COVER COMING SOON

A MILLION TO ONE

Adiba Jaigirdar

Chapter One

Sackville Street

Dublin, Ireland

April 7th 1912

6:30pm

Josefa

"She went around the corner!"

Josefa stiffened at the gravelly voice right behind her. She had somehow managed to make it all the way to the quays from the bottom of Sackville Street. She thought she had lost the guard at the last turn, but clearly not.

"Are you sure?" Came the voice of the second guard. Closer now.

One more minute and she would be caught red-handed. On one side of her was the Liffey in all its leafy-green glory. She wasn't sure if a swim in it would get her arrested or save her. She did know that it would destroy the very thing she had put herself at risk for, so she shrugged off that idea as soon as it came to her.

On the other side of her were buildings, each a few stories high, with windows getting smaller and smaller with each floor.

Josefa's only chance.

The climb to the first windowsill was little more than a leap. Inside, she could see a bed pushed up against the wall, and a stack of worn books on the floor. She pressed on the glass, hoping it had been left unlocked, but no luck. Who would leave their second-floor window unlatched by the quays anyhow?

The second windowsill was a little trickier. She had to balance herself precariously on the narrow wooden beam, reach up to the next window and pull herself up.

"She's not here," The gruff voice of the guards came from below. Josefa took a stilted

breath at the sound. She was sure if either of them glanced up, they would catch sight of her immediately. The windowsill was so narrow that it barely hid her from view, but it didn't exactly expose her either.

"Are you sure she came this way?" The second guard glanced to the corner of Sackville street, which led the way down the other side of the Liffey. From her lofted position, Josefa could easily make out the flash of his bright red beard, caught in the glint of the dipping sunlight.

The first guard grunted something quietly—gruffly—so Josefa couldn't make it out. She flattened herself against the window instead, wishing the sun would descend a little faster, willing the guards to turn away and give up their hopes of finding her. She was, after all, just one petty thief in a city that was filled with them.

She didn't chance another glance down. Instead, she reached below her—barely managing to balance herself on the windowsill—and pulled the window open. She couldn't help but grin at the success. But that lasted for only a moment before she tumbled inside, nearly crashing into the half-naked woman by her bed.

"Oh, so sorry," Josefa mumbled, trying to keep the blood from rushing to her face, and hoping that she hadn't made enough of a ruckus for the guards downstairs to hear. "I'm—uh—a little lost. My bedroom must be right beside yours. I thought this was mine."

The woman, with her dress clutched in front of her now, was looking at her with wide eyes. "If you're here to rob me—"

"N-no," Josefa quickly said, holding up her hands to show the woman that she meant no harm. "Just…next bedroom." She gave the woman what she hoped was a charming smile before swinging open the door to the hallway and slipping outside.

She breathed a quick sigh of relief and jumped to her feet again. Because there, right in her line of view, were the two guards. Officer Redbeard, tall and lanky, looking awkward

and out of place, and beside him, the guard who was obviously determined to catch Josefa. His face was contorted into a violent anger as he explained himself to the matron of the place.

Josefa didn't risk watching them for too long. She sucked in her breath, and wove down the hallway, trying to figure out how she could get out of this without the guards catching sight of her. She could keep climbing up—but that might just get her trapped further. She could try to sneak past—but that had an even higher risk of her getting caught.

Josefa cursed herself. She had been a little too eager today, leading her to make rash decisions. Still, there was no denying the fact that the adrenaline pulsing through her was giving her a headrush.

If Violet were here, she would know exactly what to do. She made it her business to be able to talk herself out of every situation. Josefa, on the other hand, was better at getting herself into trouble than getting herself out of it.

Now, the confused matron and angry-looking guards were making their way quickly down the corridor. They must have seen Josefa tumble in through the window, because—as she slid into the dark recess of the hallway, hiding herself away in the unlit shadows, the matron knocked on the very door she had just stumbled out of.

The woman from before, now fully dressed, swung the door open.

"There is nobody here but me, as you can see," she said, stepping aside with a flourish and giving the guards a full view of her bedroom. Dishevelled—but empty.

"Thank you, Ms. Petit," The Matron said, her smile as cold as the guards'. "We would, of course, be immediately alerted if there was any sort of a break in at our boarding house."

The way she said it made it seem like their boarding house was something special. From the plush carpet that Josefa stood on, she knew that it was. The boarding house where Josefa stayed had no carpets at all. They were lucky just to have proper mattresses on their

beds, and curtains to draw over their windows to give them a bit of privacy. She knew of plenty of boarding houses that didn't have even those basic things.

Josefa had no idea why Ms. Petit hadn't told on her, but she thanked her lucky stars. Especially as she watched the guards leave through the window, disappointment smeared across their faces. Josefa grinned, slipping past the matron at her desk when she had her head bowed low, and stepping out the door soundlessly.

She glanced up at the glow of lamplight in the window she had climbed through. The woman—or Ms. Petit, as she had learned—gave her a grim wave. Josefa wasn't quite sure what to make of it, but she returned it thankfully, before turning away.

She plucked out the wallet she had nicked from one of the men outside the pub. Inside, there were a few scattered coins that clinked as she dug through the pockets. There was a picture of a woman who Josefa could only assume was his wife. She had short blonde locks, and a smile that showed all her crooked teeth. Finally, she found what she was looking for. Pushed to the very bottom of the wallet.

She pulled the pieces of paper out between her thumb and forefinger. The chase had definitely been worth it because there, in front of her, was her ticket onto the Titanic.

Chapter Two

O'Neill's Boarding House

7.20pm

Violet

Puno te pozdravljam,

V

A drop of black ink from her pen dripped onto the paper, and Violet cursed under her breath. She had stained the end of her letter, and the tips of her fingers. Exactly what she needed.

Shaking out her hand, as if the ink would simply slide off, Violet sighed. She tucked the letter between the book she had been reading and buried her head in her hands.

With every letter that Marko sent, Violet felt more and more helpless. Her little brother was only twelve, and left to fend for himself in their tiny town in Croatia. He was barely making ends meet, but Violet was barely able to afford her own lodgings.

She pulled out his last letter from the bottom of the desk, feeling a tug of sadness at the sight of her brother's familiar scrawl. It came with the usual description of the orphanage where their mother had abandoned Marko a year ago. A dilapidated and worn-down place with not enough beds or food for all the children who needed it. Marko never spoke ill of it though. Violet had to read between the lines to understand what Marko was really dealing with—a place where he had no family, no friends…nothing, really.

But it was this last letter that had really pained Violet to read. The letter where Marko had finally told Violet that it would only be a few weeks until he was forced to leave the four walls of the orphanage behind to survive in a world where he had no one. Or rather, the only person he had—Violet—was oceans away, in no position to help.

The orphanage was horrible, that much Violet knew. But anything was better than

Marko being left to figure out how to live in the streets. Violet couldn't let Marko lead that life.

But she also didn't know how to prevent it. She didn't know how to reply to Marko's letter detailing his problems, when Violet was unable to do anything. The pen had flooded ink from the desperation of trying to find the right words. But what were the right words to say that you were failing as an older sister? Violet certainly hadn't been able to find them.

A knocking sound from her right finally made Violet pick her head up from her hands. She glanced towards the window, expecting a bird, perhaps. Instead, she caught sight of Josefa's dark brown hair. Turned away from the window, as if she were looking down at the street below her. All the same, her knuckles were against Violet's window, tapping out a steady rhythm.

"What did you do now?" Violet asked, flinging the window open. Josefa nearly toppled onto the floor of her room, catching herself at the last moment and dropping to the floor with a graceful flourish.

"Good evening to you, too," Josefa said with a little bow. Like this was an act that she had been perfecting.

Violet crossed her arms over her chest, trying to cover up the fact that she had been on the verge of tears when Josefa knocked on her window.

"Is someone following you?"

"I would never be that careless." Josefa gasped, like the idea that she would do something like that was absolutely preposterous. But Violet wouldn't put it past her.

Josefa was clever. Clever enough to get away with basically anything, but there was something about almost not getting away that she seemed to enjoy. To practically thrive on. It was part of the reason why Violet was used to Josefa crawling in through her window at all hours of the day and night. Like obeying the perfectly valid curfew set up by the matron of

the building was something she relished breaking. Not because Josefa had somewhere to be, or something to do. But because she could.

Now, Josefa flung herself onto Violet's bed, the previous grace gone from her body. She cast a curious glance at the letter peeking out on her desk and the ink stains on the wood. Matron O'Neill would not be happy about that.

Violet lurched forward, tucking Marko's letter away, and taking her seat by the desk again. "So? Where were you?"

Josefa shrugged, but there was a smile tugging at her lips. Violet knew that look far too well. It was the game that Josefa liked to play, holding a secret over Violet's head to get her interested. It was how Violet got sucked into far too many of Josefa's dangerous schemes. Breaking into homes they had no business being in, and conning people who had enough money to have their guard up, but were far too easy to take from. That—and desperation.

But Josefa had been teasing her about this piece of information for weeks, now. She said it was going to be her best plan yet. Violet wasn't holding her breath; Josefa said that about every single plan she concocted. But this was the longest Josefa had dangled a secret in front of her.

Still, Violet did not have the time to entertain her friend's games today. "If you don't want to tell me, then don't." She hated the way an uncontrolled anger seeped into her voice, clipping her words with the accent she had tried so hard to rid herself of. Still, it slipped in there, unbeknownst to her. Whether she liked it or not, it was a part of her.

Josefa leaned back on the bed, a grin on her lips. Violet forgot how much she enjoyed this.

"I have been planning this for months. I've just snagged the last necessary piece. The least you can do is let me enjoy taking my time telling you about it." Josefa said. Violet sighed, glancing at the pocket watch left by her book.

It was the only thing she had kept of her father when she had decided to leave two years ago. She had taken it because it was of value. A clunky object rimmed with gold. Her father had kept it on him at all times. Taking it had been as much about how much the thing could make her if she sold it, as how much her father would miss it. Probably even more than he missed her.

But in the end, she had decided to keep it. A relic of a life she used to have. A person she used to be. A reminder of why she needed to do the things she did.

She picked it up and ran her hand over the inscription on the back, feeling the ticking of the clock in her hands. Almost like a heartbeat. *Doći će naše vrijeme*, the inscription read. It was something her father always said: *our time will come.* Violet's father's time had not come yet, and she was still waiting for her own time. For her own hopes and dreams to be realized, even if most days it seemed near impossible.

"Have you heard of something called the Titanic?" Josefa asked, her voice a little too ecstatic.

Violet turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "The ship?"

"The ship." Now Josefa's excitement was palpable. Violet could feel it as readily as the clock ticking under her fingers.

"You want to…steal the Titanic?"

Josefa sighed, glancing at Violet, as if to see if she had any other guesses. She could think of a million. People were paying good money to board the Titanic. If they targeted those passengers while they were in Ireland, they were sure to get more than enough to cover their monthly expenses, and for Violet to have enough to send back to Marko to tide him over for at least a little while. Or perhaps tickets? The Titanic had been named The Millionaire's Special. It was the unsinkable ship. A voyage across the Atlantic with some of the wealthiest clientele to set foot in this nation. Tickets were not easy to come by—even third-class or

second-class tickets, never mind first class. Violet was sure anyone would pay good money if they managed to get their hands on a spare.

But when she voiced her guesses aloud to Josefa, she simply sighed again, like their conversation was a disappointment for her.

“Think a little bigger.” Josefa leaned closer, “Have you heard of something called the Rubaiyat?”

“The Ruby what?”

“The Rubaiyat!” The rise in the pitch of Josefa’s voice indicated that she had had about enough of this conversation. Violet bit back a smile. Josefa might delight in keeping things from her, but Violet was quite qualified in goading information out of anyone.

Violet’s expression was perfectly formed. One raised eyebrow, and a steady stare at Josefa.

“It’s a book. A collection of poems, actually,” Josefa finally breathed out with all the eagerness of a child. “Very famous. Very old. Very…exotic. By a Persian poet. You know. It’s the kind of thing that rich people adore.”“Right…”

“Well. There’s a special edition of the Rubaiyat that’s going to be on the Titanic. Laden with jewels.”

“Rich people love that even more.”

Josefa leaned back on the bed, a smirk taking hold of her lips. “We’re going to steal the Rubaiyat.”

Violet’s shock was not feigned this time. Her father’s watch dropped with a heavy clunk on the ground beneath her.

“K vragu.” Mumbling the curse under her breath, Violet picked the watch up, the ticking of it a comfort against the sudden spike of her own heartbeat.

“Josefa…I’m not sure we’re ready for that.” She and Josefa had some experience with

thievery, but they were petty crimes. Enough for Violet to get by. Enough to keep Josefa content. They took the kind of things nobody missed. Trinkets from the homes of the rich that you could sell on the streets of Dublin without drawing any eyes. And whatever they could lift from people's pockets without anybody being any the wiser.

"Ready or not, this is an amazing opportunity. We can't let it pass us by," Josefa said. Violet could tell she was enjoying watching the expression on her face. She shifted in her chair, the ink-stained end of her letter to Marko catching her eye.

A jewel-encrusted collection of Persian poetry. Incredibly rare, Violet would assume. She couldn't even imagine how much that would be worth. Definitely enough to tide her and Marko over. Enough for her to return home. Enough for them to finally be a family once again.

Doći će naše vrijeme. The words reverberated around her head.

When Violet looked up and caught Josefa's eyes, she was smiling wider. Like Josefa already knew Violet's decision.

"Exactly how would we go about it?"

Chapter Three

Mr. Blackwell's Circus Anomaly

9.05pm

Hinnah

Hinnah looked below at all of the people gathered to watch her. At all the lights that illuminated her form. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She didn't want adrenaline to carry her through this—that always went wrong.

Hinnah balanced the pole in her hands and took a step forward. The tight rope wobbled under her feet, but she was undeterred. She knew that if she made a mistake, she would plunge to her death. Or at least, to a very serious injury.

This was the first time Hinnah had done this act without a net underneath her. This was the first time Hinnah had decided to put her life at risk for her act.

She steadied her breath and took another step. With each step forward, she could feel the unsteadiness of the rope beneath her feet. Like the world was going to give out from under her at any minute now. She could almost feel the audience watching her at the edge of their seats.

Hinnah bit down a smile. She didn't do this for the glory—there wasn't much of that in the circus anyway. But she wouldn't lie and say she didn't enjoy these moments.

One more step. And another.

And—the rope shook dangerously below her. The pole in her hands giving way to the left. She gripped on to it tight, trying to balance it. But that only made things worse.

She had put too much weight on one side, and she swayed to the right.

Hinnah was going to lose her grip.

She was going to fall. And there was nothing below to catch her.

She chanced a glance down. Not at the audience or the lights, but at the ground. The

empty space where she would fall.

Somehow it spurred her on. Hinnah took a shaky breath, and instead of teetering on the edge of the tightrope, she stepped forward—fast. There was no grace in it, she knew that. It wasn't the way the act was supposed to go. All circus acts were a performance meant to dazzle. Hinnah wasn't doing that—she was just trying to survive.

The rest of the tightrope walk was simpler. Faster. Blood pumped loudly in Hinnah's ears the entire time.

When she stepped safely onto the other side of the rope, the audience clapped and cheered. But Hinnah didn't feel that sensation of pride enveloping her. She'd had a close call. She had almost fallen.

That wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Even as she heard the ringmaster announcing the next act, she could tell he wasn't happy.

Hinnah climbed all the way down, feeling deflated. But when she glanced at the audience, some of that dissipated. There were familiar faces to the front. She *never* saw familiar faces in the crowd.

Josefa and Violet didn't *quite* look like they fit into the group of onlookers. But they didn't exactly look out of place either. Violet with her grim expression didn't seem like she was enjoying this performance, while Josefa's eyes were alight. Her gaze was glued to the next performers. The Great Quinn Sisters and their amazing trapeze act.

"What was that?" the voice of Mr. Blackwell, the ringmaster, cut through Hinnah's thoughts. She turned to meet his glare, and almost instinctively stepped back into the shadows.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, though she wasn't quite sure what she was sorry for. She had messed up, she knew that. But it could have been so much worse. She could have fallen.

She could have—

"You said you wanted to try something more dangerous," The ringmaster snapped at her. "You said you were ready. But *that,* that was a disgrace."

Hinnah wasn't sure what to say. In reality, she hadn't really wanted to walk the tightrope at all. Trapeze was her talent. Bending her body to impossible shapes. This is what she had mastered ever since she decided to join the circus, on a desperate whim. But back then, she had a partner: Eliza. They weren't partners anymore. They hadn't been ever since they arrived in Dublin, and Hinnah decided to stay while the rest of the performers continued on their journey.

"If you let me try my trapeze act, you'd see that—"

But it was fruitless. The ringmaster blew out a frustrated breath of air and turned away. "One more slip up, and you're out," he called as he stomped away to introduce the next act.

Hinnah sighed and left the circus tent. In the back, there was one small trailer where all the performers had time to change and get ready. It was barely big enough to hold two people at once. But it was all they had.

The circus performance was still ongoing. They always left the best for last. So Hinnah had the place to herself as she slipped out of her form-fitting clothes and into the simple top and skirts she had worn out of the boarding house this afternoon. She was about to step out when a series of knocks sounded against the door.

None of the other performers knocked. This was their shared space.

"Yes?" Hinnah called out hesitantly.

"Hinnah?" The voices on the other side sounded familiar. She swung the door open. Violet and Josefa stood there, shoulder to shoulder, eyes casting around them. As if they were afraid someone would catch them in something they weren't supposed to be doing.

"…Hello." Hinnah couldn't help the note of confusion that slipped into her voice. She was not a stranger to Josefa and Violet, but they had never come to visit her at a show before. Their relationship was confined to the boarding house the three of them shared.

"Hinnah." Josefa nodded.

"Can we come in?" Violet asked.

"I don't know if…" Hinnah trailed off, glancing at the trailer around her. This wasn't exactly her space, and nobody other than fellow performers had ever been in here before.

"We'll be quick," Josefa said, and the two of them pushed past Hinnah.

Josefa took in the room with curious eyes for a moment, and Hinnah couldn't tell if she was impressed or not by everything that this small, cluttered trailer held. She closed the door with a satisfactory click and turned to the two girls with what she hoped was cool disdain.

"Is everything okay?" Hinnah cringed at how nervous she sounded.

"You were spectacular!" Josefa exclaimed, the grin on her face so bright Hinnah wondered if it hurt.

She felt the rush of blood to her cheeks and glanced away, trying not to meet either of their eyes. Hinnah had never performed in front of people she knew before. And even though she had worked with Violet and Josefa enough for them to know some of what she could do, she couldn't help but feel embarrassed. That *this* was the performance they had seen.

"I was…I could have been…I should have been better."

"You were like 50 feet in the air!" Josefa said.

"Well, probably not *that* high," Violet corrected her, but there was the hint of a smile on her lips too. "You were pretty good, though."

"Even when you slipped up, you pulled it off like no problem," Josefa said. "That's what we want!"

Hinnah looked at the two of them with a raised eyebrow. “What do you mean? Why…are you here?”

“Have you heard of the Titanic?” Violet asked.

Of course, Hinnah had heard of the Titanic. *Everyone* had heard of it. Their boarding house had been buzzing with the news of it ever since the launch at Belfast a few months ago.

Nothing quite this exciting ever happened in Ireland. Hinnah was just sad that it wasn’t happening here, that she couldn’t bid the ship goodbye from Dublin port. Sadder still, she couldn’t board it herself and travel across the Atlantic on a grand old voyage, instead of being stuck in her boxed room, in this unwelcoming country.

“Who hasn’t heard of the Titanic?” Hinnah asked.

Josefa and Violet exchanged a glance. Then, Josefa turned to Hinnah with a twinkle in her eyes. “Hinnah, we have a proposition for you.”

Usually, when Josefa and Violet approached Hinnah, it was because they needed a third person for a job. Hinnah was the person who helped them break into places. She would climb through windows, up roofs. Crawl into those tight spaces Violet and Josefa had no hopes of getting into. Once she had even climbed all the way down a chimney to help Hinnah and Josefa break into some Lord’s house. Everything she had learned at the circus meant she was pretty good at getting in and out of places, and she liked the extra money it brought in for her. Most importantly, Hinnah didn’t ask many questions.

But Hinnah wasn’t sure how the Titanic could factor into any of her skill sets.

She glanced between Josefa and Violet, unsure of exactly what it was she was about to get herself into. “Okay…” She would be lying if she said her curiosity wasn’t piqued.

“We have a plan to board the Titanic, and steal a rare, expensive—”

“—Jewel-encrusted.” Violet interrupted with a curt nod.

“—Jewel encrusted poetry collection that we know is on board the ship. We want you

to join us."

This had to be some kind of a joke. It seemed like too big a task, too big a risk. Hinnah didn't have the skills to help with something like this. And how were the two planning to board the Titanic anyway? The ship was due to set off in just four days, and she was sure the tickets were beyond anything they could afford.

"Why would you need me?" she asked.

For a moment, Josefa only blinked at Hinnah. Like the question was surprising—not what she was expecting to hear today. "Well, obviously because neither Violet nor I can do what you can. Just look at what you pulled off today. Even in the face of failure, you pushed forward. You're very determined." The admiration in Josefa's voice wasn't something Hinnah was accustomed to.

She couldn't help the blush that crept up her neck at the compliment. Nobody had ever called her determined before. Where the ringmaster had only seen Hinnah's faults, it seemed that Josefa had only seen her talents.

"What about the tickets?" She knew that even a third-class ticket was more than she made in months.

"Don't worry about that," Josefa said, like money was of no consequence. Hinnah couldn't imagine living like that. Though, maybe if she joined Violet and Josefa, she wouldn't have to imagine it.

Taking a deep breath, Hinnah asked, "What would I have to do?"