

CHAPTER 1

Looking for Work

Maybe this time ...

Emily Watson peered in through the shop window. The afternoon sun made a mirror of the glass, forcing her to shade her eyes to see inside. A long counter ran along one wall. On top were glass cases holding trays of candies — mounds of chocolate balls, butterscotch pennies, peppermint lozenges. Emily's mouth watered. Halfway along the counter stood a cash register, its gold paint glinting in the sunlight. The lady behind it was plump and motherly. And she was alone. Emily glanced again at the small sign in the window: Help Wanted.

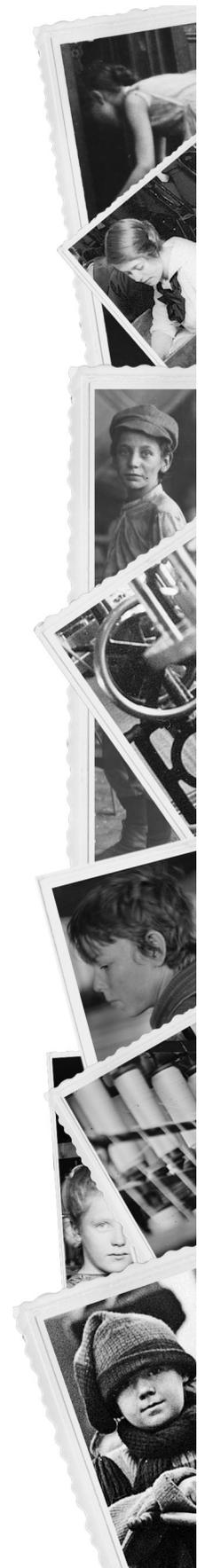
She tugged down her too-short jacket and smoothed her skirt. Then, taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door. The jingle of the bell startled her.

"Can I help you?" The woman's smile was friendly. A good beginning. The last one had frowned from the moment Emily had set foot in her store.

"I'd like ..." Emily had to stop to clear her throat. "I'm here to apply for the job."

The smile vanished.

Emily rushed into her prepared speech. "I'm very good at arithmetic, and I really like to help people. I know I'd make a good saleslady."





“Too young.”

“I’m older than I look. Nearly fifteen.”

The eyes narrowed appraisingly. “Twelve if you’re a day.”

Emily pulled herself up to her full height. “I’ve finished school already. I’m old enough to work.”

The woman’s face settled into a tight, hard frown. “Don’t you argue with me, my girl. I’m not about to get myself closed down for hiring a child.”

Tears stung Emily’s eyes. She had tried so hard, but in every shop she’d heard the same answer.

Sorry, the man in the bakeshop had said.

No openings. The grocery clerk hadn’t even turned from stacking oranges.

Out! the haughty saleslady in the hat store had ordered.

“Now, now ... Don’t take on so.” The voice was softer.

Maybe ... But when Emily looked up, the saleslady was still frowning. “There is one place.” She pursed her lips in disapproval. “I don’t hold with it, mind, but I’ve heard they hire underage girls. It’s not what I’d want for my own daughter, but ...”

“Please. I have to find ...” Emily choked on her words.

“Now don’t upset yourself again. Try the Acme Garment Factory. Just keep going down the street. It’s at the bottom of Mill Lane.”

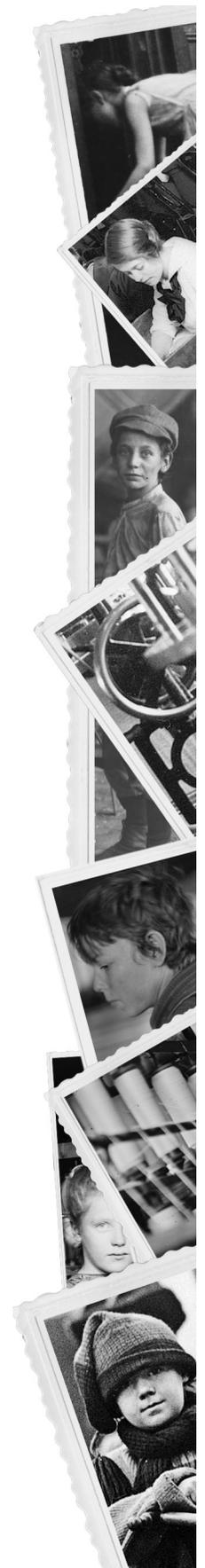
A factory. She had so wanted to work in a nice, clean shop. Well, hours of trudging up and down Main Street had shown her how foolish that hope had been. But — a factory.

The doorbell jingled. “Be off with you, now,” the woman said in a brusque undertone. Then she turned a smiling face to her customer.

Emily felt so tired she could barely drag herself from the shop. A factory at the bottom of Mill Lane. I'll go tomorrow, she decided. It was already late afternoon and she was sticky with sweat. Home. She wanted so badly the comfort of home. Then she remembered. Home wasn't home anymore. Not since yesterday. Would she ever scrub that picture from her mind? Mam in the lead pushing their old wicker baby carriage. Under, over and around baby Annie and wee Bertie she'd packed towels and sheets and pillows. Into Ernie's little pushcart they'd piled their few pots, pans and dishes. Emily had had to borrow a wagon to hold the wicker laundry basket full of neatly folded clothes. Bringing up the rear was their neighbor, Mike Magee, pushing his handcart piled with their chairs, a table, her mother's trunk, three tattered, flimsy mattresses and the boards to make up their beds.

Evicted! Because they couldn't pay their rent. Emily flushed hot with humiliation. That must never happen again. I must find a job. Now.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned her back on the friendly storefronts with their customers bustling in and out and headed toward a grimmer section of Main Street. Here she saw only the blank brick walls of tall buildings, their windows too high up to show any signs of human life. The street noises had changed, too, from cheerful chatter to the hollow clop of horse's hooves on cobblestones and the rattle of delivery wagons. Piles of trash teetering on the curbs and animal waste flung into the gutters gave off a sickly sweet smell. A furtive scurrying told her that rats were feasting. With a shudder she pulled her skirt tight around her legs.





How had it come to this? All year Miss Henderson had been telling the girls in Senior Fourth how women at last had a chance to make their mark in the world. Go on to Continuation School, she'd said, and the world will open up in front of you. That promise and Mam's encouragement had kept Emily working hard at her studies — until three days ago. The thought of that horrible day still made her feel sick.

At quarter to nine, she had crept into the school, desperate to find Miss Henderson before the bell rang and the halls filled with students. The doorknob rattled under her shaking hand and the teacher turned from writing on the blackboard, eyebrows raised in annoyance. Then she saw Emily and her severe expression softened. She reached out a hand. "Come in, Emily. What is it?"

"I ... I ..." Emily had to swallow before she could choke out the story — how she'd have to leave school that very day, a whole month before final exams, and find a job because her father ... She couldn't bring herself to say it. How they hadn't heard from her father for months and now they'd run out of money.

She felt Miss Henderson's hands clasp her shoulders. The firm touch calmed her, comforted her.

"I want you to listen carefully, Emily."

She looked up and was locked into the intent gaze that had kept her working so hard that year.

"No matter what happens," her teacher continued, "remember this: To work, to earn your own living, means you can look at the world with pride. It's not the job, it's the way you do the work that counts. Don't ever forget, there is dignity in labor." She paused, and Emily blinked with the

effort of concentrating on her words. Then Miss Henderson smiled. “You’ve done splendidly this year, Emily. You will get your graduation certificate — I promise you.”

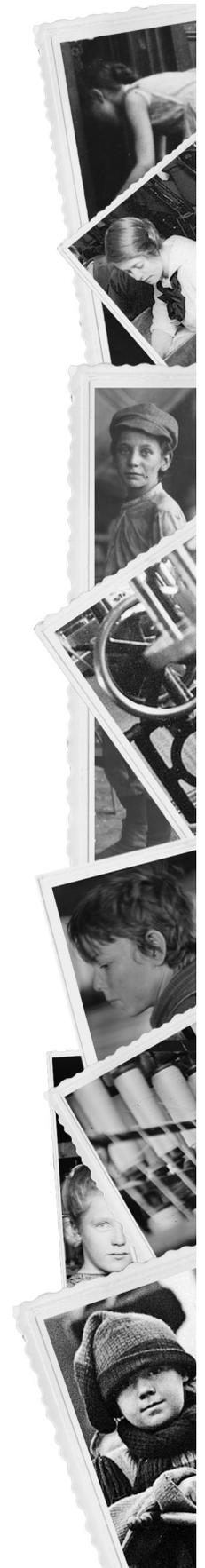
Emily had walked out of the classroom glowing, as though she were destined for the most exalted of futures. But now?

Dignity? Where was the dignity in being thrown out of every shop she’d tried? And what about this time? What if not even a factory wanted her? Then she spotted it. Just ahead, a sign high on a brick wall: Mill Lane.

Emily turned into the lane and was immediately plunged into a chilly darkness. Her sun-dazzled eyes peered down the narrow passage. Under foot, cedar block paving had given way to rotting planks laid over the mud of the lane. How could this be the place? But there on the pitted brick wall was another faded sign. Her eyes, now accustomed to the gloom, made out the hand-lettered words: First Floor — Everlast Shoes; Second Floor — Excelsior Matches; Third Floor — Acme Garment Factory. A dark opening in the wall showed four cracked stone steps leading to a door.

This was it. Her last try today. Emily took a deep breath and started up the stairs. The door creaked open at her touch, and she stepped into a square alcove lit by a dim electric bulb hanging from the ceiling. To her left was a door that said Everlast Shoes. A steady chunk, chunk, chunk made the floor vibrate. In front of her was a dark staircase. She started up. There was no railing, and the stairwell was so narrow that her shoulders brushed both walls. At a turn in the stairs her nose wrinkled from the sudden stench of sulfur. Excelsior Matches.

She hurried up to the next landing. On the door directly





in front of her the words Acme Garment Factory were barely visible through the grime on the frosted glass window. From inside came the metallic chattering of sewing machines. How easy it would be to run back down those dark stairs. And then what? Tell Mam she hadn't even tried? No, she couldn't disappoint Mam. Not when they were so desperate.

She pushed the door open. Noise roared at her. She clapped her hands over her ears, then noticed a bowler-hatted man behind a table counting bolts of white fabric. Beyond him, pale gray light from grimy windows showed a room crowded with row after row of sewing machines, their operators hunched over the jumping needles.

The man looked up and shifted a half-chewed cigar to one corner of his mouth. "Yeah?"

"I ... I heard you were hiring." Emily felt as though her words were swallowed by the din of the machines, but the man turned and yelled down the room.

"Dolly, come and look at this one."

A young woman appeared carrying a half-sewn blouse, a style Emily recognized as a shirtwaist. She spread it on the table, then held out a pair of scissors. "Let's see you snip off those threads."

Emily scrubbed sweaty palms down her skirt, took the scissors and snipped.

The woman peered at the results. "Seems nimble enough. Yes, she'll do." She turned to Emily. "Be here at 7:00 sharp tomorrow morning and bring your own scissors."

"Does that mean I have a job?"

"For what it's worth," the girl said, too low for the man to hear. Then louder, "You'll get four dollars a week, with

money deducted if you're late or you cut anything you're not supposed to. Seven sharp, mind. And bring your lunch. We don't finish until 6:15." She gathered up the shirtwaist and headed back toward the rows of sewing machines.

Emily stared after her. In all that long room not one head had turned to see what was happening by the door.

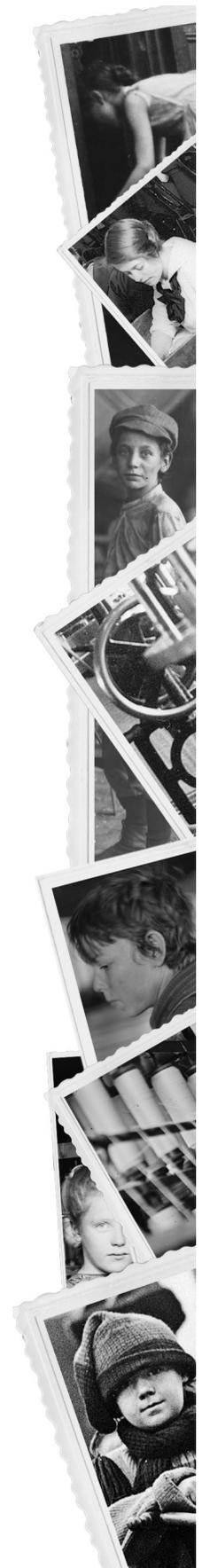
It took Emily half an hour to walk home. She started off in a daze, her ears still ringing from the noise of the clattering machines. She should feel happy — she had a job. Instead she felt heavy with despair. This shouldn't have happened. If only her father ...

"I'll send you money every month, Lily," he'd promised Mam just before he'd taken off to search for work out west. "You know I won't fail you." And at first the money had come every month. Enough for rent and food and a bit left over. But now, for the third month in a row — nothing.

And then, last week, that stomach-wrenching scene in the post office. Mam crying, clutching at the metal grille of the wicket. "Please look again. It must be there. It must! Did you check in that bag?" Hot with embarrassment, Emily had begged her mother to come away, even though she knew how desperately they needed the money the missing letter would surely hold.

Stop! she told herself. You'll be crying in a minute. She shook her head to clear away the gloom and found she'd walked right past her turnoff. No point heading for the old neighborhood. That life was over.

She turned back and started down toward the train tracks where the houses crowded together along dingy laneways. With each street she crossed, the buildings grew





smaller and shabbier. Coal-blackened brick gave way to stucco and clapboard, windows broken or gray with ancient dirt, doors scabby with peeling paint. The sour smell of garbage, rotting in the heat, made her stomach heave.

Clusters of thin, ragged children played on broken steps or in the gutters. Ahead of her trudged an odd little figure, bent gnome-like under a pile of blankets or perhaps coats. Emily had nearly caught up with it when she recognized the breeches on the short legs sticking out below the load.

“Ernie? What on earth?”

Her brother’s face grinned up at her from under the load. “Sewing for Mam. Mrs. Magee told her about this place. Gosh, it was horrible, Em. I had to go down twisty old stairs to a smelly cellar and a man plopped this pile of stuff on me and said have it back by the end of the week. But it’s okay, ’cause on the way I met up with a swell bunch of guys. And tomorrow we’re going coal-picking.”

“Coal-picking?”

“Yeah. Free coal, just for the picking. One of the guys, Alfie, says he’ll show me how.”

He shifted his load slightly and trudged on, seeming not at all upset or ashamed or any of the other emotions Emily felt roiling inside her. Almost as though it were a big adventure, living in this dreadful neighborhood.

Holding her nose against the stench from the row of privies, she followed him down the lane to the shabby little house they shared with another family. The door opened right into the front room. Her mother was sitting at the table wiping dribbled porridge from little Bertie’s chin. She turned a hopeful look on Emily.

“I’ve got a job, Mam.” Her mother’s eyes lit up. “In a factory,” Emily continued in a breathless rush. “Snipping threads ... with two cents off for every wrong cut.”

“A factory?” Her mother closed her eyes and pressed her lips tightly together.

She’s going to cry, Emily thought. Then the tensions and humiliations of the day overwhelmed her, and she burst into tears herself.

