



*When
Stars
Light the
Sky*

WOMEN OF MIDTOWN

ELIZABETH
CAMDEN

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Prologue

NEW YORK CITY • 1898

America was supposed to be the land of opportunity, but it seemed more like a land of hunger and confusion to Inga. Huddled on the cold floor of the empty church, she tried to calm her breathing because even the tiniest noise sounded loud in the dark, echoey chamber. It didn't feel right to sneak inside a church, but she was only ten years old and always obeyed her parents.

Papa had been robbed ten minutes after they left Ellis Island, which was why they had to sneak into the church to sleep. All three of them wore their coats, hats, and scarves, but it was still cold. Why was November in New York so much colder than November in Bavaria?

Papa lay slumped against the steamer trunk, his fist clenched around its handle even in sleep. That trunk contained the only items of value they had left: Papa's hammers, tongs, tacks, and scissors for making shoes. Mama slept with their canvas bag of clothing strapped across her shoulders like a packhorse. Inga curled around her satchel, hoping dawn would come before a scary priest or nun turned them out into the night.

Nobody found them. By morning she was so stiff it hurt to sit up, and yet the way the sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows tinted the church with a rosy-gold shade so pure it gave her hope.

“What are you smiling about?” Papa grouched. He always complained when she smiled for no reason because people might think she was simpleminded.

Inga scrambled for a reason to be happy. “Even though we’re poor, we just got to spend a free night in the fanciest church in the world.”

The comment caused a spurt of laughter from Mama. Making people laugh had always been Inga’s special gift. Some people were great shoemakers like her father; others were smart or could play instruments. But Inga’s gift was to cheer people up. That had been especially important over the past year when life became increasingly bleak after her sister died and then people stopped buying Papa’s shoes because the factory-made shoes were so much cheaper.

“Shhh!” Mama warned, the harsh command echoing in the church. Someone was coming, and they weren’t ready to leave yet.

Inga held her breath as two people entered the church. The fabulously dashing man and the lady beside him headed straight toward a bank of votive candles near the front of the church. The lady knelt, and the man tossed a coin into a metal box, the clang ringing out in the silence. He proceeded to light a few votive candles. The flickering light illuminated the couple.

They were *rich*! The man wore a silk top hat, and the lady had a diamond comb in her hair.

The man shook out the match after lighting a bunch of candles, then tossed another coin in the collection box and lit another match. He kept lighting candles until the entire rack was ablaze with light. He knelt beside the woman and whispered something in her ear that caused her to giggle. He laughed too, a hearty sound from deep in his belly, although soon the couple quieted and started praying again.

They seemed so devout . . . until the woman let out an ungainly snort and broke into helpless peals of laughter again.

Laughter was contagious, and Inga clamped a hand over her mouth. Her father shook a warning finger at her, though Inga couldn't tear her eyes away from the rich people at the front of the church. What were they laughing about?

Eventually the man rose to his feet and adjusted his coat. He then helped the lady to rise.

"Quick, hide," Papa whispered. He scooted behind a statue of a saint being tortured by an arrow, beckoning Inga to follow. Yet she couldn't leave the satchels. What if someone stole them?

The couple strode down the aisle, and the man spotted her. Anxiety took hold within Inga as he blanched in surprise, then started to close in on her, the corners of his mouth turning down beneath his clipped, dark mustache. He rambled a stream of words in a language she didn't know.

"I'm sorry," she said in German. "I don't understand."

"*Bist du Deutsch?*" the man asked.

"*Ja*," she confirmed, and before she could say anything else, Papa was beside her, assuring the stranger they would leave soon and meant no harm. Papa scooped up one of the satchels beneath his arm, then tried to hoist the trunk behind his shoulder. But it was too heavy, and it banged on the floor.

"*Keine sorge, der himmel wird nicht fallen*," the stranger said. His accent was terrible, but a sense of well-being settled over Inga. *Don't worry, the sky won't fall*, he had said. It was the same thing her grandmother always said, and she grinned.

The man gave a hearty laugh and continued speaking in German. "Now that's the sweetest smile we've seen all day. Isn't it, Mary?"

"Yes indeed," the rich lady said. "Such pretty blond curls you have, my dear." The lady's German was heavily accented too. She had ropes of pearls around her neck, and she smelled like lilacs. "Come sit down and tell us why you had to spend the night in a church," the lady prompted.

The rich people introduced themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Gerard. They didn't look like the sort who needed to trick strangers out of all their money, so her father told them of their sad tale of how they had lost their savings as soon as they got off the ship. A stranger offered to exchange their German marks with American dollars for a better rate than offered at any bank. The stranger was German, so they trusted him. It wasn't until they tried to get a room in a hotel that they realized they'd been swindled. The paper money was fake, and they had only a few German marks left to their name.

The rich lady's eyes softened with pity when she looked at Inga's tattered hem, and she elbowed her husband, who reached for his wallet.

"Here, this should make you whole," Mr. Gerard said and casually pressed a few bills into her father's hand. Her father didn't even look at the bills, but his eyes brimmed with tears.

"Thank you, sir," he said on a shaking breath. "A million times, thank you!"

The Gerards nodded farewell and departed in a swirl of rustling silk and perfumed air.

Papa waited until the door closed behind the Gerards before counting the bills he'd been given.

A hundred dollars! It was enough to take care of them for at least a month. Inga raced to the window to watch the couple disappear onto the streets of New York, convinced she'd just caught a glimpse of two guardian angels.

For the rest of her life, she would remember to keep the Gerards in her prayers.



SIXTEEN YEARS LATER
JUNE 1914
THE HARBOR OF NEW YORK CITY

Have you got any extra work for me?” Inga asked her supervisor at the end of her shift at the wireless office. There was usually extra work in the largest port in America. She earned a respectable salary as a wireless operator, communicating with ships coming and leaving the port, although she was always happy to earn a little more.

Mr. Guillory glanced up from his desk surrounded by file cabinets, tackboards, and cubbyholes. “Go home and get some sleep,” he said, waving her away. “You don’t need extra work.”

True, but she was saving up to buy a tombstone to mark her parents’ grave. It had been four years since they’d passed away, and now that she was earning good money, she wanted them to have a nice stone.

She scanned Mr. Guillory’s cluttered desk, searching for any half-typed reports that needed finishing or shorthand documents to transcribe. Last year she completed a certificate in stenography,

which opened up an entirely new category of tasks she could accomplish.

“Look,” she said, pointing to the weekly tariff report. “Can I add that data into the monthly register? You know I can get it done faster than the day clerks will do it.”

“The day clerks are all men, and they need the work more than you,” Mr. Guillory said.

Undaunted, she glanced around for more chores, and her gaze landed on a telegram tacked to the bulletin board. Her name was printed on the outside. “What’s that?” she asked with a nod toward the telegram.

“Oh, that came in for you a few hours ago,” Mr. Guillory said, taking the message down. She tamped back her annoyance. Anyone sending her a telegram probably had a need for urgency, but her supervisor obviously wasn’t willing to interrupt her work to give it to her.

And frankly, the job of an overnight wireless operator demanded a good deal of concentration. From ten o’clock at night until seven in the morning, she translated the electronic tapping of dots and dashes from fellow wireless operators out at sea. Who could have imagined that a shoemaker’s daughter would ever become the sort of person who could communicate with mighty steamships coming into port? It wasn’t a traditional choice of occupation for a woman, although it made perfect sense to Inga. She had witnessed the consequences of clinging to a dying profession. Even before her father’s bad lungs made it impossible for him to keep producing his handmade shoes, Inga had enrolled in typing school. When the chance to learn Morse code presented itself, she reached out for it with both hands.

Now the only thing she wanted to grab with both hands was the telegram tacked to the board behind her supervisor.

“My shift ended five minutes ago, so may I see the message?” she asked.

Mr. Guillory hoisted himself out of the squeaky desk chair

and lumbered to unpin her message. She tore it open and read the brief note:

Inga,

Please meet me for lunch at the Ritz today at noon. I need to speak with you immediately.

Best,

James Gerard

This *was* a surprise. As the newly appointed ambassador to Germany, Mr. Gerard was supposed to be in Berlin, not having lunch at the Ritz.

Ever since she'd met the Gerards on her horrible first day in America, Mr. Gerard had kept a watchful eye over her. He helped when her parents were threatened with eviction after Papa's bad lungs forced him to stop working. He paid for her to attend wireless school because she could never have afforded the tuition on her own. Over the years, they exchanged affectionate Christmas cards, and she eagerly watched him from afar by reading the society pages. The Gerards were famous for weekend parties at their country estate and enjoyed racing their yacht with royalty both here and abroad.

The hint of desperation in Mr. Gerard's message seemed odd. Inga normally went straight to bed after working the overnight shift, but how could she deny him? She owed Mr. Gerard everything, even if it meant her sleep schedule would be ruined.

If she couldn't go home to sleep, she intended to spend the morning earning a few extra dollars here at the port. She folded the telegram and tucked it into her pocket, then scanned her supervisor's desk.

"Mr. Guillory, our quarterly reports are due next week, and we are behind on the monthly statistics. And look." She stepped around Mr. Guillory to open the cabinet doors. "We're running

out of cargo forms because nobody's restocked the inventory. Can I help you spiff things up?"

"The monthly statistics haven't been compiled because Jenkins is out with pleurisy," Mr. Guillory defended.

"Which is why you should let me do some typing for you. Or compile the statistics. At the very least you can ask me to dust and scrub this place. No wonder Jenkins has pleurisy with all this dust."

Over at the wireless station, the two male radio operators were trying not to laugh. Carson yanked off his headphones. "You tell it to him, Inga! This place is filthy."

Mr. Guillory spluttered. "Jenkins might want the extra work," he said.

"Might," Inga stressed. "I *do* want the extra work, and I'm right here for the next four hours. Tell me how I can help." A fresh load of tasks would keep her alert until her meeting with Mr. Gerard for lunch.

Mr. Guillory pawed through the mounds of paper on his desk to find several pages filled with tariff data. "Have at it, my dear."

Four hours later, Inga gaped in wonder as she entered The Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Sunlight flooded the yellow-and-white lobby from the stained-glass skylight above. Towering palm trees reached toward the vaulted ceiling, and water splashed in a central fountain. The gentlemen wore tailored suits, while the ladies looked ethereal in pastel silks with broad-brimmed hats. A smartly dressed man at the front desk cast a critical eye at Inga's plain brown frock, but his chilly demeanor vanished the instant she told him that she'd been invited to join Ambassador Gerard for lunch.

"Of course, ma'am," he said respectfully. "I'll escort you to the dining room."

She hid a grin as they wended through the palm court toward the main dining room. What a treat this was! Who cared if she

looked like a crow among swans? Few people in the world could afford lunch at the Ritz, and she intended to savor every moment.

Mr. Gerard was enjoying a cigar at a corner table near the window alcove while his wife perused a menu card. He stood as she approached.

“There’s my girl,” he said warmly, then set his cigar down and held out a chair for her. Most women disliked the scent of cigars, but Inga loved it because it reminded her of Mr. Gerard and his boisterous good cheer. She learned years ago that the reason the Gerards were in church the morning they first met was because Mary Gerard learned she was finally expecting a child. They came to light every votive candle in the church and pray all would go well.

It didn’t. The pregnancy did not last, and the Gerards were never blessed with children. Eventually, Inga became like a god-daughter to them. Perhaps the Lord had his hand in what occurred that morning, for in a strange sort of way, the Gerards got their devoted child, just not in the way they’d hoped.

Mary Gerard greeted her kindly, though her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. Something was wrong, but Mr. Gerard chatted amiably about this weekend’s horse races while a waitress set up tea service and the maître d’ took their order.

“I’m surprised to see you back in America so soon,” Inga said. After all, he’d only been appointed to the embassy in Berlin less than a year ago. “How do you like being an ambassador?”

He stopped rotating the cup and lifted his gaze to hers. “Things could be better,” he said. “You know how Germans can be difficult. Sometimes they take offense at the silliest things.”

“Oh dear,” Inga said, for what else could she possibly say? Yes, Germans were a prickly and proud lot, and Mr. Gerard had always been a bit blunt. “Can you give me an example?”

“Apparently I insulted their appalling displays of public art,” he said in exasperation. “The grand duke of Saxe-Weimar was showing me around Berlin, and I pointed out that all the parks

have statues celebrating wars or killing something. Even in their gardens! It's all about some ancient warrior wielding a club or holding up a severed head. Where's the beauty in that?"

Mary winced. "Yes, but you didn't need to point it out, dearest."

"I know that *now*," Mr. Gerard said. "Then I offended the kaiser because I was supposed to refer to him in the third person. 'Did his Excellency enjoy his tea?' Or 'Will his Excellency care to read a message from the president?' It's overbearing and ridiculous."

"Did you actually meet the kaiser?" Inga asked. She never imagined actually knowing somebody who met Kaiser Wilhelm, let alone spoke to him.

"Of course I met the kaiser," Mr. Gerard said. "I took along the embassy's chief diplomatic counselor, who is supposed to keep me in line, but it still didn't go well."

Mr. Gerard proceeded to outline his troubles. His appointment as ambassador to Germany had been controversial because he had no diplomatic experience; however, President Wilson "owed him one." Apparently, Mr. Gerard used a combination of his money and influence to deliver the state of New York to Woodrow Wilson during the 1912 presidential election, and his ambassadorship was a payback. Even the newspapers appeared shocked that a man primarily known for his prowess in hosting parties should receive such a plum appointment. Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise that things weren't going well for him.

"I had to fire my secretary for telling tales about me," Mr. Gerard said. "The staff at the American Embassy hate me, but the worst is Benedict Kincaid, the chief diplomatic counselor. Benedict is always trying to tell me what to do and how to act. I suspected my secretary, a chap named Silas, was the leak who was telling tales to Benedict, so I set a trap for him. I told Silas I was playing tennis with the staff from the Romanian Embassy, but it was really the Norwegians. Either one was likely to annoy Benedict because he's a wet blanket who disapproves whenever I do something fun."

Sure enough, when Benedict confronted me, he thought I'd been playing with the Romanians, just like I'd told my secretary. I fired Silas, and now I need a new secretary I can trust not to spy for Benedict."

"Why can't you just fire Benedict?" Inga asked, and Mr. Gerard shook his head.

"Ha! I wish I could, but that's not how the embassy works," he said. "Ambassadors like me are temporary appointments. We serve at the pleasure of the president and get swapped out with each new administration. The staff appointments are different. They can stay at an embassy for decades and carry out all the run-of-the-mill duties. None of them like me, and Benedict is their ringleader. They all look up to him like he walks on water, which makes no sense to me. Benedict Kincaid is a killjoy who casts a pall over every sunny day."

"Dreadful man," Mary confirmed. "Simply dreadful."

"I wish I could fire the entire staff," Mr. Gerard said. "They don't think I'm up to the job, and now that a war looks imminent, I think they're trying to get me fired. President Wilson summoned me home to read me the riot act about ruffling feathers at the German court. If you ask me, it's long past due for someone to shake up the kaiser and his inbred, militaristic entourage. So no, I'm afraid things in Berlin aren't going terribly well."

Inga wasn't used to seeing the Gerards so glum. "I wish there was something I could do to help."

A smile flashed across Mr. Gerard's face. "My dear, that's why we've come to you! I need a secretary I can trust. You're fluent in German. You know shorthand and typing and how to use the wireless. I'm sick of worrying that Benedict is spying on me every time I send a message to the president or the kaiser. That's where you'll come in."

Her heart started thudding, and she glanced at Mary to be sure she wasn't misunderstanding. "You want me to go to Germany with you?"

“Isn’t it exciting?” Mary enthused. “You can quit that dreadful overnight shift and come to Berlin with us. It will be such fun. We go yachting and to the opera and host parties in the countryside. You’ll be with us for everything!”

She rocked back into her chair, stunned. Going to Berlin would mean leaving all her friends behind . . . including Eduardo. And quite frankly, Germany didn’t seem like the safest place in the world right now. It would be cowardly to point out the darkening political situation when the Gerards were heading straight back into the teeth of it, and yet she needed to know.

“What happens if a war is declared?” she asked.

Mr. Gerard was dismissive. “No fear of a war. Things don’t look good for the French or the British, but America is going to stay out of it. President Wilson has repeatedly assured the whole world that he won’t drag us into a foreign war, and I believe him. You’ll be perfectly safe in Berlin.”

She did *not* want to leave New York. She loved the city. “Surely there are other people you could hire who have the necessary secretarial skills.”

“I need someone I can trust,” he said. Duties as a struggling ambassador must have been terribly difficult because he suddenly looked old and tired. Even his voice sounded exhausted as he continued.

“Inga, there are people on this earth who are always cheerful and optimistic. They bob back up to the surface whenever they get clobbered. That’s you. I knew it from the moment I saw you in that church, trying to smile through your fear when you were only a slip of a girl. That’s the spirit the American Embassy is lacking right now. We need you. *I need you.*”

How clever he was to remind Inga of her indebtedness to him. Sixteen years ago, the Gerards swooped in to save her family and asked for nothing in return. It looked like the bill was suddenly coming due.

“Can I have some time to think about it?”

“Naturally,” Mr. Gerard said. “You can call me this evening with your decision so I can arrange for passage. We sail on Friday.”

Inga ran to the harbor to ask Eduardo what he thought of the Gerards’ proposal. Eduardo had a fine job as an accountant at the Docks Department, but he didn’t get off work until five o’clock, and her time to make a decision was running out.

She sat on a park bench, gazing at the esplanade that ran alongside the harbor. It was the best sight in the world, with ships constantly sailing in and out of this grand port. Flags snapped in the breeze, the cry of sea gulls and the clank of chains mingled with the slosh of water against the harbor wall. The thought of leaving this wonderful city triggered a pang of homesickness.

Five o’clock finally came, and Inga stood as she spotted Eduardo leaving the Docks Department. As always, his swath of dark hair was ruthlessly slicked into place for his office job, but he relaxed and turned funny whenever they were together.

Not today. A sadness overcame him as she described the job in Germany.

“But, Inga,” he said, his Adam’s apple bobbing, “I thought you and I could . . . well, I was hoping the two of us could make things permanent someday. Mama is already counting on it.”

She sighed. “We’ve only been courting two months.”

“I know, but you’re pretty much perfect, even if you are German.”

He flushed when he realized what he just said, and yet she simply laughed and planted a smooch directly on his mouth. “That’s okay. If my parents were still alive, they’d probably think the same thing about an Italian.”

Eduardo held her hands tighter. “Berlin is a good opportunity, but do you truly want to go?”

She couldn’t bring herself to answer as she watched a tugboat guiding a mighty steamship into port. Her love for New York

went all the way to the marrow of her bones, and yet she owed the Gerards everything. Eduardo escorted her to the subway stop, expressing his disapproval the entire way.

Back at her apartment, the women who lived on her floor were equally skeptical. Inga moved into this all-female apartment building six years ago. The Martha Washington was created to provide safe housing for the growing class of professional single women. Over five hundred teachers, nurses, secretaries, and other professional women who could afford the monthly rent made their home in this apartment building. Each floor had a communal room, which was where Inga told the other women from the eighth floor about her dilemma. So far, all six women gathered here were doubtful about the wisdom of taking the job. All of them had valid observations for which Inga had no answers.

“What if you don’t like the work?” Margaret asked. “You’ll be stuck in Germany with no way to get home.”

“What if the war breaks out?” another asked. “Maybe the ships will stop sailing, and you’ll be trapped there for years and years.”

“What about William?” Blanche asked.

Finally, an easy question. “William and I split up a few months back,” Inga said. “I’m with Eduardo Cipriani now.”

“*Again?*” Blanche asked incredulously. Inga was used to being teased for her merry-go-round with boyfriends, but she liked men, and they liked her back. Whenever they got too possessive, like William did, it was time to move on. The fact that Eduardo and his mother were already hoping for a long-term commitment meant Inga would probably need to move on soon anyway.

Across the room, Delia Byrne watched with skeptical eyes. Delia was not only Inga’s best friend, but she was probably the smartest person here. And so far she’d been silent.

“Dee, what do you think?”

“I think you’d be insane to say no,” Delia replied. “Why are you hesitating? What are you afraid of, Inga?”

That she didn't belong in Germany anymore. That she wouldn't know how to act in an embassy where she'd meet kings and princes and diplomats. That she would fail and disappoint the Gerards. She drew a sobering breath and met Delia's gaze. "I'm not smart like you, Dee. I only have an eighth-grade education and can be so dumb sometimes."

"Inga, stop!" Delia ordered. "You speak two languages, plus Morse code. You can take shorthand, type, and organize an office better than anyone I know, all of it while wrapping every man in the vicinity around your soft little finger, so shut up about being stupid, okay?"

Inga choked back a laugh. "I wish you weren't so nasty."

"And I wish you weren't so good-natured!"

Some people didn't understand the way she and Delia bickered, but they'd become instant friends the moment Inga arrived at the Martha Washington six years earlier. Yes, they were opposites. Inga was cheerful and blond compared to Delia's dark and serious, but they'd always been closer than sisters.

"When would you have to leave?" Blanche asked.

"The Gerards sail on Friday," she said.

Blanche folded her arms across her chest. "If everyone at the American Embassy hates Mr. Gerard the way you described, what happens if President Wilson fires him? You will have lost a good job at the harbor and be out of a job in Germany."

"You'd lose your apartment at the Martha Washington," another woman pointed out. "There's a two-year waiting list to get a place here, and you'd be out on the streets."

"Not if Eduardo had his way," Margaret teased. "He'd take her in a heartbeat."

There were so many excellent reasons to stay she hadn't even considered. She loved living at the Martha Washington. It was a sisterhood here, and if she left, she'd have to get at the end of that two-year waiting list for an apartment. Inga turned her attention to a rail-thin, elderly woman perched on the couch

who hadn't said a word as her knitting needles clicked with practiced rhythm.

"Midge, what do you think?"

At seventy-four, Midge Lightner was the oldest person at the Martha Washington. She'd been a nurse during the Civil War and still worked the overnight shift at a nearby hospital.

"I think the best opportunities in life are usually the scariest."

Inga sagged. She didn't want a scary opportunity; her life was already perfect. She loved the bright lights of Manhattan and letting handsome men court her. New York had parties and theaters and fresh-baked pretzels. There was ice skating in the winter and baseball in summer.

The only thing she remembered about Germany was living in a tiny town with dirt roads surrounded by a forest, the trees so tall that they blotted out the sun. Berlin would be different, yet the prospect of abandoning everything for it . . . no.

"I think you should stay here," Blanche said. "A new theater season is about to open. You don't want to go be on the front lines in Germany. Stay back in New York where it's safe."

"Safe?" Delia said, a hard edge in her voice. "I can't become an attorney even though I'm smarter than ninety percent of the lawyers I clerk for. I've had doors slammed in my face all my life. I would give my eyeteeth to have an opportunity like this. Inga, you need to go! Maybe it will be hard in Berlin, but don't quit before the game even begins. If things get hard, you buckle down, burn your candle at both ends, and rise to the occasion."

Delia in her Valkyrie mood was always so intimidating, and Inga stood to pace in the crowded room. She needed time to think without all these people chiming in. She ignored the ongoing chatter as she wandered to the window overlooking the city she loved so well. Even from here it was possible to see the spire of the church where she and her parents huddled overnight all those years ago. How afraid they'd been that terrible night. She'd often wondered what would have become of them without the openhanded gen-

erosity of the Gerards on that long-ago day. Over the years they had intervened on her behalf time and again, never once asking for anything in return.

She didn't want to leave New York. She didn't want to head into the unknown. And yet, a few hours later as the sun sank low in the evening sky, she called the hotel where the Gerards were staying and agreed to accompany them to Berlin.