Chapter 1/Wollowitz Shirtwaist Factory

Dark clouds gathered overhead like large predatory birds as Leah made her way to the Wollowitz Shirtwaist Factory. The clouds matched her mood as she pressed through the crowds of people on the streets of the Lower East Side. She should be feeling happier about moving to America, reuniting with her brothers, but life wasn't working out as she had imagined it.

Of course, she and the children were safer here in America, after the attack on her village in Russia, two years ago in 1905, but their poverty made every day so precarious. With her brother Dov cutting the patterns, there were nonstop pieces to sew pieces far into the night which she and her brother turned into shirtwaists for Mr. Wollowitz. Their low wages meant trying to complete as many shirtwaists as they could each day, but it was never enough. She had been forced to send ten year old Benny out to find a job after school in order to help with the bills.

He was supposed to be running errands for Wollowitz and bring home more fabric for them to work on. But he kept ignoring her requests.

"Sorry Mama, I forgot."

"I can't today. I have to stay late after school."

And then he would run off, after gulping down just a swallow of kasha and tea, with hardly a word and no goodbye kiss. Back home in Koritz, he had been obedient and sweet, even after that awful night of the attack when his father was killed. Even then he was a great support to her.

"You're the man of the house," she told him. "Papa would want you to be strong."

And he did try. But now in America, now that they were safe, Benny was miserable. He stayed out after dark, was rude to his uncles and barely spoke to her. Only his brother, Joseph, with his two year-old giggles, could make Benny smile. And today she had to interrupt her sewing to go to the Factory to pick up the material that Benny forgot.

Rain began to pelt the neighborhood, where each street was lined by tenement buildings, five and six floors tall, all looking like brick boxes flanked by the iron fire escapes, with tiny apartments squashed

back to back. Leah clutched the bundle of finished shirtwaists close to her chest as if it were a small child, protecting it from getting wet or splattered with mud. Even though she worried about Benny, it was still a treat to be outside on the street, feeling the chaotic pulse of the Lower East Side. So different from a small Russian village of Koritz.

She picked her way carefully around the pushcarts lining the sidewalks, piled high with onions, potatoes, cabbages, cages of live chickens, pots and pans, or shoes and boots of all sizes. Women out doing their daily shopping began to scatter as the rain came down harder. Pushcart owners ran to cover their wares, grumbling they'd have to close up before making enough sales. Crossing the street, Leah avoided the garbage in the gutters and horse droppings which made walking hazardous. It was still cold but in the summer, she thought, the smells must be over-powering.

A few older Jewish women passed her and Leah noticed that they still wore *sheitels,* wigs, which some had covered with a kerchief. She thought back to the day she and Morris had married. Fanny, the matchmaker, had not been entirely honest with either of them, anxious to close the deal.

"I want a scholarly husband," Leah had insisted, but even at sixteen, she didn't want one who was only interested in prayers and Torah. Morris, twelve years older, had requested a smart, strong wife who could give him lots of children, but didn't expect to marry a rebellious, stubborn girl. When the wedding ceremony was completed and Leah refused to shave her hair in Orthodox Jewish custom, Morris was outraged and even angrier when she refused to give up her secular books, novels by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and poetry by Pushkin.

"They are blasphemous," he yelled, while she shouted back, "I will never give them up, never."

She made it worse by speaking Russian, a language considered forbidden by the Orthodox community who insisted that Jews only speak Yiddish, not the language of their oppressors. Finally, in a compromise, she agreed to keep her thick braids covered and never speak Russian in public. She would promise nothing more. Leah had always wanted to go her own way, a path her father had encouraged, but strangely not her mother.

“If you must disagree, keep your opinions to yourself,” she had counseled, much to Leah’s surprise even at a young age. “Men can be very hard to live with, otherwise. Not everyone is like your father.” Morris certainly was not like him and Leah tried keeping quiet, but most times she couldn’t.

As she walked by a storefront, she stopped a moment to see her reflection in the store window. A tallish, young woman appearing a bit older than her twenty-eight years stared back at her, reddish-brown hair, still braided, but uncovered, wearing a long skirt and shirtwaist, looking like any average American woman. If only she could really feel American, feel she was at home.

Remembering her arguments with Morris still made her feel guilty. At the end, he protected his family with his life from that soldier’s sword. That futile, frantic search to find someone to help staunch his wounds, but she couldn’t save him. Even that last day, they had argued and he died never hearing her final goodbye. He had tried so hard to be a good husband, but they just weren’t the right match.

Finally, she arrived at the building that housed the factory. One of the two elevators had an “Out of Order” sign, but since moving in with her brothers in their fifth floor apartment, Leah was used to the climb. She ignored the other elevator, not trusting it to make the trip safely. The hallways were dim, but not so dark that she couldn’t see how dirty the floors were, with English words she didn’t understand smeared on the walls. Scurrying noises unnerved her, but she continued on.

This was the first time that she had come to the Factory. Dov or Benny always delivered the finished garments, picked up more fabric or collected their wages. So she was unprepared when she opened the door and was struck by a wall of heat and stuffy air. Rows of girls sat either sewing by hand or at machines stitching the shirtwaists. Some attached lace to the collars, others added tiny buttons. Men stood over pressers which gave off steam, making the room even hotter. In the corner was a young child, no more than seven, her big eyes teary-red, her tiny fingers cutting loose threads from finished shirts with a pen knife. Dust and cotton fluff floated in the air as if a winter storm was brewing. With no

open door or window, it was hard to breathe and Leah saw that some of the girls had tied handkerchiefs around their faces.

A man was going up and down the aisles checking to see if the girls' shirts were in perfect order. If he didn't like the stitching or the button holes or he thought the cuffs were slightly uneven, he gruffly threw the garment back at the seamstress.

"Ach," he said to one girl. "I'm not paying for bad work. Do better." Sometime, Leah thought, he threw work back without really checking the piece closely. He seemed to enjoy yelling at the girls.

"*Mamser,"* one of the girls mumbled in Yiddish. "He likes to shame us. It makes him feel like a big shot." Then she quickly lowered her head as the man approached Leah with a bundle of material.

This must be Mr. Wollowitz, Leah thought. He was short, thin, wisps of hair barely covering his skull. His eyes peered through thick glasses, a tiny square of a dark moustache perched above his upper lip.

"You, Mrs. Petetz? Good, Here's the material. Bring work back before Saturday." His voice was hoarse and he spoke quickly, leaving no space for a response.

Leah waited until he was finished, then asked, "My Benny, he doing your errands everyday?"

"No," Wollowitz answered. "Your boy not here for days. Once I see him outside with some bad kids. Hooligans they was. Be careful, Missus, or he get into trouble. You should pay more attention to him."

Leah squared her shoulders and took a breath. "I'm sure he has good reason. He's a good boy."

As she turned to leave, anxious to get away, Wollowitz stopped her. "Is that one of our shirts you wearing?" He looked closely, a bit too closely and Leah stepped back.

"No," she answered sharply. "My brother buy this as a present when I come from Russia." Wollowitz didn't look convinced but said nothing more.

What an awful man, she decided, first saying Benny was in trouble and then accusing her of stealing one of his stupid shirtwaists. If only they weren't so desperate all the time for money. All her dreams about America; getting work, school for Benny, a better life for both

children, it was all so much harder that she thought it would be. Money was scarce, but, thank God. there were no soldiers trying to kill the Jews.

Looking at the girls working, Leah realized that if she could work in the factory, she would have an uninterrupted day of sewing, make more shirts and earn more money, but there would be no one to look after Joseph. Seeing this workplace and meeting Wollowitz, she wondered how anyone survived the long day in this room with these horrifying conditions.

She hurried back home, hoping that Benny would be there and she could at last discover what he was up to, but only Dov was in the apartment. Joseph was playing nearby with a rag doll Leah had made for him. She lifted the child up onto her lap as she looked around and saw that Dov hadn't been doing any pattern cutting while she was gone.

"Dov, you don't do work? Why not?"

"*Shvester,* sometimes a person just needs some time to think. Time to daydream a little. Remember as kids, those afternoons when we would tell each other our dreams, what we wanted to do when we got older? A great writer you would marry, travel to foreign places. Me, I'd marry a rich man's daughter who would set me up in business so I could also get rich."

"Sure, but those were dreams and none of them came true, did they? That was before Mama died, when we were very young. Now times are hard and we must work every minute just to make a dollar. And do you also remember how brother Gershon complained every time to Papa that he did all the chores while we sat around daydreaming?"

"Yes," Dov laughed, "but you went off with Papa to read poetry."

It was true. All those treasured afternoon out under their apple tree, listening to her adored father reciting poetry, sounding like God to her as he read a favorite poem by Pushkin.

"My child, I dare not, over you,
Start the blessings' simple citation,
You, -with your peaceful heart and view
An angel, bringing consolation."

"I can't bear that I wasn't there when he died," she said.

"Leah, nothing could be done. He collapsed that morning while shaving, gone before he fell to the floor. With Mama and Papa gone and no money to speak of, Gershon and I decided to come here, to America."

"And I bless you two for your help. Without you, the boys and I would still be desperate in Russia. I don't mean to be a scold." She took his hand and kissed it. "But Wollowitz wants all of this done before Saturday."

"That old buzzard doesn't care about the Sabbath," Dov said. "I don't think that Wollowitz and God are even on speaking terms."

"I've seen how God treats those who are good to Him," Leah said. "Nobody cared more for his God than Morris and God did nothing to save him." She had had enough of God, waiting for Him to help her and her family, and receiving nothing for their faith.

They heard the door open and Benny walked in, slowly, edging towards the bedroom where he could take refuge, his face reddened from the cold air, slouched over as if he wanted to become invisible.

"Benny, *kind,* where have you been, what are you doing after school?" Looking at him, Leah felt a heaviness, knowing that for many days he had not been telling her the truth.

"Working," he said, "like you said I should." He sounded defiant as if he was holding back anger.

"Not for Mr. Wollowitz. I saw him this afternoon and he hasn't seen you for days." Leah stood in front of the boy, hands on his shoulders in a tight grip so he couldn't escape. "I ask again. What have you been doing?"

Benny stared down at his muddy shoes, but finally blurted out, "I work for the boys in the neighborhood." He tried to twist out of Leah's grasp, but she held firm. "They needed someone to run errands and I'm fast."

It surprised Leah to hear he was fast, but she could see that he was growing taller, thinner, almost outgrowing his old knickers and jacket.

"The Irish boys?" She forced his chin up so he couldn't look away. "I thought you didn't like them."

"I don't, but I don't like that Mr. Wollowitz either, and they said they'd pay me a dollar a week."

“Alright. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“As long as I bring money, I don’t think you care.”

Now he did look straight at her and his eyes were black and hard, like bits of bituminous coal. Leah felt them strike out at her and she had to turn away.