behind her back the other workers rolled their eyes and mocked her in a silent, rippling echo of *Pin! Pin! Pin!*

The dark figure at the far end of the room barely moved. I think she must have fallen asleep.

Suddenly Marta was at my shoulder. "Done yet, schoolgirl?"

"It's all tacked and ready to sew," I said.

Marta pointed me toward a sewing machine. My hands trembled as I set up the spool and threaded the needle. *First fitting at four . . .*

I pressed my foot to the treadle, ready to set it all in motion. The needle bobbed up and down—too fast! The thread snarled. Blood rushed to my cheeks. But no harm done—yet.

I tried again. Better. I checked the thread tension, made a few adjustments, took a deep breath, and began.

It was a familiar sound—the chatter of the metal parts all moving together. Part of me felt whisked away to Grandma's sewing room back home. I used to play on the floor while Grandma did her dressmaking, picking up pins and pieces of snipped thread. Grandma called her sewing machine Betty. Betty was old. Quite a work of art. It was decorated in black enamel with gold patterning and Grandma's name etched onto it. Grandma worked the treadle in her favorite moleskin slippers, cut at the front so her swollen feet could

bulge out. When she sewed, the fabric seemed to guide itself in a straight line to the needle. I didn't yet have that magic touch. Or Grandma hovering over me to help.

A tear did fall then. It turned the silk a dark, poisonous green. I sniffed. No hankie. This was not a good time for memories. Better just to sew, one seam, one dart at a time. First the bodice pieces, then the skirt pieces, sleeves, and shoulder pads.

After each seam I leaped up from the machine and went to Squirrel at the ironing board. Frequent pressing is the secret to a neat garment—even a beginner knows that. The workshop iron had a long cord dangling from the ceiling. I prayed the iron wouldn't scorch or pucker the silk, especially since Squirrel-girl didn't seem to know quite what she was doing with it. She'd probably never done housework in her life.

Haven't you ever ironed before? I mouthed the first time I went up there.

Squirrel gave a rueful smile and shook her head. She mouthed: *The iron's heavy. And hot.*

I mouthed back fake surprise: *Who'd've thought?!*

Squirrel held out her hands for my silk. She spat on the iron to see how hot it was. The spit sizzled. She turned the thermostat down. When she actually got to pressing the pieces for me, her handling was remarkably light and efficient.

I mouthed, *Thank you.*

She held a palm out for payment, then giggled at the

look on my face. “Just teasing. I’m Rosalind. Rose,” she whispered.

Hearing a name instead of a number was like pulling on a ribbon bow to unwrap a precious gift.

“Ella.”

“I’m not really a princess.”

“Me neither.”

“Just a countess.” Rose grinned.

Marta coughed. Back to work.

Every few minutes I sneaked a peek at Rabbit. She was sewing with her whole body bent over in focus. She’d let the blouse seams out fine but she’d tacked the sleeves back in *the wrong way around*. They were bent as if the arms were broken.

“Hey!” I didn’t know her name (and she probably wouldn’t answer to Rabbit). “Hey, you?” She looked up.

Then it hit me. Marta’s warning: *There’s only room for one of you.*

It had to be me. I was *not* going to swill around in the mud outside like the others, just a nameless one of many. I had skills. Talent. Ambition. Didn’t I *deserve* to have a decent job and a chance to rise? Grandma wouldn’t want me to go under. She’d be waiting for me back home. Rabbit would have to fend for herself. So I looked away from the botched blouse and shook my head—*It’s nothing.*

Rabbit carried on wrecking her work. I got pleats pressed on my dress, put in a side zip, and started hand-sewing the

neatest neckline ever. My head drooped lower and lower. It would be so easy just to close my eyes and snooze for a while. When was the last time I'd slept properly? More than three weeks ago. Maybe a little doze wouldn't hurt . . .

Someone jostled me awake. How long had I slept? I glanced around. Rose the squirrel was just going past me. She mouthed, *Nearly four*.

Nearly four! I hustled back into action. I was still picking off tacking threads as Marta approached.

"Well, ladies, how was your first—and probably your last—day at work here? Show me the dress, schoolgirl."

I shook it out and handed it over. It was a mess. A rag. A dishcloth of a gown. The *worst* thing ever sewn in the history of dressmaking. I was aware that the other workers were watching. I couldn't breathe.

In silence Marta scrutinized every inch of the emerald silk. In silence she held it up and shook and shimmered it.

"How about that?" she said eventually. "You *can* sew. Quite well too. I should know. I trained in all the very best places."

She snapped her fingers for the blouse next. Rabbit-woman was so stiff with fear her hands could barely uncurl from the cloth. She noticed her terrible mistake with the sleeves at exactly the same moment as Marta did.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Rabbit panicked. "I know . . . the sleeves . . . the wrong way round . . . I can put them right. I won't do it again, I swear. Please let me stay."

Marta's voice was low and dangerous. "I told you how it was—only room for one of you. Isn't that right, schoolgirl?"

My heart was thudding. I wanted to explain it had just been an accident—the woman was tired, nervous, not at her best. The words stuck in my throat, like they do in a dream when you need to call for help. I unraveled with shame inside, but said nothing.

"It was an accident," came a timid voice. "She says she won't do it again."

Squirrel was hovering just behind Marta, small, watchful, ready to dart away.

Marta ignored Rose, as if she truly had been a rodent squeaking. "Get out, you idiot!" she shouted at Rabbit. "Or do I need to throw you out?" She raised her hand and took a step forward. The dark figure at the end of the room shifted and stretched.

Bleached white from fear, Rabbit scurried to the door and disappeared. We all just watched, semisafe in our sanctuary.

When the door to outside had closed again, Marta blew out a breath that said, *Don't you all realize how hard my life is?*

Next she took my green dress and headed for another door at the far end of the sewing room. That had to be the fitting room. My client, Carla, would try the dress and then I'd know if I had a job or not.

I whispered to Frog, "What . . . what will happen to her? That woman who just left?"

Frog never looked up from her apple-green wool. “Who knows? Maybe the same as Rhoda, the woman whose place you’re hoping to take.”

I waited. Frog said nothing else. She continued sewing, stitch after stitch. Marta came out of the fitting room. My eyes followed her as she slowly wove her way, sharklike, through the tables toward me. I stood up so quickly my stool fell over.

“*Pins!*” she commanded.

I scabbled on the table. Marta opened her pin box and I counted twenty pins back in. Next she collected every remnant of fabric and paper. Frog scowled—no chance of getting my paper scraps now. I wondered what she wanted them for.

Marta looked me up and down. Coming under her scrutiny was like having your soul scrubbed with one of those wiry green pan scourers. Finally, reluctantly, she put me out of my misery.

“The client says the dress is enchanting.”

I sagged with relief.

“As a reward, she gave me this. One of the perks of the job—extra food.” Marta unfolded a packet of paper. It contained a slice of hard brown bread spread with a measly layer of margarine. Twice the size of my usual supper ration.

Unbelievably, I was too twisted up inside to eat. “Er, thank you, I’m not hungry.”

“Liar! You’ve had—what? A mug of brown coffee-water

for breakfast, and you'll get a mug of brown soup-water for supper. You're hungry enough to overcome stupid fits of conscience about that dopey bungler I booted out. Hungry enough to do whatever it takes to survive here."

She knew I'd noticed Rabbit's mistake. She knew why I'd said nothing. She approved.

Right there in front of me, Marta ate the entire piece of bread and licked her fingers. She said, "Watch and learn, *Ella*, watch and learn."

If I slept at all that night, it was to dream of green dresses, wafting past in a parade of loveliness.

People laugh at fashion. *It's just clothes*, they say.

Just clothes. Except, not one of the people I've heard mock fashion was naked at the time. They all got dressed in the morning, picking clothes that said, *Hey, I'm a successful banker*. Or, *I'm a busy mother*. Or, *I'm a tired teacher* . . . *a decorated soldier* . . . *a pompous judge* . . . *a cheeky barmaid* . . . *a truck driver, a nurse* . . . Clothes show who you are, or who you want to be.

People might say, *Why do you take clothes so seriously, when there are more important things to worry about, like the War?*

I was worried about the War all right. The War got in the way of everything. Out in the real world, outside of here, I'd wasted hours lining up at shops with empty shelves. More hours hiding in the cellar when bombers flew over. I'd put up with endless news updates, and Grandad plotting battle

lines on a map pinned to the kitchen wall. I'd known War would come—it was all people talked about for months.

It was War that brought me to Birchwood—known, in a harsher language, as Auschwitz-Birkenau. The place where everyone arrives, and nobody leaves.

Here people find out that clothes aren't so trivial after all. The first thing They did when we arrived was make us strip. Minutes off the train and we were sorted into male and female. They shoved us into a room and told us to undress. Right there. With everyone watching. Not even underwear allowed.

Our clothes were folded into piles. Without them we weren't bankers, teachers, nurses, barmaids, or truck drivers anymore. We were scared and humiliated.

Just clothes.

I'd stared at my pile of folded clothes. I memorized the soft wool of my sweater. It was my favorite green sweater, embroidered with cherries, a birthday present from Grandma. I memorized the neat folds of my trousers and my socks, rolled into a pair. My bra, too—my first-ever bra!—that I'd hidden from view along with my knickers.

Next They took our hair. All our hair. Shaved it off with blunt razors. Gave us limp triangles of cloth as headscarves. Made us pick out shoes from a pile about as high as a house. I'd found a pair. Rose obviously hadn't been so lucky, with her one silk shoe and her one leather brogue.

They said we'd get our clothes back after a shower. They

lied. We got sack dresses with stripes. As Stripeys we ran around like herds of panicked zebras. We weren't people anymore. They could do what they liked to us.

So don't tell me clothes don't matter.

I turned up at the workshop the next day, bleary-eyed from a predawn start. I was oh so ready to get dressmaking . . . only to find I was ordered to polish the fitting-room floor.

"I thought I was here to sew, not scrub," I complained to Marta.

The slap came too fast to avoid. One hard palm, on the side of my face that wasn't yet bruised. I was so surprised I almost lifted a hand to hit back.

Marta's eyes glinted as if she knew what I was thinking. This was about showing who was boss. Fine. She was.

I washed, put on a brown coverall, and collected polishing gear. Rose wasn't anywhere to be seen. Too soft to stick it out in the sewing room, obviously. Her sort were all very nice, but they had no backbone. Not that it mattered to me, of course. I wasn't here to make friends.

When I opened the door to the fitting room, I stood there openmouthed. Birchwood was so bare, so stark, I'd almost forgotten there could be *nice* things in a room.

For starters, there was a lovely bobble-trim on the lampshades . . . and real lamps, not just bare light bulbs protected by wire cages. There was an armchair in one corner. An *actual* armchair, with braiding and a grass-green

cushion. Such a fat cushion! If I were a cat I'd curl up on it and only wake up when someone set out a saucer of cream.

Pretty cotton curtains hid the view from the windows. Peony-patterned paper covered concrete walls. Around the fitting stage in the center of the room, there were real woven rugs and a parade of dressmaker mannequins.

Most decadent of all, there was a mirror.

It was a fantastic, full-length tilted mirror, the frame painted white with gold scrolling. The sort of mirror that would stand in the fitting room of the finest city fashion house. I could imagine myself in such a place, padding across soft carpets to see how good my gowns looked on ridiculously rich clients. There'd be a waiting list for my creations, of course. Minions scurrying to do my bidding. And silver trays with pots of tea and plates of pink cakes—those tiny cakes made of fluff and icing sugar . . .

“Hello, Ella.”

A voice broke my daydream. Turning, I caught a view of myself in the mirror. What a scarecrow! Ugly clothes, stupid shoes, bruised face. No glamorous accessories, only flannel cleaning mitts, a yellow duster, and a tin of polish. Standing next to me in the reflection was Squirrel-girl, Rosalind, holding a bucket of steamy hot water. Her sleeves were rolled up, and her dainty hands were raw red.

“I'm on window-cleaning duty!” she said brightly, as if it was a treat. “Except I can't get to the top panes.”

She was a bit of a shorty. I was tall for my age, which was

how I could pass for sixteen. Tall but not at all curvy. Even before the mouse-sized rations here, I'd struggled to fill a bra. School skirts always threatened to slip off my straight hips even though I ate and ate and ate.

Grandma reassured me I'd fill out. "Wait till you hit forty," she said. "That's when I got big."

There weren't many women aged forty or older in Birchwood. Those who were looked eighty. Youth was stronger—lasted longer. As long as you weren't too young: sixteen minimum, just as Rose had prompted me the day before. Otherwise . . .

Then I forgot all about Rose and Unthinkable Things. I'd spotted a pile of fashion magazines. *World of Fashion* and *Fashion Forecast Monthly*. They were exactly the same ones sold at my newsstand back home. The shopkeeper—a twitchy little hamster of a woman with jangly gold earrings—always kept back a copy of each title for me and Grandma.

Back home, Grandma and I used to spend hours reading these magazines, forgetting all about War as we turned the pages together.

"Seams too close together on the back of that," Grandma would say, stabbing a picture, or, "put *those* pockets on *that* dress and you've got a stunner." Or both at the same time we'd chorus, "What a disgusting color!" or "What a gorgeous outfit!" Then she would make coffee in little china cups—not quite as strong as the way Grandad liked it—and she'd pour something into hers from a smoky green

bottle on the top shelf of the pantry, “to add a little zing,” she’d confess.

Water droplets splashed on the magazine covers. Rose was wobbling with her bucket, up on the edge of the armchair.

“Sorry!” she sang out.

Sorry doesn't butter any bread, my grandma says.

“I could . . .”

“Would you? Thank you!” Rose jumped down and passed me the bucket.

I had been going to say, *I could hold the chair*, but Rose assumed I was offering to clean the window glass for her. As if! The last thing I wanted to do was see outside this safe haven. The only view from the windows would be of watchtowers poised like storks along wire fences. And chimneys. Smoking chimneys.

When I was done Rose smiled and said thank you. I shrugged and went to pull the rugs up, still thinking of the wonderful pictures in *Fashion Forecast*. They gave me so many ideas for new frocks. If I cleaned well, would Marta let me sew again? Sewing was my love in life. Also, if I sewed there might be more rewards. I’d been so *stupid* not taking that bread the day before. Cleaning could mean sewing *plus* food. Perfect.

I knelt to start polishing. I quickly got a nice technique going—hands in mitts, circle with the right hand, circle with the left.

“You don’t do it like that,” said Rose, putting her bucket down.

Her cultured voice cut my confidence. She had to be faking the posh accent to make the rest of us feel like yokels.

I scowled at her. “I thought you were a *countess*. If you were, you’d have an army of servants to do it for you.”

“Not an army—but quite a few.”

“So you’re rich?”

“I was.”

“Lucky you.”

She spread her hands as if to say, *See how lucky I am*. “I still know how to polish a floor better than you. Watch this . . .”

Off came her stupid mismatched shoes. On went a spare pair of mitts. On her *feet*.

Right there in the middle of the fitting-room floor, Rose started doing a soft-shoe shuffle. Shimmy to the right, shimmy to the left. Hip wiggle here, bottom wiggle there. She snapped her fingers and began to hum oh so very quietly. I knew the tune! Grandma used to sing it in the sewing room, tapping her slippers to the beat.

“*Rose!*” I warned. “What if someone hears you?”

She giggled. Unbelievably, I giggled too. Suddenly she shot off like an ice skater, right around the fitting stage in the center of the room, past the mirror, and up to where I was kneeling.

“May I have this dance?” she asked, with a princely bow.

“Are you crazy?” I hissed.

She shrugged her little squirrel shoulders. “Probably the sanest person in this place, m’dear. Care to waltz?”

Waltz? Here?

The way Rose looked, so bold and playful, I actually couldn't resist. I pretended to simper at the invitation, then rose up gracefully to join her. Well, maybe not *gracefully*. I still had polish mitts on my hands. Copying Rose, I put them on my feet. Forgetting everything else, we danced around the fitting-room floor, humming and giggling at the same time. We were princesses in a fairy tale! We were glamour goddesses in a glitzy ritzy nightclub! We were beauty queens in a pageant!

We were caught.

Footsteps crunched the gravel path to the outer door. There was someone in the doorway with a face so flat it could have been painted on. Rose and I froze, as if caught in a spell. There was no time to grovel. No time to erase our existence from the room. A client had arrived.

She was tall, with solid yellow hair and lips like sulky cushions. She had a heavy tread. Her boots left prints on the newly polished floor. The bobbles on the lampshade trembled. So did I.

She fixed us with a gaze that had us pinned to the wall like butterflies in a collection case, then she strode into the room. She set her gloves on the magazines and her hat on the armchair. Her whip went in the corner near the door.

Here we were, in a prison camp for innocents, run by criminals.

And here was one of the guards.

* * *

All my life I'd dreamed of owning a dress shop. When I should've been out playing with other kids or at the very least doing schoolwork, I was sitting cross-legged on the floor of Grandma's workroom, making miniatures of the gowns going under her machine needle. My dolls even discussed the décor of fantasy fitting rooms (I did all the voices) then posed in their precocious fashions.

Now I was in an actual fitting room, with an *actual client*, and I turned into a rabbit, just like the woman yesterday. But rabbits are easy prey for dogs, foxes, and wolves, especially when they're wearing polishing mitts on their feet. Quickly I whipped the mitts off and put on my stupid wooden shoes.

"Hello, I'm Carla!" breezed the client. Her accent was stodgy, how a potato would sound if it could talk. She was nothing like the bored block of a guard in the sewing room — that dark figure watching over us. Carla was young and bursting with energy, like the boisterous girls I used to see in gangs on the streets back home, who've just left school to start their first job.

"Yes, I'm early!" she exclaimed. "I just *had* to try on my new dress again. Have you seen it? The green silk. I *love* it. So stylish. So chic." She pronounced it *chick*. "Just *enchanting*. Won't everyone be jealous when they see what I'm wearing?"

She unbuttoned her jacket and held it out to me. Wordlessly, I took it. Where was I supposed to put it?

The door to the workshop burst open and in came Marta, as if pulled on wheels. She braked and blustered, “Excuse me, ma’am. I’m so sorry — we didn’t expect you so soon.” She snapped her fingers at Rose. “You! Get the dress.”

To me she hissed, “Straighten the rugs!”

Carla carried on talking as she undressed. “Such a lovely spring day again. The mornings are lighter, aren’t they? I do hate getting up in the dark, don’t you? Here . . .”

I was given her skirt to hold too.

In slip and stockings Carla stepped up onto the fitting stage in the center of the room. She admired herself in that amazing mirror. There was plenty of her to admire. She was rounded in all the right places, unlike me. My hips were so narrow they’d just about fit in a toaster like a slice of bread.

Rose came back in with the dress. *My dress*. I almost sighed as it slipped over Carla’s up-reached arms and ran like water over her tummy and rump. It touched exactly where it should and swished beautifully as she turned this way and that in front of the mirror. Grandma would be proud of my creation.

Carla beamed at her reflection and clapped her hands like a kid in a cake shop. “Oh, you are so clever. Such neat stitching. Such a flattering design — how did you do it?”

“I—”

I got no further. Marta glared at me — *silence*.

“Years of practice,” Marta murmured. “It helps to have a client with such a good figure. I knew this style would suit you, and I picked this shade especially for spring. Silk is difficult to work with, but the effect is worth it, I’m sure you’ll agree. I did train in all the very best places.”

Marta went around the hem of the skirt, checking it was level, front and back. Something fell. She snapped her fingers at me: *pin!* I crouched down and swept the floor— with the back of my hand, like Grandma had taught me to do— until I felt the pin. Grandma had a saying: *See a pin, pick it up, all that day have good luck.* Hearing Marta take credit for my work, I could happily have jabbed that pin into her arm. Instead I handed it back.

“The dress will be *wonderful* for the concert at the end of the week,” said Carla. “All those violins—it’s not my thing, but I want to look pretty, of course. And thanks to you, I will.”

“I’ll have the hem done in an hour,” Marta said, straightening up and admiring “her” work.

“Ye-es . . .” Carla stopped posturing and glared into the mirror.

Marta frowned. “Is something wrong?”

I had an urge to step forward and say, *Yes, there’s something wrong! That’s my dress you’re taking credit for!* Plus, if I’d had the nerve, I’d’ve added that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the dress.

Carla clapped her hands once more. “I’ve got it! Bigger pads in the shoulders—that’ll really add some oomph. And