

CHAPTER ONE

Vita set her jaw and nodded at the city in greeting, as a boxer greets an opponent before a fight.

She stood alone on the deck of the ship. The sea was wild and stormy, casting salt spray thirty feet into the air, and all the other passengers on the ocean liner, including her mother, had taken sensible refuge in their cabins.

But it is not always sensible to be sensible.

Vita had slipped away and stood out in the open, gripping the rail with both hands as the boat crested

a wave the size of an opera house. So it was that she alone had the first sight of the city.

'There she is!' called a deck hand. 'In the distance, port side!'

New York climbed out of the mist, tall and grey-blue and beautiful; so beautiful that it pulled Vita forwards to the bow of the boat to stare. She was leaning over the railing, as far out as she dared, when something came flying at her head.

She gasped and ducked low. A seagull was chasing a young crow across the sky, pecking at its back, wheeling and shrieking in mid-air. Vita frowned. It wasn't, she thought, a fair fight. She felt in her pocket, and her fingers closed on an emerald-green marble. She took aim, a brief and angry calculation of distance and angle, drew back her arm, and threw.

The marble caught the seagull on the exact centre of the back of its skull. The gull gave the scandalised cry of an angry duchess, and the crow spun in the air and sped back towards the skyscrapers of New York.

*

They took a cab from the docks. Vita's mother carefully counted out a handful of coins, and gave the driver the address. 'As close as we can get for that, please,' she said, and he took in her carefully mended hems and nodded.

Manhattan sped past outside the window, bright bursts of colour amid the storm-beaten brick and stone. They passed a cinema, its walls adorned with pictures of Greta Garbo, and a man selling hot lobster claws out of a cart. A tram thundered past at a crossroads, narrowly missing a van advertising *The Colonial Pickle Works*. Vita breathed in the city. She tried to memorise the layout of the streets, to build a map behind her eyes; she whispered the names: '*Washington Street, Greenwich Avenue*.'

When the money ran out, they walked. They went as fast as Vita could go in the ferocious wind, suitcases in hand, along Seventh Avenue, dodging pinstripe men and sharp-heeled women.

'There!' said Vita's mother. 'That's Grandpa's flat.'

The apartment building on the corner of Seventh and West 57th rose up, tall and stately in brown

stone, from the busy pavement. A newspaper boy stood outside, roaring the headlines into the wind.

Across the road from the apartment block was a light-red-brick building, its facade arched and ornamented. Flagpoles protruded from its wall, and two flags flapped wildly. Above them, picked out in coloured glass, were the words 'Carnegie Hall'.

'It all looks very … smart,' said Vita. The apartment block appeared to purse its lips at the world. 'Are you *sure* this is the place?'

'I'm sure,' said her mother. 'He's on the top floor, right under the roof. It used to be the maid's apartment. It'll be a squeeze, but it's not for long.' Their return ticket was booked for three weeks' time. Enough time, said Vita's mother, to sort out Grandpa's papers, pack his few things, and persuade him to come home with them.

'Come on!' Her mother's voice sounded unnaturally bright. 'Let's go and find him.'

The lift was broken, so Vita half ran up the stairs to Grandpa's apartment, jerkily, as fast as her legs would take her. Her suitcase banged against the walls as she

raced up narrow flights of stairs, ignoring the growing pain in her left foot. She came to rest, breathless, outside the door. She knocked, but there was no response.

Vita's mother came, panting, up the final flight of stairs. She bent to pick the apartment key from under the mat. She hesitated, looking down at her daughter. 'I'm sure he won't be as bad as we feared,' she said, 'but—'

'Mama! He's waiting!'

Her mother opened the door, and Vita went tearing down the hall; and then, in the doorway, she froze.

Grandpa had always been thin; handsome and lean, with long fine hands and shrewd blue-green eyes. Now he was gaunt, and his eyes had drawn back into his skull. His fingers had drawn inwards into fists, as if every part of him was pulling back from the world. A walking stick leaned against the wall next to his chair: he hadn't needed a walking stick before.

He had not seen her and, just for that second, his face looked sculpted from solid grief.

'Grandpa!' said Vita.

But then he turned, and his face was transfigured with light, and she could breathe again.

'Rapscallion!' He stood and Vita hurled herself into his arms, and he laughed, winded by the impact.

'Julia,' he said, as Vita's mother came in, 'I only got your telegram three days ago, or I would have stopped you—'

Vita's mother shook her head. 'Just try to hold us back, Dad.'

Grandpa turned to Vita. 'Smile again for me, Rapscallion?'

So she smiled, at first naturally, and then, when he didn't look away, wider, until it felt like every single one of her teeth was showing.

'Thank you, Rapscallion,' he said. 'You have your grandmother's smile, still.' Vita's stomach clenched as she saw tears rise up in her grandfather's eyes.

'Grandpa?'

He coughed, and smiled, and cleared his throat. 'God, it's good to see you. But there was no need.'

Julia pushed Vita towards the door. 'Go and find your room, darling,' she said.

'But—'

'Please,' said her mother. Her face was white, and exhausted. 'Now.'

'It's the one at the end of the corridor,' said Grandpa. 'More of a cupboard than a room, I'm afraid,' he said, 'but the view is very fine.'

Vita went slowly down the corridor, her suitcase in hand. She noticed how the floorboards squeaked; how the paint peeled from the wall. She pushed at the door. It stuck; she held on to the wall and kicked it with her stronger foot. It flew open, scattering thin shards of plaster.

The room was so small she could practically touch all four walls at once, but it had a wooden wardrobe, and a window looking out over the street. Vita sat on the bed, pulled off her left shoe, and took her foot in both hands. She dug her fingers into the sole, pointing and flexing the toes, and tried to think.

They had arrived. She should be thrilled. They had made it across the ocean, halfway around the world,

and New York waited outside the window, stretching up to the sky like the calligraphy of a particularly flamboyant god.

But none of that mattered at all, because Grandpa wasn't as bad as she had feared. He was worse.

Vita's skirt pockets were full of gravel from the garden back home; she picked out the largest stones, and began to throw them at the wardrobe door. It helped her think.

A person watching might have noted that each hit the precise mathematical centre of the wardrobe handle – but nobody was watching, and Vita herself barely noticed. Her mind was not on the stones.

She had to do something to make it right. She did not yet know what, nor how, but love has a way of leaving people no choice.