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Léa

a novel

ARIELA FREEDMAN

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Léa

a novel

ARIELA FREEDMAN



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To Imma

Prologue

Montreal, April 15, 1937

Léa leaves her house at dawn and the air still feels like winter. It is the time of year when Montreal is entirely unpredictable, frigid one day and sweaty the next. She thinks she sees grey flakes of snow as she wraps her thin coat around herself and hugs her arms to her chest. For weeks she has prayed for good weather. The streets are nearly empty but for a few milk carts, delivery trucks, boys on bicycles throwing newspapers against the closed doors of the sleeping city.

Tomorrow, they will own the front page of every one of those papers.

She hurries to the garment district, her head down, hands deep in her pockets. The sidewalks smell of charcoal and rain. Her coat is brown, her hat is brown; she is a city sparrow, meant to blend in on the street, flitting from corner to corner. There is no reason for anyone to stop her, but still, she is nervous, and does not want to attract attention. When she gets to Sainte-Catherine, she can see that Rose Pesotta has beaten her there, standing in front of union headquarters.

In her bright purple double-breasted coat, a gold pin on her chest like a medal, Rose looks like a general. She shares

none of Léa's concern about being conspicuous. "How did you sleep?" Rose asks.

"I'm nervous," she confesses. "I feel like I'm throwing a party, and I don't know if anyone is going to come. How about you?"

"I slept like a baby," Rose says. "Woke up every two hours screaming." She smiles at Léa. "I slept just fine. Don't worry, they're coming."

Léa peers down the street, shivering. She is trying to look around corners. She is trying to see the future.

The minutes stretch like hours.

And here they are. Here they are! A myriad of women shoulder to shoulder in glad defiance, chatting and laughing. As they fill the street, the day becomes bright and loud with possibility. Hundreds, no, it must be thousands of girls, from half a dozen factories, where the doors will stay shut and the machines will lie idle on this glorious day. The sky is clearing, the sun is out, even the grimy downtown streets are beautiful. Every single upturned, smiling face is full of promise.

Léa walks into the crowd as if she is parting the sea. "Frieda!" she cries. "How are you feeling?" Frieda salutes her with a bandaged arm—just last week, it was caught in the mangle on the floor of the laundry. Those machines are vicious. Léa hears her name and turns around to see Charlotte, who was so afraid that she would lose her job if she showed up for the strike, and she pulls her into a hasty embrace. "I'm so glad you're here!" She knows many of the girls by name, and greets them in their own languages: English, Yiddish, French. For months, she has been holding them by the hand. For months, she has been pulling them along. She has been leading them right here, to this moment.

Something about Léa is hard to pin down. Her narrow face, her rawboned cheeks and china-blue eyes, can shift in an instant from inconspicuous to remarkable. Depending on how she's dressed and where she is, she can look French or English, Catholic or Jewish. Even her name, Roback: she could be from anywhere. Sometimes she is plain and seems to fade into the background. But when she is excited or enraged, she is transformed, her cheeks flushed, her eyes kindled in the sun. Right now, she is a bead of quicksilver moving through the crowd. She is luminous.

By mid-morning, they are five thousand strong, standing shoulder to shoulder. They extend for blocks. They shout and laugh and hold placards and sing songs. With the power of their bodies, they refuse their exploitation.

It takes a little while for the police to show up, and when they do, they stand in confused restless clusters, watching the girls, not sure how to proceed. In Ontario at the General Motors strike, Hepburn's Hussars rushed the lines with billy clubs; in Chicago, they used tear gas and pistols. But these are girls. What do you do with girls? Some of the protestors, wearing their new spring coats and spring hats, drift towards the horses and pet them. The cops aren't sure if they are there to flirt or to fight. As a girl strokes the muzzle of a police horse, the animal dips his head. It seems like they have all gathered, not in conflict, but in a great-hearted fellowship. The beast tamed; a moment of unexpected grace.

The mood of the crowd is not fear, it is delight. It looks like everyone is on holiday. The women are shedding their coats, moving freely, stretching in the sun. They have paralyzed the police with their beauty.

Then the reinforcements arrive, and the battle begins.

A flash of light off a cop's baton, and she is in Berlin, running down the sidewalk that bloody May Day eight years ago, through the tear gas and the shouts, caught between the orders to stop and the calls to run.

She will not run. Not this time.

Hand in hand, facing the lines, she lifts her chin, and all she feels is calm and righteous exhilaration.