



Four of us: Rose, Ella, Marta and Carla.

In another life we might all have been friends together.
But this was Birchwood.


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

Which building was it? No chance to ask for more directions. Everyone else was rushing along too, like a herd of stampeding animals. There? No – here. This one. I stopped dead. The woman behind nearly ran slap-bang into me. We both looked at the building. It had to be the right place. Should we just knock now? Were we too late?

Please let me not be too late.

I stood on tiptoe and peered through a small, high window at the side of the door. I couldn't see much, mostly my own reflection. I pinched my cheeks to get a bit of colour and wished I was grown-up enough to have a dab of lipstick. At least the swelling around my eye had just





about gone down, although the greeney-yellow bruise was still there. I could see straight; that was the main thing. Thick waves of hair would've hidden the rest. But . . . you make the best of what you've got.

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

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

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

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

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

Inside the workshop I counted about twenty heads bent over whirring machines, like fairy-tale characters caught in a spell. They were all clean; I noticed that straight away. They were wearing plain brown overalls – nicer than the sack-thing slipping off my shoulders, that was for sure.

Wooden tables were scrubbed bone white and covered with patterns and threads. In one corner were shelves of fabrics, showing so much unexpected colour I had to blink. In another corner there was a cluster of headless, limbless dressmaker mannequins. I heard the hiss and clunk of a heavy iron and saw specks of lint floating by like lazy insects.

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

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

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

‘Pay attention! I’m Marta. I’m in charge here. *The Boss* – understand?’

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

Snap! I broke out of the memory. Time to focus.

‘Listen carefully,’ Marta ordered. ‘I won’t say all this again, and . . .’

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

'So sorry . . .'

The new arrival gave a shy smile and looked at her shoes. I looked at them too. She must've realised they weren't a matching pair, right? One was a sickly green satin slipper with a metal buckle, the other a leather brogue with broken laces. We'd all been tossed random shoes when we were first kitted out here . . . Hadn't this little squirrel even managed to bargain a proper pair? I could tell straight away she was going to be useless. Her accent was awfully, awfully *you know*. Posh.

'I'm late,' she said.

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

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

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

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

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

Squirrel put her feet together nicely. How did she manage to look so poised in that mismatched footwear? She was

not the sort of girl I'd normally mix with. For all she was dressed so badly, she probably thought I was too common. Beneath her.

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

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

Rabbit-woman shivered. 'I . . . I sew.'

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

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

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

'*Sixteen*,' said Squirrel suddenly. 'She's sixteen. She said so, before.'

'I wasn't asking you, I was asking *her*.'

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

'She's, er, right. I'm sixteen.'

Well, I would be. Eventually.

Marta snorted. 'And let me guess – you sew dresses for dollies and can just about stitch a button on, once you've

finished your homework. Honestly! Why do they waste my time with these cretins? I don't need schoolgirls. *Get out!*

'No, wait, you can use me. I'm a, erm –'

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

Was that it? My first proper job interview – failed. Disaster! That meant going back to . . . what? At best a job as kitchen skivvy or laundry scrubber. At worst, quarry work or . . . or no work at all, which was the worst thing that could happen. Don't think about that. *Concentrate*, Ella!

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

Marta looked back at me. 'You? A cutter?'

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

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

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

‘One day you’ll . . . Ha! That’s a joke,’ Marta sneered.

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

Marta nodded slowly. ‘That’s true enough. All right. Here’s what’s going to happen. You, Princess, can take over doing ironing and scrubbing. Those soft hands of yours need toughening up.’

‘I’m not a princess,’ said Squirrel.

‘Move!’

Marta looked me and Rabbit up and down.

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

‘I won’t let you down,’ I said.

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

Marta gave her orders: ‘Unpick this and let it out. It’s for a client – an Officer’s wife – who drinks her cream by the jugful, so she’s rounder than she thinks she is.’

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

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

'And you –' Marta slapped a piece of paper into my palm – 'another client, Carla, has asked for a dress. Semi-formal, for a music concert or something this weekend. Here are her measurements. Memorise them – I want the paper back. You can use the number-4 mannequin. Get fabric from over there.'

'What . . . ?'

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

I nodded, desperate not to start crying.

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

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

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

‘You want me to make a dress from scratch, before four?
That’s –’

‘Too hard? Too soon?’ she jeered.

‘That’s fine. I can do it.’

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

‘I’m Ella,’ I told her.

I don’t care, said her blank expression.

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

Squirrel, right behind me waiting her turn, said, ‘Looks like liquid silver, doesn’t it?’

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

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

Clean hands mean clean work, was another of her mottos. She also liked muttering, *Waste not, want not*. And if

anything mildly bad happened she'd shrug and say, *Better than a smack in the eye with a wet kipper!*

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

Since coming to Birchwood I'd already decided I was only going to see things I wanted to. Every second of my first three weeks had been horrible – things far worse than kipper bones. I'd been like a golem – a girl without a soul – shoved this way and that, waiting, standing, squatting. I didn't have the words to ask questions about what this place was or what happened here. I didn't want to know the answers anyway. Now, in the sewing workshop, I suddenly felt human again. I breathed in the fresher air. Forget the rest of reality. If I truly narrowed my mind I could believe that nothing in the world existed except making this dress for my client Carla.

Where to start?

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

red in the frying pan. Or herb sausages flecked with green basil and thyme . . .

My stomach growled.

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

Right. The pattern was drawn.

'Hey,' whispered one of the hunched women opposite. She was wide and squat with blobby skin, so in my mind I called her Frog. 'Save me any scraps of paper, will you?' she asked.

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



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

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

I swallowed and called, ‘Scissors!’ in a croaky voice. And then louder – ‘Scissors!’

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

I swallowed again. ‘Pins?’

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

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

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

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

Little fish get eaten. Sharks survive. It was better to be predator than prey – right?

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

I put my hands flat on the table until they stopped shaking. I was standing to do the cutting, but my legs felt weak. Grandma liked to do her cutting on the floor, where there was more room. I wasn't convinced the floorboards in the sewing workshop were clean enough for that. Instead I set the silk on the table, pinned the paper, marked on darts and tucks . . . and prepared to do the deed . . .

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

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

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

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

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

I guessed it was afternoon by the time I'd done cutting and piecing together the dress. There's no lunch in Birchwood, so nothing to signal midday. When I'd been working outdoors I only knew it was noon when the sun was at its highest and hottest. That was the halfway point between breakfast and supper. In the clockless sewing room, time was marked by the clank of scissors set down on wood, the sigh of needle-pulled thread and the tireless *whirr* of the machines. Every so often there'd be a tinkle of metal falling to the floor and Marta would call, 'Pin!' Behind her back the other workers rolled their eyes and mocked her in a silent, rippling echo of, *Pin! Pin! Pin!*

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

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

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

Marta pointed me towards a sewing machine. My hands trembled as I set up the spool and threaded the needle.

First fitting at four . . .

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

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

It was a familiar sound – the chatter of the metal parts all moving together. Part of me felt whisked away to Grandma's sewing room back home. If only it was that easy to get there. I used to play on the floor while Grandma did her dressmaking, picking up pins and pieces of snipped thread. Grandma called her sewing machine Betty. Betty was old. Quite a work of art. It was decorated in black enamel with gold patterning and Grandma's name etched onto it. Grandma worked the treadle in her favourite moleskin slippers, cut at the front so her swollen feet could bulge out. When she sewed, the fabric seemed to guide itself in a straight line to the needle. I didn't yet have that magic touch. Or Grandma hovering over me to help.

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

After each seam I leaped up from the machine and went to Squirrel at the ironing board. Frequent pressing is the secret to a neat garment – even a beginner knows that.

The workshop iron had a long flex dangling from the ceiling. I prayed the iron wouldn't scorch or pucker the silk, especially since Squirrel-girl didn't seem to know quite what she was doing with it. She'd probably never done housework in her life.

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

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

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

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

I mouthed, *Thank you.*

She held a palm out for payment, then giggled at the look on my face. 'Just teasing. I'm Rose,' she whispered.

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

'Ella.'


'I'm not really a princess.'

'Me neither.'

'Just a countess.' Rose grinned.

Marta coughed. Back to work.

Every few minutes I sneaked a peek at Rabbit-woman. She was sewing with her whole body bent over in focus. Oh



my god – hadn't she noticed? She'd let the blouse seams out fine but she'd tacked the sleeves back in *the wrong way round*. They were bent as if the arms were broken.

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

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

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

Rabbit carried on wrecking her work. I got pleats pressed on my dress, put in a side zip and started hand-sewing the neatest neckline ever. My head drooped lower and lower. It would be so easy just to close my eyes and snooze for a while. When was the last time I'd slept properly? More than three weeks ago. Maybe a little doze wouldn't hurt . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

Marta ignored Rose, as if she truly had been a rodent squeaking. 'Get out, you idiot!' she shouted at Rabbit.



‘Or do I need to throw you out?’ She raised her hand and took a step forward. The dark figure at the end of the room shifted and stretched.


Bleach-white from fear, Rabbit scurried to the door and disappeared. We all just watched, semi-safe in our sanctuary.

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

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

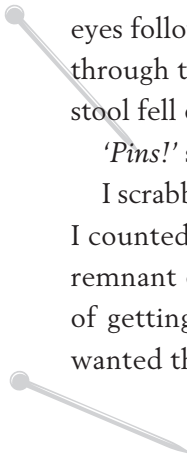
I whispered to Frog, ‘What . . . what will happen to her? That woman who just left?’

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




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

‘Pins!’ she commanded.



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



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

‘The client says the dress is enchanting.’

I sagged with relief.

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

‘Er, thank you, I’m not hungry.’ Unbelievably I found I was too twisted up inside to eat now.

‘Liar! You’ve had – what? – a mug of brown coffee-water for breakfast, and you’ll get a mug of brown soup-water for supper. You’re hungry enough to overcome stupid fits of conscience about that dozy bungler I booted out. Hungry enough to do whatever it takes to survive here. Trust me, it’s the only way.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh, I was worried about the War all right. The War got in the way of everything. Out in the real world, outside of here, I'd wasted hours queuing at shops with empty shelves. More hours hiding in the cellar when bombers flew over. I'd put up with endless news updates, and Grandad plotting battle lines on a map pinned to the kitchen wall. I'd known War would come – it was all people talked about for months. We learned about War in history lessons at school. War was something that happened to other people a long way away.

Then it came to my country. My town.

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

Here people find out that clothes aren't so trivial after all. Not when you haven't got any. The first thing They did

when we arrived was make us strip. Minutes off the train and we were sorted into male and female. They shoved us into a room and told us to undress. Right there. With everyone watching. Not even underwear allowed.

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

Just clothes.

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

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

They said we'd get our clothes back after a shower. They lied. We got sack dresses with stripes. As Stripeys we ran around like herds of panicked zebras. We weren't people any more, we were numbers. They could do what they liked to us.

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

'What *you* think doesn't matter!' exclaimed Marta, when I turned up at the workshop the next day, bleary-eyed from a predawn start. I was oh so ready to get dressmaking . . .

only to find I was ordered to polish the fitting-room floor.

‘I thought I was here to sew, not skivvy,’ was my response to that.

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

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

I washed, put on a brown overall and collected polishing gear. I noticed Rose wasn’t at the ironing board. I wondered what had happened to her. Too soft to stick it out in the sewing room, obviously. Her sort were all very nice but they had no backbone. Not that it mattered to me of course. I wasn’t here to make friends.

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

For starters, there was a lovely bobble-trim on the lampshades . . . and real lamps, not just bare light bulbs protected by wire cages. There was an armchair in one corner. An *actual* armchair, with braiding and a grass-green cushion. Such a fat cushion! If I were a cat I’d curl up on it and only wake up when someone set out a saucer of cream.

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

Most decadent of all, there was a mirror.

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

'Hello, Ella . . .'


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

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

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

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

There weren't many women aged forty or older in



Birchwood. Those that were looked eighty. Youth was stronger – lasted longer. As long as you weren't too young: sixteen minimum, just as Rose had prompted me the day before. Otherwise . . . otherwise . . .

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

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

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

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

'Sorry!' she sang out.

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

‘I could . . .’

‘Would you? Thank you!’ Rose jumped down and passed me the bucket.

I had been going to say, *I could hold the chair*, but Rose assumed I was being generous and offering to clean the window glass for her. As if! The last thing I wanted to do was to see outside of this safe haven. I already knew there was nothing green, nothing growing. The only view from the windows would be of watchtowers poised like storks along wire fences. And chimneys. Smoking chimneys.

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

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

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

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

I scowled at her. ‘Since when do you know so much about cleaning? I thought you said you were a *countess*. If

you were, you'd have an army of servants to do it for you.'

'Not an army – but quite a few.'

'So you're rich?'

'I was.'

'Lucky you.'

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

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

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

'Rose!' I warned. 'What if someone hears you?'

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

'May I have this dance?' she mimed, with a princely bow.

'Are you crazy?' I hissed.

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

Waltz? Here?

The way Rose looked, so bold and playful, I actually



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

We were girls, just girls, being girls.

We were caught.

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

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

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

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

