NOVELLA

Burning Girls

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illustration by **Anna + Elena Balbusso**

In America, they don't let you burn. My mother told me that.

When we came to America, we brought anger and socialism and hunger. We also brought our demons. They stowed away on the ships with us, curled up in the small sacks we slung over our shoulders, crept under our skirts. When we passed the medical examinations and stepped for the first time out onto the streets of granite we would call home, they were waiting for us, as though they'd been there the whole time.

The streets were full of girls like us at every hour of day and night. We worked, took classes, organized for the unions, talked revolution at the top of our voices in the streets and in the shops. When we went out on strike, they called us the *fabrente maydlakh*, the burning girls, for our bravery and dedication and ardor, and the whole city ground to a halt as the society ladies who wore the clothing we stitched came downtown and walked our lines with us. I remember little Clara Lemlich, leaping to her feet at a general meeting and yelling, "What are we waiting for? Strike! Strike! Strike!" Her curly hair strained at its pins as if it might burst out in flames, the fire that burns without consuming.

I was raised in Bialystok. I was no stranger to city life, not like those girls from the shtetls who grew up surrounded by cows and chickens and dirt. Though I had my fair share of that as well, spending months at a time with my bubbe, who lived in a village too small to bother with a real name, three days' journey from the city.

My sister, Shayna, she stayed in the city with our dressmaker mother and shoemaker father, and learned to stitch so fine it was as though spiders themselves danced and spun at her command. Not me, though. I learned how to run up a seam, of course, so that I could be a help to Mama when I was home, but my apprenticeship was not in dressmaking. Mama could see from the beginning that I was no seamstress.

Mama didn't have the power herself, but she could find it in others. Eyes like awls, my mama had. Sharp black eyes that went right through you. When I was born she took one look at me and pronounced, "Deborah—the judge."

When Mama saw what I was going to be, she knew that I would have to spend as much time with my grandmother as I did with her, and so when I was four years old, my father rented a horse and cart and drove me out to my bubbe's village. That first time, I sobbed all the way there as if my heart would break. Why would my mama and papa send me away? Why could I not stay with them as I always did? I imagined it had something to do with my mama's rounding belly, but I did not know what.

My bubbe was a *zegorin* in her village, one who leads the women in prayer at shul, and after only a few hours by her side I was so happy to be with her that I barely noticed when Papa left. Over that summer and the ones that followed, she kept me by her side and taught me not only the proper rites but how to conduct myself toward other women, how to listen to what's not being said as well as what is. She was a witch, looking after the women of her village, because the kinds of troubles women have are not always the kinds you want to talk to the Rebbe about, no matter how wise he is.

If her village made Bialystok look like a metropolis and we had to be afraid of the Cossacks, it was as close as a girl like myself could get to *cheder*, the Jewish schools where little

boys began their education in Hebrew and reading Torah. Every day my grandma set me to learning Torah and the Talmud and even some Kabbalah. None of these are for girls, say the wise rebbes, but for the working of pious magic, what else can one do? I studied the sacred words and memorized the names of God and his angels, and I liked that best. Within a few years, I was able to help my bubbe as she wrote out amulets to preserve infants from the *lilim* and prayers for women whose men were wandering out in the world, peddling in each little town in order to keep their families in bread. I couldn't get away from the sewing, though. Still I had to sew simple shirts of protection to preserve those same peddlers from harm, and every time I pricked my finger and bled on the fabric, I had to start over again.

When I returned home after that first summer, Bubbe came with me, the first and last time she ever did so. She did not like the city, though she admitted it was safer for us than a town exposed to the wild like hers. And so the first birth I ever witnessed was that of my little sister, who from the very beginning was wreathed in dimples and golden hair. She blinked her green eyes up at Mama and smiled so bewitchingly that Mama smiled back and whispered, "Shayna *maedele*." So Shayna was her name.

I did not get the golden hair or green eyes, but then, Shayna did not get any of our bubbe's powers. When I examined myself that evening in my mama's hand mirror I saw sharp angles, even at four, coarse black hair, and eyes like Mama's. Eyes like icepicks. I was not an attractive child, not like Shayna.

But I had the power. I knew already that I could be useful.

The following summer, when Papa drove me to Bubbe's, I bounced up and down in my seat as though I were one of the horses and could speed the cart on its way. I did not like to think of pretty Shayna at home with our mama and not me, but my bubbe's house was where I was the favorite. My fondest memories are of sitting at her kitchen table writing out the names of angels and symbols of power while she praised my memory and confided that there was no shame in making up names and symbols when one ran out of traditional ones—for is it not true that all things are held in the mind of God, and so anything we create has been created already?

Less to my taste, but even more practical, were the lessons I learned from watching Bubbe's visitors. Women from the village came to see her, both the *shayna yidn* and the *proste yidn*. They came in and my grandmother would offer them coffee and talk to them as if they were old friends just come over to pass the afternoon. Then, usually, just as they were leaving, they would turn and say, as though they had almost forgotten, "Oh, Hannah, a puzzle for a you," and my grandma would usher them back to the kitchen and listen intently as they poured out stories about sick children, women's illnesses, being with child when one more would be more than a woman could ever want. Most problems my grandma could solve with a jar of her broth, seasoned this way or that, but this last was always trickier, and was when Bubbe welcomed another pair of hands most. I could not manipulate her instruments as well as I liked with my smaller hands, but I could boil them and watch and learn. And when it was time for a baby to come, my smaller hands were a great help.

What was hardest for me to learn was tact.

Once when I was eight and I was studying the holy symbols and how best to combine them with the various names of God, a local woman, a nobody to my mind, a maidservant home for a visit, for heaven's sake, rushed into my grandma's cottage and stood there looking around her. I did not like her at all. Her stupid stuttering interrupted my thoughts and she looked like a lost cow as she stood there blinking, unable even to articulate her need. I scorned her, knowing in my child's way that I would never be at a loss for words like this, no matter my trouble.

"Well?" I asked her.

Nothing. She said nothing for a long minute and then she stuttered out my grandmother's name.

"Fine," I said. But instead of running to fetch my bubbe from the other room, I just stuck my head in and hollered, "Bubbe, another pregnant maid for you!"

Two things happened. One was that the girl burst into tears, and the other was that my grandma appeared in the kitchen and slapped my face so hard that it felt as if one of God's angels had smitten me. I landed on my *tuchus*.

"Dry your eyes, my darling," said my grandma to the girl, while I stood rubbing my jaw like an idiot. "And please forgive my granddaughter. She is sharp enough, but there is no heart in her chest, only a steel gear."

I ran out of the house and into the garden, where I climbed into my favorite spot in an old birch tree that my bubbe used for tea leaves and tar. Not pretty and no heart, only a steel gear. There was not much future for a girl like that, I thought. No marriage, certainly, and thus no children. No wonder my mama did not delight in me as she did in my sister. Papa loved me best, in his quiet way, but he did not have my mama's sharp eyes; most likely he just could not see my emptiness. I wept, feeling sorry for myself, but only a little. Well, I thought, if I cannot be pretty and I cannot be kind, I can be powerful. I *would* be powerful, and make everybody see it. More powerful than Bubbe, even.

Despite my renewed vow to study, I was not to learn anything for a week. Instead, I had to keep house as well as I could while my grandmother stood over me and harangued me.

"You think you are somebody special, a queen, maybe, to be so cruel to someone coming for help? Smart you are, and a

witch you may be in time, but a *zegorin*, never, never so long as you keep like this! You will never command respect, and you will never be able to practice your skills, for nobody will come to you! People must come to us with trust, and if you must speak sharply to a girl you do it in private, so that she understands that you do it for her own good! Not hollering contempt like a Cossack!"

"I was not like a Cossack!" I said. "I hurt nobody!"

"So that girl was crying because she stubbed her toe? She's not the first to be taken in by the master of the house and she won't be the last, and anybody who comes for help should get a hearing, and not be scorned by a child too young to lace her own boots!"

I cannot say that, after this incident, I felt kinder toward those visitors of my grandmother's whose problems were, I felt, of their own making, but I learned to school my face and my tongue and even to feel some compassion for their suffering. When I was at home, though I would pull Shayna aside to tell her the gossip of Bubbe's village. She would have been about four or five then, the age I was when first I went to my Bubbe's, and she always wanted to know what it was I was doing.

"What am I doing?" I would toss my head. "What am I doing indeed but cleaning up the mistakes of dullards who should know better!"

Shayna's eyes grew wide. "What kind of mistakes?" She was at the age when she was always spilling her milk or tripping over nothing, and she had great sympathy with those who made mistakes, but I did not. After all, my grandmother rarely had to correct me more than once on the same matter.

"Foolish girls!" I told her. "Foolish girls who watch the horses and cows but don't know enough to keep their own legs closed if they don't want to foal or calve."

Shayna chewed on her lip. "Well," she said, "You can't keep your legs together while you're walking, or you'd fall. Do they fall a lot, like me?"

I tossed my hair again, annoyed to be talking to such a baby. "You don't know anything," I said. "Just like them."

But it was only to Shayna I would whisper such scornful things. To everybody else, and especially to my bubbe, I listened patiently and even kindly.

And so almost eight years passed, with Shayna learning to sew dresses from our mother and me learning how to use my powers from our bubbe. And then one evening, in the middle of winter, my best friend Yetta banged on the front door of our house, and when I answered, she pulled me out onto the street.

"It's Rifka," she said. "She's in trouble."

Rifka was Yetta's older sister, and I did not wonder what kind of trouble she was in. She had been almost engaged to a butcher's son, but they had fallen out over his attentions to another girl.

"Poor thing," I said, unthinking, and then Yetta smacked me, just lightly, but enough so that I paid attention.

"Don't give me 'poor thing!'" she said. "Everyone knows how you spend your summers, and I will not go to anyone who might tell Mama or Papa. If you are a friend to me, you will come help Rifka now!"

Of course, I was only too pleased to be asked. I collected my bag of tools and herbs that I had put together under my grandma's green eyes and set out, telling Mama that Yetta and I were going for a walk. Rifka was not far along—anxiety had made her careful, and I could have mixed up the powders she needed blindfolded, but she clasped me to her and wrung her hands as though I had moved heaven and earth. When she miscarried the following day, tears of joy ran down her face as I held her hand.

She did not tell her Mama or Papa but she did tell her friends, and soon enough I was called upon for various illnesses and childbirths and other women's matters. It got so I could no longer go to my bubbe's for more than a month every year, for the women of Bialystok's Jewish Quarter could not do without me. I missed the idyllic months with my bubbe, but I was proud of my learning and new status. And I do not regret this! Learning and skill are things to be proud of; they are the stars that light the sky of one's lifetime.

By sixteen, I was bringing in as much money as my mother and sister combined. For not every family can afford dresses, but every family will have a sick child, or a distressed daughter.

When I did go to my bubbe's, I took over more and more of her work in order to give her some rest.

"I *do* manage without you," she'd say, as I'd come home late from sitting up with a child with whooping cough.

"Yes," I'd say, "but you shouldn't. I can hear your bones creaking from here."

I don't think she minded such comments as much as she pretended to. I think she was proud of me. She called me her good right hand. I was there with her when she fought the *lilit* at the bedside of Pearl, the butcher's wife. It was a strong demon with wild long hair and claws that stuck out from her fingers like nails from a plank of wood. She raged and raged outside our circle of protection. I knelt at Pearl's hips, supporting the coming baby with my hands while my grandmother chalked stronger and stronger charms of protection on the wall.

The *lilit* howled like a livid wind.

"Don't look!" I shouted to Pearl. "It's unclean! Think of your little one!"

Pearl shut her eyes tight and clutched the silver knife we

had placed in her hands when labor started. She added her own voice to the whirlwind in the room while I slipped my hands inside to loosen the cord around the baby's neck. I felt it straining tight against my fingers.

"May the foolish woman who brought clothing for the new babe into her house before the birth be left with nothing but an armful of cloth!" shouted the *lilit*. "May she claw at the dirt like a dog, searching for her baby's bones! May she—"

"In the name of Eloe, Sabbaoth, Adonai, let your mouth fill with mud and your voice be stopped!" said my grandmother firmly, putting herself between Pearl and the demon. As she cut off the *lilit*'s words, the cord loosened, and my grandmother went on to bind the *lilit* with the names of the heavenly host. Finally all was quiet and Pearl's baby spilled, healthy and ruddy, into my arms.

I held her up in triumph to the new mother, but Pearl's face was a mask of terror.

"What ails you?" I asked her. "All is well." Then I turned to follow her look, and saw that although my grandmother had bound the *lilit*, she was deep in conversation with the creature when she should have been doing the work necessary to banish it. I handed the baby to his mother and turned to my grandmother.

"Look to your own children, Hannah," said the *lilit*, cutting her eyes at me. "You think she will thrive here? Trouble is coming to your daughter and her family in Bialystok."

"Bubbe, what are you doing? Banish the unclean thing and be done with it!"

My grandmother pursed her lips. "Deborah, tend to Pearl and her son. This creature and I are speaking."

"Then speak outside!" I told her. "Speak outside if you must speak to it!"

"Very rude," said the *lilit*, clacking her claws at me.

My grandmother held the door open pointedly, always keeping her body between the demon and the new baby. I waited for half an hour before she came back.

On the way home, I exploded in a way I only ever did with Shayna and with Bubbe. "What were you thinking, listening to a child-killer?! What filth did she pour into your ears?"

"All creatures have some knowledge," my bubbe said patiently, "and it's as well to find it out."

"Very wise," I said sharply, "but perhaps now I should find it out, too? What were you talking about?"

"The future," said my bubbe, and she refused to say any more.

I returned from that trip and found that my mother and Shayna had not been having an easy time of it. Business was slow. One day I found them together pinning up a dress onto a pattern. They didn't know I was there, and they were talking in low voices, intimately, in a way I'd shared with my bubbe but never with our mother. I became green with jealousy, and lingered in the doorway to listen.

"Pass me that pin, darling—ugh," said my mother, sitting back on her heels to look at her handiwork. "You know, when I was a girl, with a needle in your hand your life was golden. Always you would have work, always you could support your family."

"And so I shall!" said Shayna sunnily. She had long ago grown out of her clumsy phase and now everything she did was graceful and delicate. "Already you see the embroidery I do, Mama! The stitches so tiny, only an ant could see each one."

Mama pressed her hands to the small of her back. She was starting to show, and I was not the only one who'd noticed. "Well…no. Not anymore. Already you see us scraping and scrimping for business. The new factories open up and machines can do more work for less pay, and the factories do not hire us. I begin to think that my mother is right…perhaps we should send you and your sister over to America. They say there that Jews can work in factories as well as gentiles—indeed, that without us there would be no factories."

Shayna's face turned pale, and I was sure mine had too. It was rare not to know a family that had sent a daughter or husband over to America, *di goldene medine*. Yetta's family owned a sweetshop, and even they had sent over Rifka. I had always thought it was because they had found out about her disgrace, but perhaps it was not. Money came every week, and letters too. In America, Rifka wrote, children went to school together, Jews and gentiles, with no fees to pay and no limits on the number of Jews. There was not gold on the streets, and she lived with a family that had her sleep on a board placed on two chairs and made her do most of the housework, but still she sent home more money in a week than her parents could make in a month.

"Bubbe would not want that!" I cried. "How could you say so? How can you talk about sending away your own daughters?"

Mama was so surprised to see me that she nearly swallowed a pin. She coughed and said, "But she wrote to me about the idea. She didn't say anything to you?"

"Not last I saw her, and that was only a month ago."

"Well," Mama sighed. "My mother keeps secrets. She keeps secrets and she makes plans and catches us all in her net. Her own feet, too, sometimes, she tangles." She looked at me tenderly. "I have wanted to warn you sometimes, darling. You need to be careful of my mother's plans. Once when I was young she decided—"

I did not wait to hear what my bubbe had decided. "Bubbe would not send me away! She needs me!"

Mama frowned. "Well, I would never force either of my

girls to go. But you should think hard about it, both of you. Bubbe has sent me a letter and she is unhappy with what she sees in store for our city. I shudder to think of any danger, and between that and the money…. Now you go away, Deborah, go chatter with Yetta or brew up some broth. Your sister and I have work to do."

I wandered out into the street. It was true what Mama said, that business was not good for her and Shayna, but to go across the sea! It was not as if we lived in one of those places where, as Bubbe said, they killed you after every bad harvest. Bialystok was modern and the chief of police was a man of decency, who did not hold with the killing of Jews. Besides, our young activists had formed a self-defense league, and I would not have wanted to be on the wrong side of those knives and guns. I thought we were safe; at least, we did not fear every moment of every day.

I kicked sullenly at rocks until I wandered over to see Yetta, and then we played at singing games, which we could only do when Shayna was busy, because her voice sounded like a sick cat.

Later that year, Cossacks killed my grandmother.

My grandmother's village was too small for word to reach us before we visited. Papa and I found most of the village's houses destroyed. Just cottages, built of mud and straw. Easy to kick apart. Easier to burn.

Papa had grown up in a village like this one, and his face twisted as he surveyed the wreckage.

"Back into the cart, young one," he said. "We leave now." He didn't raise his voice, just spoke as if what he said was fact.

"Without burying Bubbe?" I said, trying to match his calm.

"Where is there to bury her? The shul and graveyard are destroyed. We will take her back with us. This is not a good place to be."

"Papa," I said. "Let us at least say Kaddish—surely we have enough time for that?" The wind blew my hair in my face.

We went inside and I lay my bubbe on a ragged old blanket, too worthless to bother taking. I cleaned her body with water from the well and closed her eyes, arranged her arms and legs decorously alongside her body, not all splayed out at odd angles like we found her. I do not think she had died from violence; I think the terror was too much for her heart. When I was finished, she looked almost as if she had been sleeping when the Angel of Death took her, not cowering and hiding as men no better than beasts destroyed her village. But I could not wash away every sign of decay, and one look at the remains of her home showed the peaceful arrangement I had made for the lie that it was. Papa said Kaddish over my grandmother. He let me have another fifteen minutes to go through the house and take what was left to bring home to Mama. I found Bubbe's box of needful things behind the loose stone in the hearth where she usually kept it, and a small pouch of old jewelry with it. That was all.

In the cart I cried all the way home.

Mama and Papa had grown up in small villages, and they feared the pogroms every time the wind changed. But I had not been touched by such fear before. Hadn't our own chief of police said, "As long as I live, there will be no pogrom in Bialystok"?

Soon after Papa and I had returned with the news of my bubbe's death, Shayna and I were sitting together in the main room when Mama came in with sadness in her eyes and the box and pouch in her hands.

"You should have these to remember and think on my mother by," she said.

She took out a locket, an ivory cameo carved with the profile of a fancy lady, and stroked it with one finger. "Shayna, darling, you look like my mama did when she was young, when I was little—hair so gold it puts the sun to shame. You should have this locket. Mama wore it when I was a little girl, and she said it was fine protection." My mother looked near tears. "I hope the new one coming is another girl. A girl I can name for my Mama."

Then she turned to me and tilted her head, thinking. Our sharp-eyed mother was back.

Mama took the ivory box from her lap and shook it suspiciously. "I can't open it, and believe me, I've tried. But the symbols carved into it—I suppose they mean that Mama would want you to have it."

I took it and traced out the carvings with my fingers, the same way Mama had touched Bubbe's cameo.

Mama stroked my coarse black hair. "Be careful, baby girl. Use your judgment."

Deborah was a judge in the land of Israel, and Mama never let me forget it.

That box was where Bubbe kept prayers for women whose husbands traveled, special inks, blessed talismans, and one photograph of Mama, Papa, Shayna, and me that we'd paid a traveling salesman for. I'd never had any trouble opening it. I was different from Mama.

I waited until I had some time to myself and went to a place I knew, secluded by bushes, not too far from our home. There I opened the box, expecting Bubbe's familiar collection of blessed things to tumble out onto my lap. What I found inside was a length of deerskin wrapped around a silver-plated knife, the photograph, and a piece of paper. It wasn't a blessing. It was long and complicated and seemed to be some kind of contract.

I tried to puzzle through the contract but the words swam in front of my eyes and made me dizzy.

As I refolded the paper and put it back in the box, I heard a rustling

"Who's there?" I called out, a little frightened.

No one answered, so I picked up a stick and walked briskly over to the bushes.

"Come on out!"

There was another rustling and then the patter of a large rat scampering away. I parted the bushes with the stick and saw some long gray hairs stuck to the tree branches, and a trail like something made by a long, ropey tail dragging in the dirt.

Our baby brother Yeshua was born three months later.

After the baby came, we began working the clock around in order to get to America, where, Mama said, they didn't let you burn. Papa began working seven days a week; he wouldn't handle money on the Sabbath, but he would go to his workshop instead of to shul, and Mama prayed the whole day for God's forgiveness. I already was working as hard as I could—I had never turned down anyone who called for me, and I didn't start now. But I worked harder at home, casting spells of protection around each of us. Mama wouldn't let me or Shayna talk to boys—she said that we had enough trouble saving for five tickets without one of us girls dragging a husband or baby into things. This was fine with me; I never had much use for boys. When I could sneak away, I went to Yetta's family's sweetshop. Sometimes Mama and Papa talked about sending Papa over to America first, so he could send money back, but everyone knew women who'd done that and then never heard from their husbands again, and I was not sure my protection could keep him safe far across the sea, so we just stayed the way we were: Mama, Papa, two sisters, and baby Yeshkele. And every week, we put what money we could spare in a jar that Mama kept buried in the back garden.

Mama was always telling me, "Look after the little ones," as though I was not already wearing my tongue thin speaking spells of protection over Shayna and Yeshua. It does not come without cost, the work I do, and I grew tired of Mama's constant worries, especially because in my heart I did not believe that anything could happen to us. Not in Bialystok.

Every so often I would take out the contract and pore over it. But trying to read it hurt. The ink seemed to be made of blood and vomit. A stench like cowshit rose off the page. My stomach churned every time I unfolded the paper. The writing itself snaked obscenely in my brain, displacing any meaning the words themselves might have. I would spend hours and come away with a headache strong enough to make gravel of boulders and only enough words to know that my bubbe had signed a contract of some kind.

What this meant, I had no idea.

Take care of the baby, Mama said.

Yeshua was always wandering off. He would get bored watching Mama work, and of course it was always I who had to fetch him back. He crawled through and smudged the circles of protection I drew around him and it was almost impossible to get to the end of an invocation without Yeshua trying to eat the herbs I placed around him. I cannot count the times I had to break off in the middle, redraw the circles, and start over. I cannot count the number of amulets I drew up for him, as he chewed each paper with its magic symbols and prayers to bits. It got so I could not tell if any of my work was worthwhile—he seemed so set on undoing it all.

It became simpler just to take him everywhere I went. That way I could protect him in the moment and keep him out from under Mama's and Shayna's feet. The only places I did not take him were to women's childbeds. Otherwise he was a constant presence on my hip.

One day, coming home from Yetta's sweetshop, an old woman with long, straggling gray hair, who looked like a heap of clothing with a cord tied around the middle, stopped us.

"Lovely baby," she said. "Lovely baby boy."

I waited for her to make a sign warding off the evil spirits she'd attracted with her compliments, and when she did not, I knew she meant us no good and tried to push past her. As I did, she grabbed Yeshua out of my arms. He began to wail and reach for me.

"Get your pigkeeping hands off my brother!" I yelled, grabbing for him, but she swung him away from me.

The old woman looked me full in the face and I fell back—her eye sockets were empty holes, and fires burned in them. The creature was a *lilit*, the *lilit* my grandmother had spoken with.

"Pigkeeper, is it, granddaughter of Hannah? Your brother, is it? The boy is mine, and none of thine."

I pulled out the silver-plated knife that had been in my grandma's box. I'd kept it in my apron pocket ever since that day I'd found it. "He's mine and I'll send you to the fires of Gehenna if you don't give him back."

Instead of answering, the old woman sprang away from me. I stabbed at her with my small knife, but my aim was no good and all I managed to do was slice into her arm.

The creature fell to its knees, screaming in pain. Some kind of mucus poured from its cut arm. I grabbed Yeshua back while it pressed on the wound, vainly trying to stanch the flow while it raged at me, spitting and cursing. The mucus ate away at the blade of my knife. I clutched Yeshkele to my breast as though he were made of gold and bolted for home.

By the time I got there, frightened and out of my breath and my wits, Shayna was the only one at home. I flung myself into her arms and cried while Yeshkele squirmed impatiently to be put down. But I couldn't force myself to relax my grip.

"Deborah!" Shayna exclaimed. "What's happening?"

"He's our baby, ours!" I rocked back and forth on my heels. Shayna unbent my fingers, took the baby from me, and set him down gently.

"Our baby, ours," I kept saying while Shayna patted my hair and wiped my face. Yeshua crawled off to play with some toy horses our papa had carved for him.

Finally I ran out of sobs and told her what had happened, that a demon had tried to take our baby brother, who was chewing thoughtfully on one of the horses.

"How could it?" Shayna asked me. "After your work?"

I wiped my face. "I must have forgotten something," I said. "Something that makes him vulnerable. Or I'm just not strong enough yet. Or—" Suddenly I thought of the mysterious contract in Bubbe's box, and of her long talk with the *lilit* that had been trying to take Pearl's baby.

I ran and got the paper from the box. "Shayna," I told her, "these words are sick—can you smell them?"

"I can't smell anything," she said. "It's just a blank piece of paper."

"It's not," I said. "If I keep these words in my head my eyes burn and my thoughts curdle. So I'm going to read out each word I can to you, not keeping it in my head at all. And you write them down."

Shayna looked a little frightened, but she did what I said.

"Baby," I finished, and Shayna gasped.

"Oh, Bubbe," I whispered. "Oh, Bubbe, how could you?" For our bubbe had killed our brother with ink as surely as if she'd taken that silver knife to his throat.

The long and the short of it was that our bubbe had struck a bargain with the *lilit*, whose name resisted my reading, for the power to get us safely to America. In return, she gave the demon the right to take the next baby of the family.

I'd never realized how much Bubbe wanted to get us out, and I wondered what the *lilit* had told her about Bialystok.

Well, she'd been cheated—the mob had taken her and we were still in Bialystok. But our baby brother wasn't safe yet, and the demon was trying to collect. I tried to put a brave face on for Shayna's sake.

"The contract can't be good still," I told her. "Bubbe can't see us safely to America now."

But in my heart, I knew the demon didn't see it that way, and so did Shayna.

"Don't be an ass, Deborah! If that were true, you wouldn't have had to fight it off this morning."

I didn't know how to keep Yeshua safe. But I did know that it was no use telling Mama and Papa, and Shayna agreed. After all, they were working as hard as they knew how to get us across the sea, away from the old demons, and what more could they do if they *did* know? It was down to me to take care of this kind of business.

For two weeks, Shayna and I hovered over Yeshkele like two cats over a mousehole. When one of us slept, the other one watched. We took him everywhere with us, and Mama appreciated the help, even if she didn't know its reason.

After two weeks of my eyes falling out of my head with exhaustion from useless charms and wardings and my brain boiling with effort, I reasoned like this: everyone knows the power of a contract. The contract was what put Yeshkele in danger. So, if we destroyed the contract, we would release the power and dispel the danger.

I tried throwing the thing on the fire but it wouldn't burn. I stuck it right in the heart of the blaze, but when the embers had burned themselves out, I stirred the ashes, and there the contract would be, with not even a smudge.

Sometimes you need more than herbs and spells of protection. Sometimes it is not enough merely to defend. So Bubbe had taught me the evil eye. The evil eye, everybody knows, works by concentrating the element of fire, infusing it with the power of God's curse, and directing that cursed fire with one's vision. Under Bubbe's supervision, I had practiced by glaring my heart out at dust, at flowers, at old rags. Lines formed in my face ahead of their time and eventually I got good enough to set regular bits of paper alight with my gaze. Now I needed to direct my anger at something more powerful than rags. I could feel the anger at my grandmother for making this cursed bargain massing behind my eyes like lightning in a black cloud. And I could hear the crackling in the air around me. Shooting pains ran through my head and I could feel my hair start to snake out from its braid. When the pressure was like a blacksmith's vise, I'd open my eyes and send my pain at the rag or the paper and it would burst into flames.

When I felt that I was ready, Shayna and I took Papa's cart outside of the city and made a pile of oil-soaked rags and dry leaves. We put the contract in the center. Then she held Yeshua and drove the cart well clear of me and the kindling. I had told her to go half a mile; she went barely a quarter-mile, which was just as well for me, in the end. When she and the baby were safely away, I focused on my rage at Bubbe, at the demon trying to take Yeshua, on the mob that had killed my grandma. I heard the crackling and felt my head pulse with pain, and when I turned my gaze on the mound we had built, there was a sound like a hundred gasps, and a tower of flame shot from the small pyre up into the cloudy sky.

My joints felt like they were made of moss and I fell down hard, hitting my head on a rock. My muscles like cobwebs,

too weak to move or even to call for help from Shayna, I watched the fire burn itself out in clouds of oily, acrid smoke so thick you could have cut it into slices and spread butter on it. It took close to an hour to clear, and I could hear Shayna stumbling around with Yeshua in her arms, calling for me. Even when she found me, I wouldn't let her start for home until she'd sifted through the ashes and found nothing left of the contract.

I had succeeded.

Shayna had to almost drag me back to the cart. I was sick, she said, so sick that it looked like I might not wake up. Mama and Shayna told me that my fever burned so hot that when they dunked me in ice water to bring it down, the water turned warm as blood. Mama longed for her mother to come and put together one of her brews, but Bubbe was gone and all Mama knew how to do was boil up a chicken and try to make me eat. They said that I fought her, that I said she was trying to drown me. And then, as suddenly as I got sick, I got better. I woke up one morning and asked Mama for something to eat. By the next day, I'd had enough of lying in bed. But Mama didn't want to let us out. Something had happened while I was sick. The skin around her eyes was taut and she had chewed her lips so hard that they bled.

"The chief of police is dead," she told me. "Dead and gone. And there's bad feeling in the air."

"I don't feel anything," I said. I suppose I was still sick, to have said something so stupid.

She clipped me around the ear. "Not your kind of feeling, child! The chief didn't up and die of a chill, idiot! Someone killed him. And the army says it was the Jews."

Shayna broke in. "Everybody knows that the chief was a friend to us! Didn't he say—"

"Yes. Yes, he did," said our mama. "And now he's dead and the chief prosecutor is no friend of ours. The self-defense league has been patrolling every hour of the day and weapons are appearing on the streets outside of the quarter, and for all it's a bright June day, there's a dark fog lying over the city. I don't want you two going out."

"Mama," I said. "You can't keep us in forever. How long must we wait until this fog lifts? I haven't been outside for so long. This is the gentile Holy Week and things will only get worse. Better now than Easter Sunday."

Mama looked like she might slap me again. "Headstrong girl! I should have sent you both to America already, for here you have the survival skills of an infant!"

To hear such a thing after what I had done! That she wished me far from her side, that she did not trust me to take care of myself even after she had depended on me for charms and amulets. An infant, she called me! Me, who had fought off a demon and destroyed its hold over our family! Still, I kept my temper in check, as I had learned.

"Mama, if times are so bad, it's all the more reason for me to go out. With the protections I put on the family, my supplies are low. Let me get what I need to protect us, and when I come back, you'll have no more worries."

And Mama relented, I think as much out of a desire to see roses in my cheeks again as anything else. I took Shayna with me to help carry my supplies, and as we stepped over the threshold, I looked back at Yeshua. But I shook myself. He was safe now; if Mama was to be believed, taking him with me would only be putting him in more danger. So Shayna and I left together, and Yeshkele stayed with Mama while Papa worked in his shop next door.

After I got the herbs I needed, Shayna and I walked over to Yetta's sweetshop, so I could make sure she was all right. It was a long walk for me; I was weak, and the colors didn't look quite real—everything was thin and watery. The sun hurt my eyes.

At the sweetshop I fell into conversation with Yetta, who was minding the shop while her parents were out. Shayna eyed the candies. We could hear the sounds of some kind of parade from far off, but Yetta was catching me up on the gossip I had missed during my weeks of illness, and I was enthralled in the story of her other sister's betrothed's time at *gymnasium*. I didn't even notice the sound of a gunshot, which I later learned had been the signal for the processions to turn on the Jewish Quarter. We didn't hear the shouts; it wasn't until Yetta smelled smoke and looked out the door to see a mob yelling and throwing stones that she grabbed me and Shayna and pulled us into the stone cellar. I helped pull the rug over the trapdoor in the back room as we went down and wrestled the bar into place.

We heard glass smashing, and then sounds of violence were right overhead. We could hear barrels being smashed, the counter splitting. My mind was still weak from the fever, or I think I would remember more clearly. But I do remember knowing as strongly as I had ever known anything that Yeshkele needed me, only me, and he needed me to come quickly, to run to him. I remember the sound of flames crackling, my hands on the barred trap door, Yetta grabbing my arms from behind and yanking me back down the stairs. We stayed there a long time. We ate the sweets and dried fruits that were being stored and used an old barrel to relieve ourselves. We slept and woke and still the sounds of the mob carried down to the cellar.

Finally there was quiet.

Shayna crept upstairs and put her head out the trapdoor while Yetta made sure I stayed still.

"Everything's burnt," Shayna said. Her whisper cracked.

Yetta and I followed her upstairs.

The shop looked like—nothing. Everything burnt or smashed or both. We picked our way across the floor, silent and reverent as Adam and Eve on the first day of the world, but it felt like the last.

The streets were empty, but fires were still burning down the block.

We didn't speak. Other people were just as silent. I remember one man watching a building burn. Tears dripped steadily from his eyes but he didn't make a sound. Some wandered aimlessly; nowhere left to go, I guess. I saw two women meet each other in the middle of a block, saw their eyes widen in shock and relief, and then they threw their arms around each other. Without a word. I never heard a silence like that before.

I don't remember saying good-bye to Yetta. She went to look for her family, I think, and Shayna and I needed to find ours. I didn't see Yetta again. I don't know what happened to her. My best friend, and I never saw her again.

I don't remember walking home, either, but I must have. Not all the streets were destroyed. We found out later that in some places the self-defense league had managed to fight off the attackers: civilians, police, an army with bombs and guns. And some streets that held places like butchers' shops, places where men and women brought out the long knives, they made it through all right, too. I do remember that Shayna insisted that we would find Mama and Papa safe at home, Mama with her dressmaker's shears and Papa with his awl, but I knew different.

Our street was always quiet, mostly private homes.

Shayna said she had to lead me home every step, because if she let go my arm I'd just stand in the middle of the street like a lamppost. I allowed her to pull me along, but I paid no attention to my path, stumbling once into a pile of broken glass. I did not feel the fall, though the cuts hurt sharp enough as they healed. Shayna spent almost an hour picking glass out of my flesh that night. When we reached home, my arms were coated red with my own blood.

Mama and Papa and Yeshua, they were dead. Shayna closed Mama's eyes before I went to see her. I couldn't bear to stand before those eyes. I remember holding Yeshua's little body against my breast and crying, trying to wake him up. But I could not wake him, and all my embraces did was stain him with my blood.

The day after we buried Mama, Papa, and our brother, I went into the back garden and dug up our savings. It was enough for two of us.

That is how Shayna and I came to America. In America, Mama had said, they don't let you burn, and I repeated it to Shayna every night on the boat.

We had enough when we got here to rent a room and buy some new clothing so we didn't give ourselves away as a couple of greenhorns before we even opened our mouths, but not enough to last for long. A business like mine needs word of mouth, needs local knowledge, so it's not like I could just set up shop. Our *landsleit* group got us work at one of the tiny sweatshops in the neighborhood, no more than six people crowded into the boss's front room, his wife cooking dinner on the same stove he used to heat the irons. But it was such a little shop—you couldn't live on what they paid. The boss sweated every penny out of you and the shop was no good for rebuilding my own trade, because there were so few of us working there. I had no intention of living out my life like that, and I would not allow Shayna to do so either. I saw what had happened to women who had been sewing their whole lives—hacking coughs from the cotton dust, eyes bleary and half-blind from peering at seams and threads all day, fingertips like leather from stabbing themselves with needles.

Those small sweatshops were the past, they were the Old Country, like we'd never left. America, everybody knew, was in the modern factories, where dozens of girls sat together and earned a respectable wage, not subcontracted out to tiny shops that took their profit out of your skin.

Not that the factories were any picnic—women there could still end up blind, coughing, and sick, but it was more congenial, friendlier, and most important for me, had lots of girls together in one place. We needed to get out of the small shops, and Shayna was the one with the skills to get us hired. Lots of these factories broke down the work so that you didn't need much skill, but nonetheless, it was useful to sew more beautifully than a machine.

When we walked into Shlomo Cohen's, they barely gave us a second glance.

"Mister," I said to the foreman, "we're looking for jobs."

"And you can keep looking," he said to me, but when Shayna pulled out a blouse she had stitched and embroidered on the ship coming to America he sang a different tune.

"This is something special," he said, addressing Shayna this time. "We can use someone like you, and you could go far here, maybe be stitching samples in a little time."

"And my sister," said Shayna firmly.

He shrugged. "And your sister." We were put to work on the spot.

So, we worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, at Cohen's shop, one of the smaller factories, only about fifty girls, and we got by. There was always work. You could hear sewing machines on the Lower East Side every hour of the day and night, every day of the week, Sabbath or no Sabbath. The Italian girls worked Saturdays and the Jewish girls worked Sundays and most of us didn't observe so much and we worked any day we could. That was the way of the New

World—even the most pious would eat ham sandwiches in the New World. And be glad to get them, too.

Shayna's talent shone through. She was made a tucker on the ladies' skirts, a high-paying job, with the possibility of becoming a sample-maker, where she could follow a garment from fabric to its final form, doing almost the same kind of detailed craftwork she had done with our mother.

On one side of me was Ruthie, another girl like me who could run up a seam but not much else. Ruthie had bright blue eyes and she laughed like the shop was a party. Something about her black brows and brown braid reminded me of Yetta and I started spending less time with Shayna. Shayna would stay late, so eager she was to become a sample-maker, and I would walk home with Ruthie instead. We would eat dinner together, talk. She was like me, no interest in the young men, but she was friendly enough to me. She said my eyes were like awls. And she said this like it was a good thing.

Ruthie was a firebrand, had been at *gymnasium* back in Riga and had become a Bundist, a revolutionary. Like many of her comrades, she was also a freethinker.

"No gods, no masters!" she would tell me passionately, before stabbing her finger with the machine's needle. "These others," she'd say, swinging her arm around to take in every girl in the shop, "these others are only interested in catching a rich man, but I have bigger dreams! Look here, here is opportunity for a world not bounded by fears of superstitious whispers! Here we can cast off such foolishness, do away with rich men and cruel gods together! We can throw away fears of demons and see evil's true face, the faces of depraved men!"

I was so captivated by her speech that despite what I knew she had me half-ready to forswear any belief in God or devils as well. I had never been very political, but in the company of someone like Ruthie, I found myself stirred by visions of justice, by a world aflame with possibility, the blossoming of a new era in the New World.

Ruthie always told me that she became a Bundist after learning of the misery suffered by the poorer members of her father's shul. Back in the old country, her father was a rebbe and a Zionist, a man who believed that safety and justice for Jews would be found only in our return to our ancient land. I half think Ruthie became a Bundist in part to anger him. Ruthie had Shayna's sense of excitement along with some real order to her thoughts. She'd had to leave Riga when the police found out that she'd been the author of certain pamphlets.

After work Ruthie would let me practice my English on her, or we'd go to the movies or wander the streets, arm in arm. Never was the Lower East Side so wondrously beautiful as on those nights, especially after it had rained and washed away some of the smell.

On my other side in the factory was Rose, who had been abandoned by her nogoodnik husband and left with four children. One day she came in with more lines in her face than usual. Her youngest, Fanny, had been up all night with what Rose claimed was the croup.

"The croup is bad," I said, "but not terrible. You can paint her throat with iodine."

Rose nodded, but she didn't look less worried. I almost put it down to a mother's heart, but still I kept pushing. "I can come over after work and help you."

"No!" she cried fearfully, and then subsided. "No, I can do it myself."

"Rose," I said. "It's not the croup, is it?"

"How can you know?" she asked.

I was pleased—close observation can take the place of any more mysterious power when necessary. "I know," I said.

She looked around furtively and edged closer to me. "You mustn't tell anyone," she whispered. "I can't afford to stay home in quarantine."

I knew then what the next words out of her mouth would be.

"Scarlet fever," she whispered.

"Rose," I said. "I can help with that."

"How?" she asked, a little suspicious. "I can't pay."

"So who said anything about payment? I'm offering to help."

I put all I could of myself into the broth I made that night, and I had faith in it, even though the ingredients I got here were not quite the same as those I would have used back home; vinegar and red pepper were easy enough to find, but I searched hours in the markets for myrrh gum. For double measure I made up an amulet for the baby as well, and added into it something new that I found in the markets: powdered foxglove. When Rose saw the amulet her face lit up.

"Now," I said, handing over the amulet and the medicine. "You must be sure to give Fanny hot baths—she needs to sweat out the illness."

I prayed every night that the child would recover. I had done everything I could, but there is no knowing with scarlet fever. It can recede only to come back worse than ever. But Fanny did recover, and Rose believed it was my doing.

She came back to me when her sister was in trouble. Her younger sister, she told me, had started walking out with a worthless boy, and wouldn't take anybody's words of warning, even their father's. Rose was worried the girl would fall pregnant, and then what would become of her?

"I can help with that," I said.

"I will pay you," she said.

So I made up pessaries for Rose's sister. "It's good you had the brains to come to me early on," I told her. "It's easier now than later."

Little by little I built up a group of women who knew

me—Rose's sister had a friend with female troubles, that friend had an aunt with a sick child, the aunt had a friend with a child coming after two miscarriages who wanted every amulet and charm I could provide for her. After a few months I was able to stop working at the shop, and that week, Ruthie came to live with Shayna and me. The family she boarded with had decided to move to Boston, and it seemed only natural for her to come stay with us. In fact, it was no trouble at all, because Shayna was home less and less. When I asked her where she was going, she would just tell me that she was spending time with some of the better seamstresses from the shop, that they were giving her tips on becoming a samplemaker. As I was so busy lately, I was just grateful that Shayna had made some friends. Between my work and Ruthie, I barely got to see Shayna some weeks. Ruthie and I often had the room to ourselves. I was grateful that Shayna understood.

About a month after moving in with us, Ruthie left the shop as well, putting her troublesome writing to good use. On the Lower East Side, there were so many newspapers! She was hired as a writer by *Der Schturkez*, a socialist paper put out by immigrants who had come to America after the failed 1905 rebellion. They made even Ruthie look mild.

I'd hoped the three of us could celebrate together, but when I went to Shlomo Cohen's to pick up Ruthie and Shayna, only my friend was there. I couldn't find my sister with any of the other girls, but I wouldn't let it ruin the evening. Ruthie and I went uptown and waited for standing room tickets at the opera, even treating ourselves to a glass of wine each at the intermission. At the bar, I leaned over and saw my sister on the arm of Johnny Fein.

Johnny Fein had a handsome face and he dressed well, but he was a dangerous man to know. He ran numbers, drugs, women. His girls came to me for help all the time. But he never had any trouble getting a pretty girl on his arm. He wouldn't have had much trouble even if he'd been a tailor, I think, because of his sharp features and lantern jawline, but it didn't hurt that he always had a lot of money to flash around, and he was flashing it that night, treating Shayna to a bottle of champagne. I hadn't seen them in the standing room section, that was for sure. And Shayna didn't see me now, as I turned away and went to find Ruthie.

We missed the final act of the opera, as I was staging my own melodrama outside with Ruthie as audience.

"How long—how *long* do you think she has been walking out with him? With a *criminal*?"

"Calm down," said Ruthie. "You're doing nobody any good tearing your hair out like this, least of all me. This is supposed to be a happy occasion, remember?"

"*Happy?* I should be happy with my sister, my baby sister whom I'm supposed to protect even now, sipping from the cup of iniquity? Willingly chaining herself with fine gold and silver filigree to a man of evil? How could I not know?"

"I can't imagine," Ruthie said dryly, "why she wouldn't have mentioned it to you."

"Such a man! A man to make small children scream and run away in the streets!"

"He gives the children candy," said Ruthie. "They like him."

"Yes, well, I imagine he gives Shayna candy as well." I subsided. "But she will have some talking to do when she gets home tonight."

She did not come home until very late indeed, that night. She and Johnny Fein must have gone to a dance hall after the opera. I waited up and when Shayna came in, I launched into her. Ruthie tried to make herself not be there by curling up in a chair in the corner.

"Girl! We did not come all the way to the New World so that you could get yourself killed by hanging on the arm of a *shtarker* like Johnny Fein! What do you think you're doing?"

Shayna gasped. "Witch!"

I snorted. "You think I needed witchcraft? I saw you all right—I saw you at the opera house! You know, I looked for you to celebrate with us after work but you were already gone. I thought you were out with the girls—some girls!"

"What do you care where I am?" she asked plaintively. "You've been happy without me, I could tell! I'll do what I like!"

"I guess I know now why you were really staying out so late!"

"You know nothing about it!" Shayna yelled back, her shock and quailing gone. "Nothing! My Johnny is a hero! You should have seen how he was with that Cohen!"

"So tell me. How was he? A brutal thug? Because that's what he is at other times."

"Not a thug! You don't know! You were over on the other side of the shop with that dirty atheist you call a friend—"

"Ruth is sitting *right here*!" I shouted. "Don't you dare call her names! If not for her advice I would have dragged you home the minute I saw you, and this is the thanks she gets!"

"You be quiet and listen to me for once, Deborah!" Shayna dismissed my interruption. "There was that Matthew Cohen putting his hands all over me and calling me filthy names and nobody near who could help. But one day Johnny came in and told Cohen that was no way to treat a lady and offered me his arm to walk home. He's been a perfect gentleman. You never noticed any of it from the first day to this, and now you want to tell me what to do?"

I felt terrible. I had seen the way Matthew Cohen eyed Shayna, and I knew he thought he was such a big man—son of the owner and all, palling around with a brutal *goniff* like Johnny Fein. They both thought they were big men, real Americans, calling themselves "Johnny" and "Matthew" when everybody knew they had been born "Yakov" and

"Moishe." But I had not been paying enough attention to the danger Shayna was in. Even so, I was not going to let my guilt get in the way of a fight. "So Johnny Fein claims you and that turns him into a righteous man?" I said. "If you're really this stupid you *deserve* to end up like the rest of his girls!"

"What do you know about what I deserve? You'd rather see to every other woman in town than to me," Shayna blasted back. "I've always come last for you! Your customers, Yeshua, Yetta, and now Ruth! You're not Mama and if you weren't so unnatural, you would see yourself how Johnny really is!" She gestured over at Ruthie, who was trying to make herself unseen. "And you have your friend," Shayna said. "You leave me to mine."

"Unnatural?" I yelled back. "Fine! You won't have the bother of my unnatural help ever again!"

Shayna stormed out, slamming the door, and didn't come home again until early the next morning. In general she stayed out later and later, and soon she didn't come home nights at all. I barely saw her—just a glimpse in a crowd, really, at a dance hall, maybe. But she was still a tucker at Shlomo Cohen's shop and that, I thought, should tell her something. If Johnny Fein really meant right by her, wouldn't he have pulled her out of factory work by now and made an honest woman of her?

"Your Johnny, the hero," I said sharply to her one morning when she was still sleeping at home. "Why are you slaving over a sewing machine in that factory if he's so righteous?"

Shayna pressed her lips together and glared at me. "I like it there well enough," she said. "I like the girls, the talking. And it's good to make my own money. I suppose you'd miss it if I stopped paying my share of the rent!"

"It's not your own money that bought you that ring," I told her, pointing at her finger wearing a golden ring with a real sapphire.

She twisted the ring around and said, "Johnny says I shouldn't talk to you so much, anyway. You don't understand." She walked out.

Oh, but I understood. I understood, and I'd seen this sort of thing before. It started with opera and new hats and dance halls and sparklers on your wrists and fingers, but that wasn't how it ended.

Weeks later Shayna came home wearing a scarf around her head, shadowing her face. A scarf of the highest quality, no question, but a scarf nonetheless, like she was a greenhorn.

I have sharp eyes, though. I can see through shadows and scarves, and I could see the bruises she was covering.

"What's happened to you?" I asked, as if it wasn't obvious.

"Nothing," she muttered, drawing the scarf tighter around her head.

"That's not nothing," I said, jabbing a finger at the shiner over her right eye.

"So I slipped," she said. "You know how clumsy I am."

I snorted. "I know how clumsy you were when we were girls, but even then you never wound up with bruises on your face. Let me help you."

"I don't want your help!" she said harshly, and turned away from me.

"You must wait, my love," said Ruthie, which was pretty rich talk coming from the girl who counseled violent revolution. "She'll come back to you eventually."

She did.

I had a nice piece of meat made for dinner, and I had enough for three or even four, when Shayna came in, her eyes red from crying.

"Shayna *maedele*," I said. "Baby girl, what has happened to you?"

She waved her hands vaguely and sat down at the table, her head bent.

"I've done a terrible thing, big sister."

"Nothing so terrible that I cannot solve it," I said. I didn't have the heart to give her the tongue-lashing she deserved. Ruthie ran to the kitchen we shared with the other tenants to make some coffee, leaving us alone.

"I am through with Johnny Fein! Through!"

"Good," I said. "But tell me what has happened to you."

"What has happened to me? Better you should ask what I have done!"

"I'm asking," I said, coming to the end of my patience. "I can help, but I must know the ill."

"You think I am crying tears?" Shayna said. "These are not tears streaming from my eyes! This my heart's blood for what I have done!"

"Stop squawking and tell me what is happening," I said sharply, but Shayna only drew breath to wail again.

Ruthie came in with the coffee and intervened in what were clearly going to become hysterics. "Tell us," she said quietly.

Shayna told us.

"I have meant to talk to you for a long time," she said, "for weeks, but I haven't had the nerve. Johnny is a man with a temper like a demon, and he does not like to be crossed. Better that I should wait for him to tire of me than bring down his wrath on us."

"I can take care of us," I interjected.

Shayna smiled wanly. "I'm sure you believe so, but even you cannot turn aside a bullet. A few days ago, I was working in the shop, waiting for Johnny to come pick me up. But he came in late, and he came in with Matthew Cohen."

"They'd been out drinking and gambling that afternoon—I could tell—and Johnny told me that as I was a sporting girl I'd want to know about a bet they made. But I didn't! I didn't!" she sobbed.

"But we want to know," Ruthie said gently. "You can tell us."

I was not half so calm inside as Ruthie appeared to be.

"Johnny had been bragging, how pretty I was and how nimble with my fingers, and he'd bet one of his friends that I could turn out a hundred shirtwaists a day for three days. Me, by myself! No piecework—just me!"

"Nonsense," I snorted. "Nobody can do that!" Ruthie put her hand on my arm. I think it was meant to calm me but I felt it as a warning as well.

"I know!" wailed Shayna. "I told him I could not, but he told me I'd better, for he and Cohen had wagered more money on it than my life was worth."

Shayna's fingers were twisting her fine shawl like a dusting rag.

"I worked my fingers raw all day, but the pile of pieces got no lower. I knew I could never get everything done by midnight. Oh, Deborah, how my foot ached from the treadle and how my hands shook. It was worse than our first days in that little sweatshop on Delancey. My eyes stung and my fingers were dead at the tips. I never even stopped to eat, and then I stuck my finger with the needle twice and started bleeding on the cloth. I put my head down to cry."

"Poor child," murmured Ruthie.

Silly goose, I thought, but did not say. She should have come to me long ago.

Shayna looked at Ruthie, not at me, as if she could read my mind, and went on. "After a few minutes, I picked myself up, ready to try again, when—such a sight, oh, God! Out of the pile of cloth next to me a terrible old woman came. She had long gray hair that hung in rattails and her nails curved out in claws. She was hunched over, covered in warts, and reeked like rotten meat in the sun. Her skirt was held up with a frayed rope and coming out from under it I could see the tip of a tail. Her eyes glittered like broken glass. Oh, I was terrified—my blood froze and I gasped for air!

"But I remembered what you said, Deborah, about sometimes God's host taking ugly forms to test us, so I did not show my horror."

"What I said?" I interrupted her tale. "That was no angel of God's, that was a demon!"

"I didn't know!" wailed Shayna.

"Be quiet," said Ruthie to me.

So Shayna resumed. Her breathing had become less ragged as she fell into the rhythm of the story. "'Tut, tut, Shayna *maedele*,' said the woman. 'Why do you cry?'

"So I told her my sorrows, and how soon the clock would reach midnight and how Johnny's face would darken when he saw how little I was able to make, nowhere near a hundred, and how I didn't know what he would do.

"'Dry up your tears,' said the old woman. 'I can sew up those pieces no problem, and all I need from you is your pretty ring.'

"It was the ring Johnny bought for me, with the sapphire," explained Shayna. "I love that ring; it made me feel like a movie star to walk down the street on Johnny's arm with that ring on my hand, but I figured that a ring does no good to a corpse, so I took it off and gave it to the old woman."

Taking her out from under Johnny's protection, such as it was, I thought to myself.

Shayna was lost in memory. "Oh, you should have seen that old woman sew! Her hands and feet and tail were a blur. When she stopped, there was the pile of shirtwaists done and dusted, and she vanished into thin air just as Johnny and Matthew came in. They were thrilled to find that I'd won their stupid bet, and I thought that once they had sobered up the next morning, they would see what a foolish bet they'd made and that everything would go back to normal. But the next morning I came in to find a pile of cloth higher than my head. I worked my fingers raw and until my eyes were burning and bloodshot, but by eleven o'clock I had more than half the pile to go. I stood up to stretch out the cricks in my neck and back, and when I sat back down, I was face to face with the ugly little woman. Again, she asked what my trouble was, and again, I told her.

"'Don't you worry about a thing, Shayna *maedele*! I can sew these pieces for you, no problem, and all I ask from you is that pretty locket around your neck.'"

Again, "Shayna *maedele*," I thought to myself. A familiar address, like the demon knew her—and then I realized it did.

"But it was Bubbe's locket!" continued Shayna. "I didn't want to give it up, especially since Mama had given it to me, but what could I do? I figured that Bubbe wouldn't begrudge me a finished task, and I took off the locket and gave it to the gray-haired woman."

Taking her out from under Bubbe's protection, I thought. If this was the same *lilit* as the one that had plagued us in the Old Country, it didn't want rings or lockets, not really. I went cold and ran my eyes over Shayna's figure. She looked as trim as ever.

"Again the old woman set to work, and when she was done, the entire stack of shirtwaists was sewn up perfectly. On the stroke of midnight, she vanished, and Johnny and Matthew stumbled in and I really thought that this time it would be enough for them, that surely they wouldn't go through with a third night!

"But the third night," Shayna said, her hysterics rising again, "the third night, the old woman didn't asked for my hat or my locket, but for my first-born baby! And what could I do but say yes, and now I've lost my first-born before I've even borne him!"

How did it find us? I thought frantically. I knew it had been spying on us in Bialystok, or how could it have known to tell Bubbe that we were in danger, but how could it have followed

us to this New World? Ruthie said America was free of those old fears, but she was wrong. "Are you carrying?" I asked.

"I don't know!" Shayna cried. "I want free of Johnny and his wagers." She buried her head in her hands and wailed.

Oh, I felt that wail in the pit of my soul. To have failed not only Yeshua but Shayna as well! The one with my inattention and the other with my arrogance. "But a mistake is a mistake," I said. "Maybe I'm not above making them as well. And I can help with yours." After a minute I added, "I can take care of Johnny." Ruthie put Shayna to bed, but I sat up a long time, planning how.

The next day I went out and dug up some clay from the street. I came home, molded it into the shape of a man, and named it. I took the silver knife and slashed open the sides of the doll where Johnny Fein's pockets would be.

With his money no longer flowing, Johnny Fein's body turned up in the river, a week later, broken and twisted.

Matthew Cohen, I hardly had to do anything about. Without Johnny to cheat and threaten for him, he started losing his bets, and no one else would cover him. He lost his money, all his family's money, inside of a month. A broken man, too, he was. He ended up in the back room of a saloon with a bullet in his head, so I guess he finally welshed on the wrong man.

Shayna, well—she wasn't the same, but after Johnny had been dead for a while she picked up her head again and smiled a little at the world around her. She had not been with child after all, so that was one less worry for us. Ruthie and I made enough money between us that she didn't have to go back to work for a while. She started seeing a kind young man, Solomon, a quiet fellow, so steadfast and calm. He worked behind the counter at his family's appetizing shop, which was how they met. They were a good match and before their first trip to the movies, Shayna brought him home to meet me and Ruthie. He was very respectful. Shayna began spending more and more time with him, but just as often as they went out, she would bring him over, and the four of us would have dinner. Sol even came to me when his younger sister came down with the croup. After some months, Sol and Shayna were married in very small ceremony, just Ruthie and me and Sol's family. After a month or so, the four of us moved into a small apartment over his family's shop, next door to his parents and aunt and uncle. Shayna had long since left Cohen's shop, and now she worked with Sol's family at his store.

One day, she came to me with her face drawn and tight, just like when we were little and she was in trouble.

"Sister, sister," she said. "I've got news—a little one coming." She made the sign to ward off the evil eye.

"Mazel tov, Shayna," I told her.

"For another, maybe," she answered. "But what will happen to my baby? That *lilit* will come take it away. Or will it end up like our baby brother?"

"I haven't forgotten," I told her. "This is America. I won't let that creature take your baby away. Don't worry yourself anymore. I burned that contract once and I can take care of things again."

I knew the demon wouldn't take Shayna's baby while it was in the womb, but I took every care anyway. Not a stick of furniture or a scrap of clothing for the baby would I let Sol bring into the house before it was born. He had to keep everything in the store. I made up amulets and cast charms of protection over her just like I had done for Yeshua back in the Old Country. When Shayna started to feel pain I put the silver knife in her hands and chalked a circle, wide enough for her to walk around in, around her bed. I chalked every charm of protection that I knew on the door. Sol, I sent him to shul to pray for her and recite psalms. He went. A good man, Sol. Good enough to know when to do as he was told.

While Shayna labored and suffered, I did what our bubbe had taught me. First I recited the prescribed benedictions. Then I picked up a new pen, an unopened bottle of ink, and the koshered deerskin parchment from Bubbe's box. I wrote out the finest amulet ever made for a newborn—no rebbe could do better. I used every symbol of protection I'd ever seen and some I made up. Shayna whispered to me the name she was going to give her baby girl—by now we both knew it was going to be a girl—and I wrote it into the most elaborate, complex, and powerful prayer of protection I could, invoking every angel and every name of God I knew or imagined.

"Beauty isn't enough," Shayna said hoarsely, between contractions.

"No," I agreed. "It's not."

"My daughter will be a fighter."

So in the amulet, I wrote for the protection of Yael, daughter of Shayna.

When Shayna, sobbing as though her heart would break, had pushed Yael out, I rolled up the deerskin, slipped it into a deerskin bag, and hung the bag around the baby's neck. I peered into little Yael's eyes and already saw the fighter she was, anybody could see that, and a true Hebrew name is true power, everybody knows that. So when Shayna sat nursing her for the first time, gazing happily at her daughter, I sat on the edge of the bed and said to her, "We must call her by her true name only if nobody else is near. Otherwise call her Alte, the old one."

I hoped we could fool the *lilit*. Even if we slipped up, though, I had confidence in my magnificent amulet.

Shayna insisted on singing to the baby, and Yael seemed soothed by her songs, but the rest of us! Such a caterwauling would scare off my customers, I was sure. Still, it's not good to argue with a new mother—it might sour her milk—so I held my peace and tried to get used to the horrible sentimental songs. She liked one in particular, "Ev'ry Little Movement,"

and would rock the baby while humming, "Every little movement has a meaning all its own. Every thought and feeling by some posture can be shown…." A more insipid song I've never heard.

Seven months passed before our old troubles from the Cohens' shop came back to haunt us.

It was a Sunday; Sol and Shayna were at the store and Ruthie and I were home. Yael started screaming, angry and frightened in one sound. We ran to her and found a bent old woman with a naked rat's tail leaning over her crib and tickling her under her fat chin. She was as ugly and shriveled as Shayna had said, and covered in bristly fur, but I knew her at once. Her eyes were the fiery pits I remembered. I knew we had no time to lose. I darted in front of Yael and spat out all the names of God I could think of:

"By El, Eloe, Sabbaoth, Ramathel, Eyel, Adonai, Tetragrammaton, Eloyim, I command you to be gone and let this child be!"

But the *lilit* just picked up Yael, who screamed and kicked out at the old woman's warty skin with all her strength. I steeled myself and again commanded the demon to be gone, this time calling out the forty-two syllable name of God, as dangerous to those who speak it as to those it is spoken against. But the demon only grinned more broadly.

"Your prattling means nothing to me, witch," she said. "Not even God will break a signed contract." She shoved what I recognized as a deerskin parchment filled with writing in my face. It was a duplicate of the one I had burned a few years ago in Bialystok. But there was one difference—below our bubbe's signature I saw my sister's. I grabbed Ruthie's arm and pulled her close.

The demon shot claws out of her gnarled fingers and shredded my perfect amulet. "I claim what is mine, the child Yael, daughter of Shayna, and depart, for not all the names of the heavenly host will break this contract."

Yael was screaming her lungs out and flailing at the demon with her tiny hands balled up into fists. I realized how useless it had been to try fighting this creature by hiding the baby's name and calling her "Alte," by chanting the names of God.

And then I realized how to defeat the monster.

"Ruthie," I whispered. "I need time. I can save her, but I need time. A week."

Ruthie was no dummy. She fell on her knees and burst into stage tears. "By the mercy in heaven and earth, by Adonai and all his angels, Uriel and Zadkiel, and I don't know the others, not like Deborah does, but I beg for the mercy shown in the past. As the Lord God spared the Jewish babies over the eight days of Pesach from his righteous wrath, I beg you to grant us eight days to say good-bye to our baby, to prepare her for a motherless life."

I would never have tried such a stunt—for one thing, Ruthie was mangling the story of Pesach—but how could a demon resist comparing itself to God? That is the very root of a demon's evil. It fluffed up its hideous fur, looking like a large, horrible spider. "In the name of Adonai, Uriel, Zadkiel, and all the heavenly host, I *am* no less merciful than your God. Take your eight days. Say your good-byes and make the child ready."

And then she was gone.

I paced back and forth all day, wearing a hole in the carpet until Shayna came home from work. I went downstairs to talk to Sol twice, but each time I stopped outside the door to the store and went back up without even putting my head in. It wasn't my place to tell Sol about Shayna's previous troubles—that was between husband and wife. But when Shayna did get home, I let her know in no uncertain terms that we had big trouble, and keeping it from Yael's father would not be right. I told her what had happened. She blanched and turned on me.

"You said the amulet would keep Alte safe!"

"Well, you never said you made a covenant with this creature! You never said you signed a contract!"

"How should I have said such a thing?" she cried. "Bad enough, a *shonde*, to have done it. But to say it? I grow tired of your scorn, Deborah." She pushed herself away from the table, and in the same tired voice said, "We'd better start packing. A week's headstart is a good one; we should be able to get pretty far."

I gaped at her. "*Goyishe kopf*—what have you got for brains, girl, kasha? Maybe you think you're dealing with a little dybbuk? No such luck—you've got hold of the Devil's own right hand here. There's no running away from that thing. You are just going to have to be brave."

"Me?" she asked.

"I can help you, tell you how to hold on to Yael, but do it for you? No. That I cannot do. She's not mine to hold on to, and I signed no contract. You will have to face this demon yourself."

"Face a demon? *I'm* supposed to face a demon?"

I fought the urge to shake her and demand she be the woman our mama would be proud to own as her daughter. "Maybe you'd rather give up Yael?"

Now Shayna looked as if *she* wanted to hit *me*. But she swallowed her temper, as I had swallowed mine. "Of course I wouldn't." She sounded stronger by the minute. "But how do I fight a demon?"

A person can get tired of looking after her little sister. So guilty I'd felt, ever since Johnny Fein had hurt Shayna, that I hadn't asked her for anything since, like she was a baby herself. But she wasn't, she was a grown woman. And a person can get tired of being looked after, as well, of being the little sister. I suppose that's why Shayna went with Johnny—to

get away from me and out from under my gaze. I am bossy, or so they tell me. I looked at Yael again and she looked at me. I remembered Yeshua peering up at me from the cradle of my arms.

"Let's find out," I said.

Together Shayna and I spoke to Solomon. I told him that the best thing he could do would be to stand ready when the time came, holding the baby, and if Shayna failed or if I was wrong, run as fast as he could for shul with his daughter. It would never work, of course. The demon would catch him before he made it out the door, but what could I tell him? That he was about as useful as a groom at a wedding? Ruthie we told the truth, and to her credit, she believed. She determined quietly that if Shayna and I failed—and if we failed, we would die for our treachery—she would grab the creature's tail and follow her wherever she took the baby. Never would she give up.

I did what I had to do. For six days I fasted, and on the seventh I went to the mikvah, bathed, and returned home. I ate matzoh with honey, prepared by Shayna, and plain fish. I lit a candle and set it on the table next to a clay bowl full of good wine. I kept a pen, ink, and paper nearby. I swallowed a mouthful of sweet wine and then I began to chant:

"I conjure you by the Lord who created heaven and earth to reveal to me what is true and to conceal from my eyes what is false; I conjure you by the staff with which Moses divided the sea to reveal to me what is true and to conceal from my eyes that which is false; I conjure you by the heavenly host, the hands of God, Akriel, Gabriel, Hatach, Duma, Raphael, Zafniel, Nahabiel, Inias, Kaziel…"

While I chanted I watched the wine intently. If I had stopped chanting even for one moment, the spell would cease, so I listed every magical name I knew, every name I could imagine, every feat of every great Jewish hero and heroine as the wine bubbled, frothed, churned, and finally smoothed out as still as glass. Then letters began to appear, as though they were being slowly etched into the surface of the wine. Without breaking my chant, I groped for paper and pen and copied the letters exactly. When no more letters appeared and the wine was still again, I finally brought the chant to an end, and the wine became plain wine once more.

I took a couple of deep shuddering breaths, feeling sick to my stomach. I had never properly been trained for this and I didn't know the safeguards that I should have had in place, that my bubbe would have had in place if she had been casting this spell. I felt very ill, weaker than I ever had before.

I called Shayna in and showed her the letters written on the pad.

"Not the Lord nor all the heavenly host will break a signed contract," I told her. "You will have to do it yourself."

"And how am I to do that, big sister?"

"You must *force* the demon to tear up the contract. Then she will have no power to take your little one. The demon does not have to listen to the names of the Lord and his angels, but she must answer to her own." I tapped the paper. "This is her name. You must bind her with it and force her to make you free of the contract. It is the only way."

Shayna took the paper and started to sound out the name. Quickly, I put my hand over her mouth. We didn't want to attract the creature's attention before we were ready.

At sunset the next evening, we waited in one room: Shayna, me, Ruthie, and Sol with Yael in his arms.

And then the *lilit* strolled into the room. She looked like me, this time. Just

like me.

Shayna started to shake. I took her hand. "Don't be frightened," I told her.

Then Shayna turned to look at me and I saw that she was not frightened. She was angry. I gave her hand a squeeze and hoped that she wouldn't let anger overwhelm our planning.

The demon chuckled and spat. Her spittle sizzled and burned through our rug, my wedding present for Shayna and Sol. "Your bubbe is suffering a thousand torments as she reviews the ways in which your troubles are her own doing. You, Deborah, I will deal with later, for we have so much in common, after all."

I shook my head—no, we have *nothing* in common—and heard the demon say, "Now, Shayna *maedele*, give me Yael. Give me the baby girl." She cracked her knuckles and grinned my grin, our bubbe's grin.

Sol tightened his arms around the baby while Shayna stared at the demon.

The demon smirked and displayed the contract that had been signed twice, once by my bubbe and once by Shayna. "I fulfilled my end of the contract twice, giving your grandmother powers and doing your sewing. It's not my fault she was killed before she could use them or that the mob took your brother before I could. I'll just have to do what I can with this one instead." She snapped her fingers. Yael disappeared from Sol's arms and reappeared in the demon's. Yael began to scream and claw at the demon's hands with her tiny nails.

"*Abomination!*" Shayna screamed, extending an arm and shaking her finger at the creature. "*Abomination!* Cursed in the sight of Adonai, Tetragammon, and all his host! Abomination! I, Shayna, daughter of Rokhel, conjure you to forfeit the child Yael, daughter of Shayna! I conjure you to release me from our contract, a contract shameful in the eyes of God and

man, a contract conceived and gotten by you, the lowest of the low, the slime of worms and shit of pigs! I conjure you to destroy this contract and leave this city, leave this earth and spend eternity in the realm of unspeakable things! I conjure and bind you by your own soul, your own self, your own name—" Shayna pointed her finger at the creature's heart and yelled, "RUMFEILSTILIZKAHAN!"

The demon turned gray and began to spin in place. "The devil told you that!" she howled. "The devil told you that!"

"Not the devil, unclean thing," Shayna said, triumphant. "My *sister*." And she seemed proud to have me by her side.

The demon spun and howled wordlessly until the very air burst into flames and it and the contract it was holding imploded into burning embers that vanished in midair. Sol leapt to catch Yael before she fell to the ground. The only sign that a stranger had been in the room was the hole in the rug.

We had Yael, ours to keep forever, but not without cost. Finding the name of the demon had been powerful magic, and the exhaustion that followed, the weakness that comes when you do a great feat for which you have never been properly trained, made me sick, sicker than I had been for many, many years. Sicker than I had been since the Old Country.

I tossed and turned with fever for days and a livid rash spread across my face and limbs. I burned so fiercely that Shayna brought in a doctor who looked me over and pronounced, "Scarlet fever."

Scarlet fever! A child's disease, after all—insult to injury, that was. But then again, conjuring the demon's name had left me weak as a child. My skin burnt so fiercely that it turned bright white. Shayna held cold compresses against my skin, but within minutes the heat from my body made them feel like they'd been warming in the stove for an hour. My fever climbed every day, burning what little sense I had left. Ruthie stayed home from work for days trying to spoon broth into my mouth so I wouldn't dry out entirely, or so I am told—for again, I don't remember much of those days. But with Ruthie home and me too sick to do any business, we were short of money, and Shayna went back to factory work.

Sol's mother found it a shame, a married woman in a factory, but Shayna told Ruthie that, actually, she did not mind. "With Sol and his brothers and his parents in the store," she told me, "all I am is underfoot. In the factory, I'm somebody. I'm good at what I do there. I'm good enough that I think that someday I'll get to be a sample-maker, maybe even a designer."

And she was so happy, said Ruthie, with the work she found—a modern factory, large, airy, three floors, imagine that, she said, and so high up the girls needed elevators to come and go. And so easy it was for her to get the job there, she didn't have to pay off anybody, she said—it was like magic, like an angel was watching over her.

Too easy, in retrospect.

I don't remember any of that. All I really remember are the dreams—every hour I managed to sleep I was plagued with nightmares, dreams in which my eyes were worms of fire burrowing through my head, or my head and hands became so swollen that I was sure they would burst, or I was falling, falling so far that I would never stop, never come to earth again. The pink rash had become raised crimson blisters. For weeks this lasted, and then…one night, late in March, the fever broke, and I sweated through three blankets. Ruthie washed linens all night, and that morning I woke up hungry. Ruthie fed me some breakfast: a little soup, a little milk, a soft-boiled egg. For two or three days she tended me while I regained my strength, and then she went out to work.

I was weak, and for most of the day, I sipped tea and tried to rest, but as morning shaded into afternoon the watery sunlight finally pulled me to my feet. Taking slow, tiny steps, I dressed myself and made my way down to Sol's store, where I found him behind the counter and his mother minding Yael. His mother agreed with me that fresh air would do me all the good in the world, so slowly, painfully, I stepped out into the street.

The sunlight, weak as it was, was painfully bright to my eyes. It bounced harshly off cold streets, all sharp angles and hostile edges. I pulled my jacket closer around my body; when Shayna had first stitched it for me, it had hugged me close, displaying my figure, but the weeks of illness had wasted me. A chill wind cut through a near alley and I trembled.

What struck me most about the street was how quiet it was, unnaturally quiet. There were no children playing skip rope or taunting each other, no peddlers trying to sell their wares, no friends arguing good-naturedly or couples screaming at each other. Just my soft, frightened footsteps and the wind. For a minute I was convinced that the illness had taken my hearing as well as my figure.

I walked carefully, keeping one hand on the buildings for support. When I finally got to the end of the block, the sounds of street life flooded back and I became dizzy with relief. I caught a bit of life from the remaining sunshine and went where my feet took me. I didn't know where I was going, only that I wasn't strong enough to get there as quickly as I needed to.But still, behind the street sounds, beneath the bustle, I heard that sinking silence.

I was three blocks away from the park when I heard the fire engines coming up behind me. They passed me easily and by the time I arrived at the Asch Building I barely had breath enough to push through the crowd.

The silence was gone. Screaming and roaring filled my

ears and poisonous black smoke filled the sky. I didn't understand what was happening—bundles of clothing trailing flames seemed to be falling from the sky while the few doors of the Asch Building were choked with people clawing and crawling over one another in order to get out. Once they did get out, though, they just joined the yelling throngs across the street, watching the falling bundles hitting the street with solid, damp thuds, one right after another. It wasn't until I saw one of the bundles trying and failing to push itself to its feet that I realized what they were.

This was Shayna's modern factory, I knew it, and I knew it had been no angel that had gotten her the job there.

I found myself out in the street where firemen were frantic with their own futility. Their rescue ladders went up seven stories—the factory was on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors. One woman staggered out of the building and immediately turned and tried to run back in. The firemen had to knock her out; she kept yelling about her daughter.

I looked up. One girl stood on the window's ledge. Already her skirt was beginning to smolder and even though she was so far above me, I swear I could see her face, unnaturally calm as she opened her purse and threw the money inside down to the street—and I remembered Shayna saying that today would be payday.

She took off her hat and sent it sailing in the direction of the park and the wind whipped her hair around her face. I could see flames as well as smoke coming out of the windows now.

Her dress was on fire.

She smoothed her hair back and stepped off the ledge as if she were stepping off the curb and crossing the street. She plummeted and her skirts rose up around her, a flower of flame. She landed only six feet from me. A cinder hit my cheek and bounced away before I could move.

Three women stood on another window ledge together. They linked arms, closed their eyes, and jumped, and their aim was good, but they tore right through the bottom of the safety net, and the firemen holding it were splattered with blood.

"I didn't know, I didn't know they would come down three, four at a time, arms wrapped around each other's waists," the fire chief wept when Ruthie interviewed him later.

I searched the faces of the women pouring out of the building, running to avoid being hit by the falling girls, their friends, but I didn't find Shayna there. I ran through the street, pulling away from the men who tried to stop me, looking at the fallen, but I could not find my sister among them either.

I looked up at the flame-filled windows. There was no more jumping now.

"I'm sorry, Mama," I whispered.

I wept while the building flamed with girls burning, burning here in America.