

*Petrograd, 1918*

The cobblestones glistened with a thin layer of ice, reflecting the soft glow of the gas lamps that lined the street. Icicles hung from the shop window awnings, and the branches of the silver birches were bare and reached up through the fog. Snowflakes lazily drifted and settled on rooftops, like icing on a gingerbread village.

The scene would be beautiful, if it did not reek of poverty.

Villagers huddled together under cloaks, their faces obscured by thin scarves and rags. Stray dogs buried their noses in the gutter, searching for food scraps. A group of thin children shod in plimsolls were playing some sort of cricket with part of a fence as a bat and a ball made from twine. The freezing cold was bone-chilling.

The frigid damp could be felt even through the dirt-streaked shop window. She clutched her shawl from behind the counter and continued to observe the high street when a man burst through the door, followed by a gust of cold wind.

“Good afternoon,” she said. He was thick and burly, and stank of the drink. A Bolshevik hammer and sickle adorned his collar. Apparently, he had no time for pleasantries and pulled out a crumpled cutout newspaper photograph from his coat pocket.

“You seen this girl?”

She took the photograph from him and smoothed it out on the counter. The girl in the photograph was beautiful, with long hair and pale, unblemished skin. A stark contrast to the worn and hungry faces of the street outside. The caption read *Countess Tatiana Ivanovna*.

“I apologise, but I have not seen her.” She passed the photograph back to him.

“Well, if ya do, let the authorities know. Even with them Romanov’s outta the way, we still can’t be too safe. This bloody countess ‘as gone missing, we reckon she’s on the run.”

“I hope that you find her.” She gave him a pitiful look and he nodded, leaving the shop.

They were looking for her.

Tatiana's heart raced.

To the untrained eye, she would seem like a poor and humble shop owner, desperate to sell her wares. But to the trained, perceptive eye, one might look past the dirt-streaked and tired face and question her thick coat, too costly for the everyday commoner, and her eloquent manner of speech, too articulate to belong to someone uneducated.

Tatiana waited for thirty seconds before calling out to the back room. "He is gone, Mama,". Countess Ivanovna, faking a hunchback under her layers of faded rags, joined her daughter at the shop front.

As Tatiana glanced at herself in the window, she found her reflection a stranger. She and her mother had roughly chopped their hair, smeared their faces with dirt, cloaked themselves with rags and wore hoods low on their heads, disguised as commoners in a desperate attempt to flee, praying nobody would look at them too closely.

Tears brimmed in Tatiana's eyes as she recalled the haunting memory of their escape from the palace following the murder of the Romanov's, her second cousins and cherished friends. Her family had worked hard to conceal precious treasures and heirlooms, sewing them into the linings of their clothes. The once familiar streets had become fraught with danger and unrest - with revolutionaries starting fights, strikes and violent uprisings against the aristocrats, including her beloved father, who had been shot by just going about his day.

She knew now that they were not safe anywhere in Russia.

During her childhood, Tatiana had a German governess and a French tutor, and became fluent in both languages. When the war started, she had never spoken German again. But her French would be useful in Paris.

Her mother pressed a wad of papers into her trembling hands - fake identification papers. They were needed for their train journey to France. Tatiana traced the unfamiliar scrawled signature.

As she tucked the papers into her pocket, she felt the weight of the jewels sewn into the lining of her coat.

The bitter taste of exile lingered in her mouth, tainting her every breath. Yet, Paris beckoned to her, its siren song selling promises of reinvention. She cloaked herself in uncertainty, unsure if Paris would ever fill the void of leaving her cherished homeland.