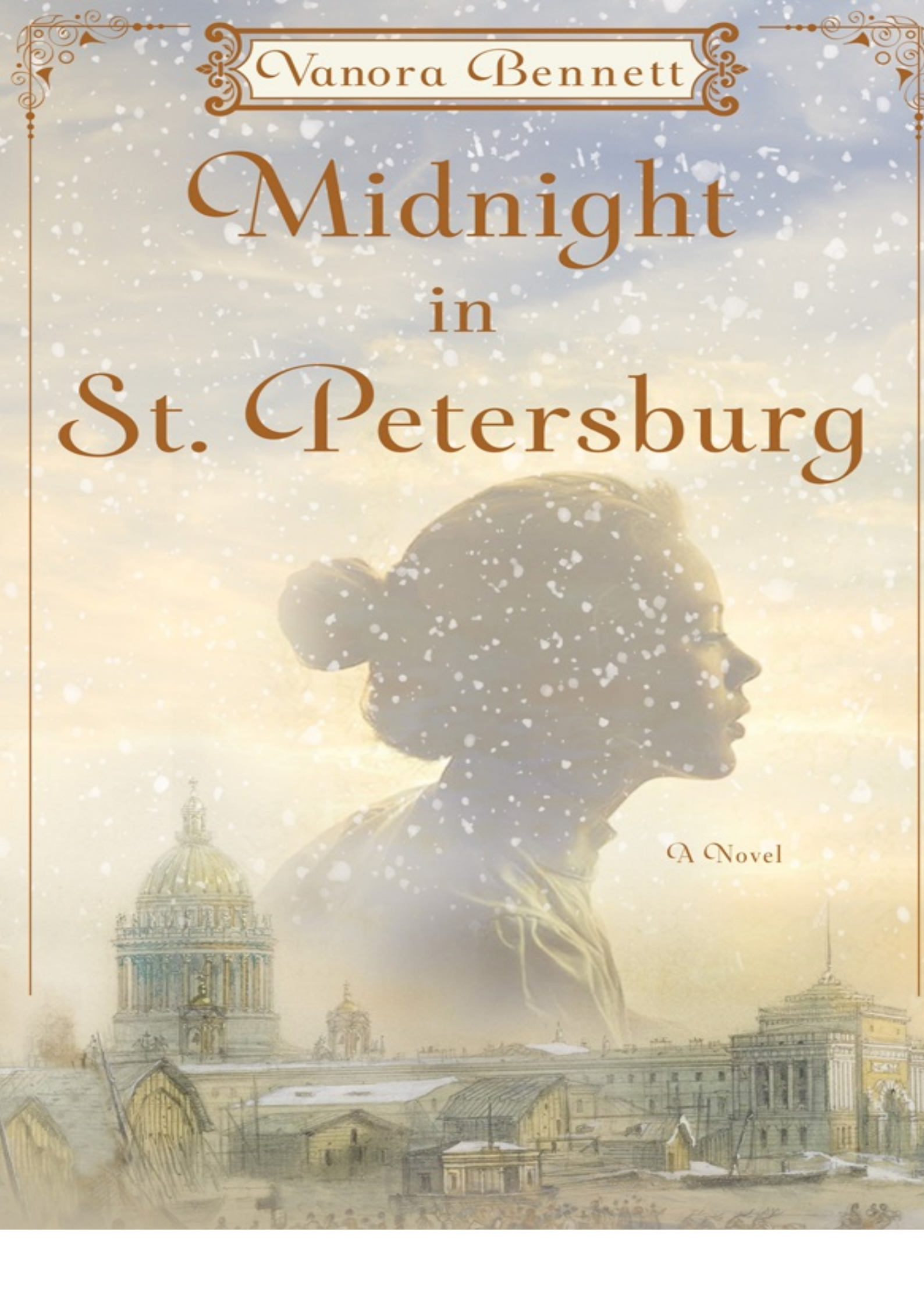


Vanora Bennett

Midnight
in
St. Petersburg

A Novel



MIDNIGHT
IN
ST. PETERSBURG

VANORA BENNETT

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

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For the Karpovs in St. Petersburg

PART ONE

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 1911

CHAPTER ONE

The train was still hurtling through the darkness, with hours to go before St. Petersburg and dawn when Inna had her fortune told.

Not that she'd ever meant to show her palm to a gypsy. She'd slunk on to that train in terror of being noticed at all.

Of course, she couldn't help hearing what was being said by all the raucous men crowded together on the bottom bunks of the communal compartment, drinking, eating sausage and chicken legs and eggs, and singing along to a squeezebox playing sad songs far too loud and fast. She couldn't help being aware, either, that there was a gypsy woman on the bunk below hers, reading the drunks' hands.

But she'd spent the first part of the journey pressed up against the wall of her top bunk, keeping very quiet, like all the other shadows in all the other corners she didn't dare look at, shying away from the noisy talk. In an attempt not to be overwhelmed by the racing of her heart, she'd been repeating hypnotically, in time with the rhythm of the wheels, 'Nearly safe, nearly safe, nearly safe...'

She'd never have imagined, alone with her fear, that anything or anyone could have persuaded her out of the prickly darkness. Until it happened. The talk had been enough to keep her hidden – the talk that kept coming back to the assassination.

The Prime Minister, shot dead in the theatre in Kiev by a terrorist. The Tsar, down south on a visit, standing in the brilliantly lit royal box, frozen-faced as a photograph, watching Stolypin hold his chest and stagger to his knees.

What I don't understand is, how did he get past the security police in the first place?

He had a pass, can you believe? I was told he was a police informer himself.

An anarchist, I heard.

Or some sort of Red. An SD, an SR ...

But a Jew, of course.

There, of course. Her heart thudded. It was only ever a question of time before the conversation turned to the Jews.

Reds, Yids, what's the difference? Always the Yids, isn't it? A viper in the much-suffering Russian breast.

The door kept banging. Word must have gone around in the restaurant carriage that there was a gypsy telling fortunes down in the third class. New drunks came, wanting to cross the woman's palm with silver.

Miserably, she heard: *Yeah, give them a good kicking.* And, after a rustle of newsprint, another voice, less obviously belligerent, but nasal and full of hate: *Yes, like it says here ... 'The Government must recognize that the Jews are as dangerous to the life of mankind as are wolves, scorpions, reptiles, poisonous spiders and other such-like creatures. These are destroyed because of the risk they*

present to humanity. Yids must likewise be placed under conditions that will make them gradually die out. This is the task of the Government and the best men in the country.'

There was a roar of approval. Inna cringed back. Here, too, she thought; they're the same even up here.

And then it died away.

She risked a peep over, down from her bunk.

A thin man of medium height was stepping into the carriage. He had the longish hair and beard of an Orthodox religious man, and a big gleaming cross at his breast. He was dressed like a peasant.

She waited for him to join in too. But then she saw he was shaking his head. 'Did the Lord Jesus preach hate, brothers?' he said. His voice was quiet.

In the embarrassed throat-clearings and shufflings of buttocks on seats that followed, she heard the rustle of *Zemshchina*, the right-wing hate newspaper, being stuffed back into a pocket. No one liked being caught with a red angry face, baying for blood. Not up here in the safety of the north, anyway. Good, she thought, savagely. Good for the little father.

The peasant didn't press his point. He just moved on to the fortune-telling gypsy, right below Inna and held out a coin, then his hand.

Inna hoped the gypsy would have a happy-ever-after fortune for him.

But instead she dropped his hand and said, 'I'm not telling *your* future. Take your money back.'

'What's wrong, my dear?' the peasant said in his burr. Now he was so close, Inna saw he had the soft expression of a countryman approaching a skittish horse, apple in hand.

Then he looked up at Inna, caught her looking down at him from her top bunk, and shocked her again with the directness of his gaze. He had extraordinarily pale eyes. 'Ah, well, all our hands are full of troubles,' he said to the gypsy woman. 'No escape from troubles, in these wicked times...'

'Don't you go hunting for that coin any more,' he went on cheerfully, patting the gypsy's bedding for the coin she'd let fall. 'Tell the little lady's fortune instead ... the one up there.'

The gypsy squinted up at Inna in surprise; then, abruptly, she pulled Inna's hand down, as if to grab the whole business over with as fast as possible.

Inna was too surprised to resist.

The peasant wasn't put off by the gypsy's hostility. As Inna felt the woman's bony fingers on her palm, he murmured, 'A happy future, mind: flowers in the field, a chicken in the pot, a handsome husband...'

But the gypsy didn't look at Inna's hand for more than a moment, either. Then, with a scowl, she pushed it away too. 'Another one,' she muttered. 'One thing's for sure. We live in evil times.'

Inna kept her hand out. Her fear had receded a bit now and she wasn't going to let this woman make her cringe away as if she'd done something wrong. 'What did you see?'

But the gypsy shook her head, tied her scarf over her head and picked up her purse, as if she was out shopping.

'Come on, tell me,' Inna said. She didn't know why her voice was trembling.

Perhaps the gypsy heard that. At any rate she looked reluctantly up and took back Inna's hand. 'Lifeline, here, see?' she said, jabbing at the palm, all round the base of the thumb.

Inna nodded.

‘Well, it stops, doesn’t it?’ the gypsy said irritably, as if Inna was being stupid. ‘Look. Just peters out. Nothing.’

There was a silence.

‘You asked, Abramovna,’ she said, loudly enough for Inna to think others might hear the contemptuous Jew slur.

Hating herself, Inna shifted hastily backwards into the darkest corner of her bunk as the gypsy flounced off towards the compartment door. She let her breath out. No one except the peasant had heard, and he was safe.

He was spreading his hands in resigned acceptance. ‘Five kopeks wasted, that’s for sure,’ he said peaceably. ‘Both of us doomed. Ah well, God be with her, poor thing, with her nasty thoughts – and at least we’ll have each other for company on the road to Hell, if she’s right...’

He nodded and turned to make his own way out of the carriage. Once again Inna was left on her own, with her arms wrapped tight about her knees, and the rowdiness below gaining in volume, and for comfort, only the rhythm of her phrase, ‘Nearly safe, nearly safe, nearly safe,’ in time to the wheels.

But now even that lullaby had stopped working so well. Different words to the rhythm were coming unbidden into her head. The gypsy’s words: ‘Peters out, peters out, peters out...’

* * *

The poorer passengers were out of the third-class carriage almost before the train had stopped in St Petersburg.

They rushed guiltily in the grey light along the platform of Emperor Nicholas Station towards the station building, ignoring the weight of their parcels and packages. It was only September, but already their quick breath came out white in the chilly air.

Anyone watching the fast-emptying green carriages would have seen the long-legged spider of a girl who emerged last, with only a smallish bag in each hand. She stood on the step for a moment blinking, seeming bewildered by the pace of the retreat into town.

Then she jumped down, too, set her worn woollen coat with its respectable bit of beaver at the throat straight, adjusted her plain hat over her black hair, and strode off to catch up with the crowd.

In her head, she was reciting the address she was making for. Strictly speaking, she didn’t need to. Next to the passport in her wallet she had folded the much-fingered piece of paper on which she had written it down. She didn’t know where it was, exactly. She didn’t even know her way out of the station. But she knew she’d be safe once she’d found it.

She let her hand brush against the pocket in which she could feel the wallet. She was already walking fast. But she speeded up.

‘You there, girl!’ Inna heard a man’s rough rasp just behind her, talking in the exclamatory way that the lower classes of Russia talked to their women, labelling everyone either ‘girl!’ ‘woman!’ ‘aunty!’ or ‘granny!’

She ignored him, raised her nose a fraction higher and speeded up. That kind of voice meant trouble.

‘*Baryshnya*,’ the voice said, sounding less certain as it moved up the social scale with its forms of

address, but following her, all the same. Definitely her. Footsteps still right behind. *‘Mademoiselle?’*

Inna had left her own Jewish documentation behind in Kiev. No point in keeping it when all allowed her to do was live in the south of the empire, in the Pale of Settlement, where Jews were supposed to stay under strict police control. It wouldn't get her anywhere here, up north, in the imperial capital.

She didn't need her papers any more anyway, since she'd been lucky or quick-witted enough to pick up Olya Morozova's evening bag in the panic at the theatre. She'd known what was in the bag because Olya had spent the whole of the first interval showing it off to her classmates: a travel passport to spend a month with her grandmother in St. Petersburg, missing the start of term at the secondary school in Kiev. It was something Inna could only dream of, and, oh, didn't Olya, impeccably Russian, and the daughter of the city's deputy police chief to boot, know it, and didn't she sweeten the pleasure for her in showing Inna the pass.

But Olya hadn't had time to think about her bag in the second interval, once the man in the shabby coat had walked in and they'd heard the shots and the entire audience had erupted in panic. She'd been too busy screaming.

Somewhere up ahead, in the echoing heights of the station building, a melancholy brass-band version of the overture of 'A Life for the Tsar' could be heard. They'd been playing the same patriotic music Glinka in the theatre, too, Inna remembered; the music brought it back.

The frightening crowds in Kiev after the assassination had also had the Tsar on their minds. The leaflets which had covered the town like a snowfall by dawn, with their ugly, hastily put-together typography full of grammar mistakes, telling the people the assassin was a Yid, as well as a Red: they all had the same message. It was time for patriotic citizens to show their loyalty to the Tsar by ridding the Motherland of this noxious nation of Christ-killers.

Inna had picked one up late the next day, once she'd used Olya's passport to buy her ticket for the night train. Her fear had lessened once she was on the move and taking control of her own destiny: there was still a series of stifling rises in the gorge, but at least not that numbing helplessness. After a quick glance, she'd trodden the leaflet into a puddle, outside the station. She'd ground it underfoot, and watched it disintegrate into the wet black of the water.

There'd been more crowds of patriots out all that day: snub-nosed, tow-headed, thickset men, and out of the pubs, in and out of their Black Hundreds meetings, with their double-headed eagle pins gleaming on their lapels, carrying their pictures of the Tsar and his family, handing out the leaflets and chatting to the burly policemen in their midst as if they were brothers (which all too often they were). No blood had been shed; there had been no screams, or shop windows broken, or bonfires in the streets, which Inna knew from hearsay was how things went when a real pogrom got going. But still, the people were dangerous as they milled around staring at those others – the shadows flitting by lugging parcels to the station, or to carts or carriages or motorcars. Tonight's escapees were all hoping not to be tomorrow's victims, and Inna was glad to be away.

Well, now she was away. But was she safe?

She turned and stared down her nose at the greasy jowl of a man in a dark uniform with silver and red facings. She felt something rising in her throat, but her voice sounded steady as she said, 'Yes?'

He looked suddenly uncomfortable as he wriggled in his too-tight tunic. She could see him thinking

that he'd mistaken the shiny thinness of the cloth at her elbows for the submissiveness of the poor, and got his tone wrong. Dropping his eyes, he said, 'Begging your pardon, *mademoiselle*,' with an extra note of respect.

Not that there was any need for a man in uniform to apologize. If you were a subject of the Russian Emperor, and wished to go more than fifteen miles from your home, you needed permission from the police and the Ministry of the Interior that ran them. It was the ministry's task to stop terrorists throwing their bombs or sticking their knives into ministers' throats in the secret civil war everyone preferred to pretend wasn't convulsing the land. You could be watched, searched, fingerprinted, arrested, interrogated, exiled, fined or handed over to military justice on nothing more than a policeman's hunch that you might be doing something political or were a Jew – since Jews, it was believed, were especially prone to dangerous politics.

Yet even so a lowly individual policeman, like this one, could always fear that the next person he dealt with might just be privileged enough to harass him back, ensuring he lost the certificate of trustworthiness without which he would be banned from public employment.

'Your documents, please,' he said, definitely less sure of himself now.

She put down her bag and got the wallet out, looking straight at him.

He unfolded the wallet, tsking at the thin sheets of paper in the little internal passport booklet that wouldn't separate, and making a big performance of blowing on them while giving Inna vague and menacing looks. But there was nothing wrong with the red stamps and dates, Inna knew, or the permission from the Kiev Ministry of the Interior that the passport gave for Morozova, O. A. (occupation: student of Fundukleyevskaya Academy; age: 18; faith: Orthodox; residing at Kreshchatik 86, Kiev; social class: hereditary noblewoman; facial features: dark hair and no distinguishing marks; daughter of: Morozov, A. P., hereditary nobleman, 6th-grade colonel of the Corps of Gendarmerie, Kiev department) to visit Morozova, A. A., hereditary noblewoman, his grandmother, residing at Italian Street, St. Petersburg, for family reasons, from last week, for the month of September.

After a lengthy examination of the booklet, the policeman gave it back. Somewhere in his reading, perhaps at the mention of Morozova, O. A.'s father's exalted status in the services of state repression, his expression had become timid. He bowed, now, too low for comfort given his girth and the tightness of his tunic. 'Checking for passengers from Kiev ... have to, after...' he muttered. He didn't want to say the word assassination, Inna saw, and she felt a momentary pang of pity for him, with his cruel, stupid job.

'Looking out for Yids on the run,' he added in a stronger voice, straightening up. Inna noticed that he had a double-headed eagle pin on his stand-up coat collar. 'Murderous Red swine. Scared they'll get their come-uppance. Don't want to stay and take the punishment they've got coming. Running everywhere, thousands of them – like cockroaches. But we don't want that filth here, do we?' If he was expecting an answering leer from her, he was disappointed. 'Well ... well ... I wish you a pleasant stay in our city, your excellency.' He handed back the booklet and, avoiding her eyes, turned to see out a new victim among the hurrying third-class passengers.

Inna watched as he moved to intercept one of the other shadows she'd been aware of, a man in his early thirties, with the sadness in his soul clearly visible. He had a deathly white face behind his dark

Jewish-looking beard and shadows under his eyes, and, every time Inna had glimpsed him, on board trains, he'd been holding tight to the hand of an unnaturally quiet little girl of about ten. No mother. Inna had tried not to wonder what had happened to her. Now, as he saw the approaching gendarme, the last flicker of hope left him. The little girl's face crumpled into panic.

Inna hurried on. So they had no passports. But since hers was stolen, and Olya Morozova's father might at any moment think to telegraph his colleagues to watch out for imposters, there was no time for pity.

But, when she looked more closely at the station building ahead, she realized it offered no safety. Instead there were more gendarmes guarding the doorway and pouncing on people in the crowd. Some were converging on youths in scruffy overcoats, filleting leaflets from their pockets; others were grabbing urchins, and flicking wallets from their hands. But most were looking for incomers.

Inna stopped dead. Someone bumped into her from behind. Scurrying feet shifted course. Then she felt a hand on her arm.

Inna closed her eyes and bowed her head. So this was it, she thought: how your lifeline petered out. 'I thought so ... you're the little lady from the train who had your fortune told, aren't you?' It was the peasant from the train.

'I saw you, and I thought, Well, you must be new to the city if you're trying to leave through the station building. Police everywhere, snooping through your papers – waste half your day if you give them a chance. So why don't I walk you out the way Petersburg people go, the ones who've got a sense. You don't want to look like an outsider, do you?'

She nodded gratefully, noticing his extraordinarily calm pale-blue eyes again.

'Come on, then.' He set off briskly to the left into a narrow lane that went straight from the train platforms all the way round the side of the station hall to the street.

It only took a minute.

Inna looked round and realized that the great modern square they'd come out into, with its grand cliff-faces of hotels, and tramlines, and squealing motorcars and carriages and pedestrian crowds all rushing here and there under a lowering sky, was actually outside the station. There wasn't a gendarme in sight.

'So ... that's it? Are we out, in the city?' she asked. 'Really?' She took a deep breath, dizzy with relief. She was in St. Petersburg. She was safe.

CHAPTER TWO

She began walking, one bag in each hand, impatient to be off and free of the peasant.

Yet the fact remained: she didn't know where to go. She knew she had to walk into the centre along Nevsky Prospekt, the great avenue which ran through the city in a dead straight line. But she had no idea which of the roads leading off this square would get her to Nevsky.

From behind her came a chuckle. 'That's the road out of town,' she heard the peasant say, sounding amused. 'I'm heading into town, along Nevsky. Shall I put you on your way?'

She turned, with dignity, to reject his offer, but when she met his eyes she could see there was no malice in them. He'd helped her till now. Of course he wasn't about to start pestering her.

Chastened, she nodded. 'I'm going to Hay Market,' she said, realizing – to her surprise – that she would be glad of the company.

'I've known that lane since I had troubles of my own with the police,' the peasant said, shouldering one of Inna's bags (she kept the smaller bag, which contained her violin, in her own hand) and setting off beside her along a big straight ugly boulevard lined with tall grey buildings. What troubles? she wondered, but he went on: 'That's the thing about policemen: they get everywhere, like cockroaches. No way to actually stamp them out – but it never does any harm to keep out of their way.'

Inna couldn't help but smile. It was a delicate gesture, she thought, to invite her to remember the terrifying gendarmes, who liked to call Jews cockroaches, as no more threatening than kitchen creeping crawlies themselves.

'Especially if you're a Jew.' The peasant gave her a sideways glance.

It was an invitation to frankness. She hesitated, and then took it. 'Like me, you mean,' she said.

Noncommittally, he nodded.

His casual mention, out loud, of Inna's national identity, the fifth point on the passport, the inescapable evidence of her membership of a shameful race (if she hadn't temporarily escaped it by borrowing Olya's papers, at least), didn't make her flinch in the way she usually did. She just felt distant from the proposition. Auntie Lyuba, who was Russian by blood, had raised Inna, with her Russian first name, to be just like any of the young Russian girls in their city apartment block. Inna's last name, Feldman, could be Yiddish or just innocently Volga German; there were only even difficulties if people raised their eyebrows on hearing Inna's unchangeable middle name: the patronymic she was called by on formal occasions, 'Inna Venyaminovna', which was made from her father's un-Russian-sounding, un-German-sounding name, Benjamin. Yet there'd never been religion in Auntie Lyuba's life, or in Inna's. They were progressive and scientific: no ancient Talmuds and Judaic chaos in Auntie Lyuba's genteel apartment, thank you, just dead Uncle Borya's books on medicine, Dahl's dictionary, the Russian classics, freshly laundered white lace everywhere, and lessons, lessons, lessons all day long. Inna didn't remember much about her own parents, but they

been close to Aunt Lyuba, so she thought they must have been like her in this. Still, even if Inna, like Aunt Lyuba, had no Jewish ways, they were never unaware of what people might say, or think, or do. Inna remembered starting at the Academy, and pirouetting excitedly in her new white lace pinafore, ready to walk the three streets to the school by herself for the first time, and how her carefree happiness had curdled when Aunt Lyuba, shaking her head over Inna's lustrous black hair tied in a big white bow, and the exotic curves of her cheekbone and nose, had murmured, 'They'll always know ... but they'll always expect a Jew to show fear. So walk tall ... stare them down, like a princess.'

And Inna had done her best. She'd given every man on the way to school the fiercest look she could; yet even now she could never banish the fear.

The fear is all that's really Jewish about me, Inna thought now. She couldn't see anything else she had in common with the Jews they were always writing about in the papers (people she'd never actually seen for herself): those banned both from countryside and big cities, who filled the little towns of the south, the *shtetls*, with their wailing music and strange clothes, the ones behind the revolutionary movements, or the monstrous ones drawn, hunchbacked and grinning, who were said to bake matzos with the blood of murdered Russian children. (Not that this was likely. Everyone knew that; everyone with an education and some common sense, anyway. But still, there was the Kiev man they'd arrested a few months back – Mendel Beilis, his name was – on precisely that charge: the arrest that had started all the pogrom talk that was resurfacing now. So you couldn't help but wonder, a bit.

'I don't drink children's blood or steal chalices from churches, if that's what you mean,' she said tartly.

'No...' the peasant replied. His voice was calm, absorbing her flash of defensive anger without seeming to notice. 'Of course not. You're just a person, getting on with your life.'

Inna bit her lip.

He went on, sidestepping the oncoming Number One tram without a second glance: 'I know a man, Simanovich. He's a jeweller in Kiev. They're always on to him, the police: making out he's a loan shark and a gambler. Evil-minded nonsense. He's a dignified man. Loves his people. Tries to help them: he's got several of his Jews papers to stay up here, for instance; and why not, if they like the city, why not? They're people like anyone else. Simanovich should be rewarded, not tormented.'

She'd underestimated him, Inna thought, touched. He might be an unlettered peasant, but his goodness shone through. She liked his gentle garrulousness, too: that unhurried way of following his thought right through.

'... But there's so much hatred now. Maybe it's just because of that man who's been killed, Stolypin: the Prime Minister, the Chief Policeman.' The peasant paused, then continued in a strong voice. 'Yes, the Chief Policeman ... Because the police are people like everyone else. They take the style from the top. And him, Stolypin, they called him a reformer, but he was a cruel man too. Not good for any of us. His days were numbered...'

He muttered something inaudible. Then, shaking his head, as if regretting his harshness, he made the sign of the cross, and said, rather reluctantly, 'Well, God be with him.'

Inna nodded, keeping her face still. She didn't want to tell him that she'd actually been in the theatre when Stolypin was shot, because in truth she didn't have much to tell. She almost wished she

had seen more than a stir in the crowd when the two shots rang out, and then the hysterics on all sides, women fainting in chairs and people pushing for the doors as word passed through the hall like fire who it was who'd been attacked.

'So you know Kiev? Were you there for the Tsar's visit?' It surprised her, now she came to think of it. What would take a Siberian peasant so far from home? Come to that, what was he doing here, in the capital?

He turned his gaze on her, slowing down as he felt towards his answer. His eyes were vague. The deep lines around them crinkled, and he laughed.

'Why, I've been to Kiev many a time,' he said. 'This time in a train, like a gentleman, but oh, in the pilgrim days of my past, many's the time I've walked all the way from Siberia on my own two legs. rejoicing in God's sunlight, or shivering under His snows. I'm not a young man, and sometimes I feel I've walked every inch of the empire on these two legs.'

He was shaking his head at the memory of his travels. Then he stopped walking, as if a more important thought had just struck him. He pointed at a side street – another gulch of cobbles between grey cliffs of apartment blocks. 'That's where I live now. Nikolayevskaya Street, House Seventy. I won't ask you in now as we've got business in the centre. But mind you come and see me there when you've settled in. You'll be welcome.'

Inna nodded, politely but guardedly. She knew she wouldn't be back.

So, she thought, still piecing together the puzzle, he'd be one of those peasant pilgrims she'd read about, the *stranniki* who found God in a thunderclap, and left their villages to wander the land for years, in religious ecstasy. That would explain his cross, and his godly air, though not why he'd left the land to come here to the city.

Not that it really mattered. What she wanted to know most, as they started walking again, was where would they get past this dull bourgeois avenue and reach Nevsky Prospekt, and the beginning of the gorgeous but frightening imperial Petersburg that every Russian novel described so vividly?

Inna had always imagined Nevsky as a place of wonders: classical columns, arches, caryatids, French bonnets, Guards officers, gleaming carriages, palaces pulsing with electric light and chandelier-lit shops full of lobsters, jewels and candied cherries.

Not like this street. The only salesman here was a scruffy man with a brazier on the pavement selling pumpkin seeds roasted in salt in twists of newspaper, and giving her a lecherous wink as he called, 'Seeds, seeds, I'll give you seeds, darling.' She swept past, nose up.

'It's that house just there, do you see, on the corner with Nevsky,' the peasant was saying. 'My house. Don't forget that.'

Nevsky?

'Nevsky?'

This couldn't be it, surely? This – a street distinctly less glamorous than many in Kiev? This dull jumble of stolid ugliness – Nevsky Prospekt?

He roared with laughter again. 'This is Nevsky. The most famous street in the land.'

'But where are the palaces? The theatres, the concert halls, the shops?' she asked.

'Ah,' he said, nodding. 'Just up ahead. But don't be impatient. There's all the time in the world for palaces and shops and vanities.' He paused. 'Yes, I know Kiev well, and I was sad to see it the way

was this week, with everyone so frightened, and disaster in the air, and all your people leaving...'

Inna shrugged, and said, as coolly as she could: 'Yes, the people I've been living with this year kind of relatives – *they* were scared. They're leaving for Palestine.'

She couldn't suppress a sigh. The Kagans were the closest thing to family she'd had left. She'd been so grateful when they'd come out of nowhere and taken her in after Auntie Lyuba's death. Not that they'd ever been close, once she was there; the Kagans were always too taken up with their fearful plans to be off. But now they'd gone, and it was so far away, Palestine. And she had no one else to keep her in Kiev.

'I've been to Palestine,' the peasant was saying. 'Last spring, I went.'

Inna turned and stared at him. 'Did you go *there* on your own two legs, too?' she asked, letting her scepticism into her voice.

'No, no,' he replied, almost absent-mindedly. 'Kiev to Odessa, and from there over the Black Sea to Haifa on the *Lazarus*. You sleep on deck, and how beautiful the sea is, with the sun glittering on the waves. You only have to gaze on it for your soul to become one with the sea. And after that, Jerusalem.' He sighed, but his breath was full of joy and love. 'An earthly realm of tranquillity ...'

'Not expensive, either,' he added, perhaps understanding how trapped Inna was feeling. 'Twelve roubles each way on the boat, third class. That's how pilgrims go. No comforts, but why would you give up your share of suffering? It's suffering and persecution that purify the soul. You could go, too, if you wanted. See your folks.'

'Well, one day maybe I will,' she said. She didn't really think she would, but the idea it might be possible lightened her heart anyway.

Or perhaps it was the gleam of pale sun on water ahead ...

Her eyes widened. She could see the road transforming itself into the Nevsky she'd hoped for.

On her left, looming up, was a great dark-red palace. And, beyond that, over the dark glitter of what she knew must be the Fontanka, was a bridge frilled with delicate iron tracery, and topped with four enormous statues of horses with rippling muscles ...

She stopped, exhilaration chasing away her tiredness and worry. She was here, at the very centre of things. She'd made it.

'I was glad to be away from the centre of vain and worldly things when I got on that boat,' came the companionable voice at her side, sweeping her forward. 'But sometimes, when you see the sun on the water, you can't help but marvel at the beauty of Creation, even here.'

He squinted at her. 'You like it, eh?' He seemed amused. And as they walked on, he told her stories about the buildings they were passing, and about the grand duchesses or starving ballerinas or saved Armenians or merchants behind each stucco façade. He knew so much. He breathed the gritty air with its smell of salt and industrial fog as naturally as if it were the country air of home.

Inna was impressed by his composure. On the corner of the Merchants' Yard Market, two young dandies with gold frogging over their fronts forced her off the pavement, and she had to scramble back to safety out of the path of an oncoming carriage. Yet he glided through the crowds of tight-waisted gentlemen in braid – so many uniforms: army, navy, Guards, civil service; Inna couldn't tell them apart – and of ladies in sweeping robes and feathers, as if he hardly felt their imperious jostling.

'So this is why Dostoyevsky found Nevsky so tricky,' she said breathlessly. 'I feel like the Ma

from Underground now, too. Invisible, and black and blue from all these aristocratic elbows, and full of secret bile, you know?’

He put a hand out to steady her, but his only reply was a vague, uncomprehending, ‘What’s that you say?’

Then, without warning, he turned off the boulevard down another broad avenue.

‘Oh!’ Inna cried, forgetting Dostoyevsky because her head was still spinning with excitement. ‘But we haven’t seen half of it. Where is the Yeliseyevsky store, with the pineapples and fresh lobsters? And the Defence Ministry, and the Kazan Cathedral, and—’

‘Further on,’ he answered matter-of-factly. ‘But you wanted Hay Market, didn’t you? And that’s down here.’

Understanding that if he really did live way back on that street he’d shown her near the station, he must already have put himself out considerably to bring her so far, she said, quickly, ‘Of course, I understand,’ and hurried on behind him.

‘Where are you going, anyway?’ he asked, over his shoulder. ‘Who to?’

Inna paused, unease creeping back into her heart. ‘To a cousin. A kind of cousin.’

‘You have a lot of “kind of” relatives,’ he said.

‘Well,’ she replied, trying not to feel defensive, ‘he’s the son of the other “kind of”. I’m going to stay with him.’ She took a deep breath to steady herself. ‘He works for Leman, the violin-maker.’ She wanted to give the impression that she knew exactly what she was talking about. She didn’t want her companion to realize that she’d never actually met Yasha Kagan.

But she felt tears painfully close as she strode on, round the corner into the new street.

She was remembering her flight back from the theatre through the restive crowds that suddenly seemed to have filled the Kiev streets, her feet hardly touching the ground, and finding the Kagans packing their trunk. They’d held off emigrating for the entire year, even though they had papers because they’d kept thinking that their Yasha might come too, if things didn’t work out for him up in St. Petersburg. Yet there they were, not mentioning the frightening news of the night, just saying, with shame in their eyes, that they could get a passage from Odessa on Tuesday.

‘Of course,’ Inna had told them stoutly, wondering where she’d go, but not wanting to add to their burden by making them feel guiltier about her than they probably already did. ‘I’ll find somewhere new to stay tomorrow.’

She remembered retreating to her room – their son’s old room, where she’d been lodging for the year since Aunt Lyuba died.

It was full of memorabilia. There was the first violin he’d made, during his apprenticeship, which his mother had kept and which Inna had taken to playing since she moved in. There was a photo, too, from Yasha’s last year at school. The youth in it was tall and slightly out of focus, with his head held high, a long neck, and curls of black hair at nape and temples.

Inna had lain down on the bed, looking at that stranger’s photograph. It was late, but there was a lot of movement on the street outside: men’s feet running and urgent talk, and the uncertain light of lanterns.

It was only then that she’d realized exactly what she was going to do, instead of finding a room and clinging on here, alone, for another year of school.

'I'm coming to you,' she'd told Yasha's portrait. 'And I'll bring your violin,' she'd added as she heard a crash of wood splintering on something hard outside. 'No point in leaving it to get smashed by them.'

The next morning, she'd gone to the bank and withdrawn all that remained of Aunt Lyuba's small inheritance.

By now, Inna and her peasant were in Garden Street (though, as the peasant said scathingly, 'Who knows when there was last an honest garden in it?') and going down the side of the glittering Merchants' Yard Market. The market arches sparkled with foreign goods, but once you'd got a block further, past the Empire Bank, the traders under the next row of colonnades looked poorer, and the wind felt more brutal. By the time they reached the square at the end, the magical grandeur had gone out of the air altogether and they were surrounded by the grime of an ordinary city again: traders, trams, rubbish underfoot, and a brass band of old men hunched up against the wind by a small white church.

'Hay Market,' the peasant said, stopping. 'And now?'

'Well ... I mustn't keep you any longer,' Inna said, looking hesitantly around. The address she wanted was just off here somewhere. It shouldn't be hard to find. Yet the streets leading back from the square looked suddenly threatening. The men lurking all around were not wearing the bright military or civil service uniforms she'd admired on Nevsky, but threadbare working-men's padded coats and smelly sheepskins. Women stared assessingly out from under battered hats, and the eyes of the ragged street children were frankly frightening.

'Nonsense,' the peasant replied. 'Leave a young lady like you alone at the Hay Market? Why, you'd be stripped down to the bone within seconds. Look at all these scallywags. No, no, I won't think of it.'

All at once, it was too much, and Inna felt the tears hot and wet behind her eyes.

Looking down, she said, in as near to a level voice as she could: 'I'm not exactly sure where he lives. It's Moscow Prospekt, just round the corner somewhere ... but...' Here, to her horror, she heard herself gulp. 'I don't exactly know him, you see.'

After a moment, she felt a heavy arm move slowly across her shoulders. 'Does he know you're coming, this cousin?'

She didn't answer. She could feel her face, turned down behind her hand, scrunching up as she tried to stop the tears. But they coursed down her cheeks anyway, out from under her tight-pressed eyes. Her shoulders were shaking under his arm.

'Don't you fret, now.' The peasant's voice was low and soothing. 'We'll find him and everything will turn out all right. You'll see.'

Looking up, Inna said, still shakily, 'I'm all right now.'

'I'll ask someone then,' he said matter-of-factly, stepping away. 'Moscow Prospekt, you say?'

He stopped one of the hard-faced traders, and Inna, still worried about crying again, saw the man answer him with a jerk of the thumb, to the left.

'House Number Two,' she said, and they set off into the biting wind with a new sense of companionship.

The address she had written down turned out to be in a dark, fetid courtyard off one of the big ugly avenues nearby.

Even the peasant looked doubtful as they pushed open the door to a prison-like staircase, which seemed never to have been cleaned, and began to make their echoing way up the wide stone steps to the first-floor flat.

Inna stood tall, took a deep breath and rang.

Part of her felt journey's end just ahead, and safety, and wanted the peasant gone. But another part of her was full of gratitude for his help and panic that he'd just slip away before Yasha came to the door.

So she did nothing – didn't meet his eye, didn't speak – as they both strained to hear voices or footsteps from inside the leather-padded door.

It was only when footsteps did become audible that she looked at him. He looked back thoughtfully nodding his head.

She feared he might make the sign of the cross, or say something pitying in farewell.

'You forget about that gypsy woman, and her foolishness. What does she know? The future is a matter for God,' he said simply.

She was about to shake her head and say, No, it was a matter for her. But the door was opening and a stripe of warm yellow light came from within. The peasant, as if unwilling either to intrude or to leave before Inna had found her relative, stepped back into the shadows.

A tall, muscular, close-shaven man in his twenties was looking out. 'Can I help you, *mademoiselle*?' he asked Inna politely.

She stared at him.

Could this man possibly be...?

There were none of the luxuriant dark curls she remembered from the photograph. This man's hair was cropped close to his skull. Following the bluish line of stubble from the long throat and lean jaw upwards, she saw how it receded at the temples and appreciated the small vanity that must have prompted the Spartan style he'd chosen. Still, he was handsome, in a sportsmanlike way: long-legged with a torso whose muscles she could guess at under his white shirt, and that elegant throat, with his head set on top with almost military precision, chin down, crown high, in a way she'd never have guessed at from the picture.

But she recognized the straight nose with its flaring nostrils, and the wide, straight mouth, and the cheekbones, and the brown, almond-shaped eyes, with the possibility of softness suggested by the thick lashes. There was no softness in them now. Yet she'd never seen a face so arresting.

'Yasha?' she asked.

It was only as he nodded, and confirmed, still in that neutral voice, though with just a hint of impatience or surprise, 'Yes, I'm Kagan ... how can I help you?' that Inna was aware of the peasant slipping away down the stairs. She was too preoccupied with the man in front of her to turn or call goodbye. It was only later that she realized she'd never even asked the peasant his name.

CHAPTER THREE

Yasha had been about to go out when he heard the doorbell. He'd have been long gone already if he'd been earlier on, Madame Leman hadn't taken it into her head to bring out all the coats and hats and boots from storage, ready for winter. She'd dumped them in armfuls in the lobby, but then got distracted, as usual, and gone off leaving the job half done. So it was pandemonium in the windowless little room and he'd been pushing through piles of furs, looking for his jacket in a cloud of mothball smell, and feeling exasperated for what felt like hours.

Before opening the door, though, he'd taken the precaution of shoving a couple of children's moulting rabbit hats on top of the box of leaflets he'd been planning to take round to Kremer's. Yasha never knew. Better safe than sorry.

But when he looked out into the gloom of the landing – as stern as he could in case it was the police who'd come calling – what he saw, in the yellow stripe of light from inside the flat, wasn't a fat man in a uniform at all, but a girl.

An unnervingly attractive girl, too: very tall, slim, with lovely ankles visible below her threadbare coat and shining black hair escaping from under her hat. A girl half stepping forward to look at him (his face must be in shadow, he realized), with a face too pale for classical beauty and huge green eyes.

He stood up straighter. He'd never seen her before. He'd remember if he had. She wasn't the kind of girl you'd forget.

Yet, uncertain though her expression was, she seemed to know his name.

'Yasha, I'm Inna,' she was saying.

Her name meant nothing to him. And he could hear Kremer's uncle's voice in his head, saying, 'A good revolutionary keeps his trap shut,' and, 'Never trust a stranger.' So he looked watchfully back at her, waiting.

She hesitated before plunging on in her attractively low voice, 'I've been living at your parents' flat.' He was shocked to hear her use the informal, family way of saying 'you' and 'your'. 'Since my Aunt Lyuba died ... I'm a kind of cousin of your father's...'

He noticed a beseeching look in her green eyes.

Of course. Mama had mentioned the cousin's turning up, in one of her very long and inconsequential letters, which were all full of gossip about people he'd left behind, and general aimless fretting about the bourgeois kinds of things his parents did fret about. It had been one of the few pieces of news he'd taken in, because he'd remembered hearing stories about the Feldmans as a boy. 'So you're Inna Feldman?' he said.

She nodded, still looking expectant.

Yasha remembered old Kremer's warnings about women. 'Always be on your guard,' he'd been

fond of saying, in that wise, smoke-choked voice of his, 'especially with women. You never know what they want – but you always know they'll want something. Anyway, there's only ever room in a man's heart for one love, lads. Let it be the revolution, and not some rouged-up hussy.'

'You're their lodger in Kiev,' he said brutally, noticing the way she flinched as he said this. 'But what are you doing *here*? In St. Petersburg?'

He'd made a point of replying using the formal 'you' – *vy* – as if she were a stranger. Respected but not his family, not his nearest and dearest. For the first time since he'd seen her and been thrown into this state of near-paralysis, he was taking control. He could think again.

He watched her register that, then decide not to take offence, just answer.

'Well, because they've left,' she replied quickly, too eagerly, with the beginning of an anxious smile that both twisted his heart and angered him at the same time, 'and I've brought...'

'Left?'

If there was one thing Yasha knew about his parents it was that they never went anywhere. The concert hall, the shops, the theatre, neighbours' apartments, and a week at the coast in the summer taking the Crimean air: those were the predictable parameters of their universe.

'Are they here?' he asked, in what felt like a gasp. Turning; half expecting to see them coming up the grimy stairs any minute. 'With you?'

'No,' she said. 'They went to Odessa. Where the boat goes from, to the Holy Land. For the Tuesday passage.'

'But they can't have,' Yasha heard himself objecting. 'They didn't tell me. They didn't write. They *always* write.'

He had piles of letters, most of them barely read, in a drawer in his room.

'They did,' she said. How calm she sounded. 'I've brought you the letter.'

He went on staring at her as his world turned upside down: as he stopped being the bold young man venturing far from his claustrophobic home to have adventures and change the world and sneer with his mates at his parents, who were pottering around safely back home, doing their best to forget they had a drop of Jewish blood in their veins; as he became ... well, whatever you did become when your family suddenly just vanished into thin air.

After a long silence, he said, almost to himself, 'But why?'

'They were scared there would be a pogrom. We all were.'

Her voice was controlled, but he could hear the wobble in it.

'But there's not going to be a pogrom,' Yasha said. He felt confident of this. All his comrades in the Bund had discussed this question, at length, and had decided that the appointment of Kokovtsev as the new Prime Minister – not a bloodthirsty man – meant the authorities had no interest, this time, in egging on the more uncouth elements of society to shed Jewish blood.

'Nothing's happened so far, and nothing is going to happen in future, either,' Yasha added, aware that he was sounding too angry. 'Everyone knows that. They should just have stayed put.'

Her eyes flashed with indignation. How green they were.

'Well, it was completely natural to be frightened!' she burst out. 'Anyone would have been, with the way things got ... the streets full of those thugs, the things those leaflets were saying. You would have been scared, too, if you'd been there. And what does it matter if it hasn't happened yet? It still

might. Any day. Why do you think so many people have been trying to leave?’ He noticed that she’d gone on calling him the familiar ‘you’, *ty*, as if insisting on their closeness.

‘Palestine is for cowards,’ he said flatly. ‘Better to fight than run away.’ It was what his comrades told each other at their political meetings. Yet here, before this girl who actually knew his parents, it didn’t sound so convincing. He tried not to think of his father’s shortness of stature; of his bent back and timorous, scholarly ways; of his thin cracked voice; of his multiple minor medical problems and his silver-topped cane. Because if he did, he’d know how absurd it was to imagine the old man going out and facing street gangs of hoodlums.

He didn’t want to see mockery in her green eyes. He looked down.

‘Did you say you’d brought a letter?’ he asked after another pause, still saying ‘*vy*’. He’d take the letter, she’d go away, and he’d have a chance to find out where Mama and Papa were heading, at least. This was it, he’d push it through on his own.

He could feel, hear, that she was nodding. ‘Well, where is it?’ he said. He met her eye at last, but only to look expectant as he put out his hand. ‘Their letter?’

‘At the bottom of my bag,’ she said shortly, looking away in her turn. He could see, now, that she was less mocking than he’d expected, and also angrier. Her lips were tight. There were white dents on her nostrils. ‘I’ll find it once I’ve unpacked.’

And then, to his astonishment, she picked up her bags and pushed determinedly past him and out through the door. ‘Because I’ll need to stay.’

At a loss, Yasha followed her into the lamp glow of the vestibule in time to see her stop just inside the door and stare at the chaotic mounds of boots and coats and hats facing her as she put down her bags. With disquiet, he saw that one of the bags was now resting against his covered-up box of leaflets.

He watched her glance around, taking in the mortifying mess. Just for a moment, her nose – straight, elegant nose, Yasha noticed – wrinkled. She must be smelling the mothballs. He saw her take a step in the full-length mirror, and the armchair for sitting on to pull on boots, and the little table beside it with its lamp, the little dish for Madame Leman’s hairpins and eau de Cologne and brush. Her eyes moved next to the shelves crammed with candles, lamps (some broken), Lucifer matches, and jars of jam, pickles and preserves, all hand-labelled in Madame Leman’s flamboyant scrawl. He saw the shelves widen at the fat magazines and periodicals, mostly very scuffed, piled up in front of the shelves lining the third, coat-free, wall.

For what seemed an eternity, Yasha couldn’t think beyond his own agonizing awareness of the terrible impression all this clutter must be making. From behind the door onwards into the apartment he could hear all the usual family din: banging and clattering from the kitchen, children squawking and someone picking out a waltz on the piano.

And then he saw the look of painful longing on her face, and realized she wasn’t despising it at all. He let out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

Suddenly everything felt simpler. Now she was inside, he could also see how young she was: tall, but hardly more than a kid really, with shadows under her eyes.

Well, of course. Naturally she’d be tired. She must have been in trains, alone, for a good three or four days.

He wasn't going to let in any foolish thoughts about it possibly being right to have left Kiev in the past week for fear of a pogrom. But, thinking of the rowdy types who'd packed the communal compartments he and his friend Kremer had met in, travelling here together a year ago – those hard-drinking men and all the policemen who'd wanted to check the Jewish pair's papers – he could see how frightening the journey north must have been for a young girl on her own.

'You must be tired,' he said, trying to restore a politer note to the conversation. 'Were you all right on the train by yourself?'

'Yes.' She looked at him challengingly – another flash of green. 'Yes, I was all right, because I stole a passport,' she went on baldly. 'A Russian one. And just as well I did. They weren't letting Jews out. And they had police at the station here too, looking for people coming in.'

His eyes widened a little at that. He wasn't going to admit to being impressed, though, or to the fact that he was having perhaps been any real danger in Kiev. He just shrugged, uneasily, and let it pass.

He'd better ask Madame Leman if she could stay the night, at least, and just hope to God that wouldn't be a big to-do about it, like there had been when he'd sneaked Kremer in to sleep on his floor for those few days. She could have a bath. Get some rest. Get back on her feet. And then she could get off and do whatever it was she'd come here to do. Kremer and his leaflets would have to wait a day.

There was nothing else for it. He squared his shoulders. 'Come on,' he said, and picked up one of her bags.

Yasha stopped at the open door on the left and led her into the spacious living room, sunny yellow with big divans and armchairs with books left open on them, and a pack of cards on the table decorated with Tarot images, not the hearts and spades anyone who didn't know Madame Leman might have been expecting. Seeing her eyes open wider still, he remembered the effect this room had had on him, too, when he'd first got here. It was quite unlike the small, tidy, careful rooms of his parents' apartment, where you had to remember to do the right thing at all times. This was the war-time kind of place where you could feel free to say anything you liked. There were pictures everywhere: big expansive things, peasants in sunlight, woodland scenes, portraits of sleeping children or men in suits and one odd one that was just a red rectangle on black. But the most eye-catching image was the charcoal portrait of Monsieur Leman: a giant of a black-haired man with laughing, intelligent eyes looking straight out into the room and a cloud of dark beard half-visible against the grey shadow of the loose top he was wearing; a flash of white cuff, a clean wrist.

Yasha was pleased when she took a step towards it. 'Everyone stops at that one: it's a Repin,' he said, and he couldn't keep the pride out of his voice. He could see her catch her breath. He could imagine what she was thinking: What, the famous Repin! She'd have seen reproductions of his paintings: the wild Cossacks in fits of laughter at a letter from the Sultan; the Tsar's dejected prisoners pulling a barge under a happy blue sky. Yasha couldn't resist basking in the glory of it. 'He's a friend of the family, so he drew the master.'

She nodded, entranced.

'Wait here,' he said gruffly and put down her bag. 'Take a good look while I go and tell Madame Leman you're here.'

* * *

Madame Leman was in the kitchen. Pink-faced, with fading blond hair escaping from a bun, she was supervising a child with plump cheeks folding mincemeat into little cabbage parcels. ‘Neatly now Agrippina,’ she was saying with a smile. There was steam rising from a boiling soup pot on the stove next to a frying pan with the first batch of finished darling doves in it. The little girl looked excited. She was licking her lips. The smell made Yasha hungry too.

When Madame Leman heard Yasha wanted to have someone else to stay, her smile faded. ‘Oh Yash,’ she said. ‘Not again?’ Her eyes went to the big book open on the table. It was full of tight little sums; notes, red-circled calculations, lists of expenditure. At the sight of it she sighed; then she caught herself. ‘Well,’ she said, probably regretting that glance. ‘After all, we’ve just got the payment in from the orchestra; that’ll tide us over for a bit. But one night only, mind.’

That suited Yasha fine. Honour satisfied. He nodded.

‘Who is it?’ she added. Some of her usual warmth returned to her manner as soon as she saw he wasn’t going to argue about how long. ‘One of your Jewish group friends?’

‘A girl,’ Yasha said, then, realizing that this might be giving quite the wrong impression, added hastily: ‘A cousin, I mean. She’s been living with my parents. Up from Kiev.’

‘Why?’ Madame Leman asked, looking wary again. ‘What is she here for?’

He shrugged. ‘She’s brought a letter from my parents. Who’ve gone to Palestine. Apparently. The Jews were scared there’d be a pogrom.’

At that, Madame Leman’s eyes went soft. Stepping away from Agrippina, she embraced him, the smearable spoon waving behind him. ‘Oh, Yasha, I’m sorry,’ she murmured. He hugged her mutely back, very hard, and this time felt obscurely comforted to hear her add, ‘You’ll miss them, darling, won’t you? But if they had to go, they had to go. They’ll have been afraid.’

The little girl, who, living in this household, was used to flamboyant hugging, chided matter-of-factly: ‘Now, Mam, you’re getting mincemeat in his hair with that spoon.’ And the embrace broke up with ‘tsssk’ noises and laughs and fingers smoothing away any traces of onion.

When Yasha looked round, still smiling bashfully – she might be irritatingly all over the place a few times, and she’d gone far too hard on him about Kremer, but Madame Leman was a good sort really – he realized Inna was standing in the doorway, watching.

She was quite still. She looked pinched and left out and tight about the shoulders, but even then she couldn’t hide the willowy sway of her movements. Yasha held his breath. He saw Madame Leman’s eyebrows rise slightly.

Then, with a determined smile, Madame Leman said very quickly, ‘Welcome!’ and, ‘Yasha’s family is like family to us!’ Turning briskly to Yasha, she added, ‘Now, we’ll put your cousin in the little room at the top tonight, Yasha, the one next to yours. I’ll send Agrippina up with sheets in a minute. But I know you’ve got it full of your junk. So run along and clear it all out, will you? Put your boxes on the landing, all of them, so she can move, and don’t grumble, please. After all, it’s only for one night.’

There was something very final about those last words.

Yasha cleared his throat. ‘Can I have that letter now?’ he asked Inna.

Inna nodded, seeming dazed. She’d probably never heard anyone talk as fast as Madame Leman. Yasha thought. He knew how bewildering it could be. He watched her go out and come back with the

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