

T H E
I C E
S W A N

THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798
J'NELL

C I E S I E L S K I



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Ice Swan

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PROLOGUE

OCTOBER 1917
PETROGRAD, RUSSIA

The night burned red with the flames of revolution. Shots ringing out. Cannons exploding. People screaming. The Bolsheviks came intent on death with anarchy in their iron fists.

Her Serenity the Princess Svetlana Dalsky hurried down the corridor of the Blue Palace carrying a travel case that had been packed for weeks should this very scenario arise, not daring to use a single candle lest it draw attention. The dozens of windows reflected the red sky, turning the drapes and carpets and ancestral portraits to stains of blood. The rebels would soon be at their front door, and not even her father's protection unit of White Guards could hold them back. The time for that was over.

She slipped into her younger sister's chamber still cloaked in darkness and moved to the bed. A weak candle on the bedside table illuminated Marina's sweet face relaxed in worriless sleep.

Svetlana set her case down and shook her sister's shoulder. "Get up, Marina." Marina moaned and flipped over, her hair like dark honey across the lacey pillow. "Get up!"

"What for?" Marina rolled back and cracked open an eye. Taking in her sister's dark travel clothes, she bolted upright. "It is happening?"

"Yes."

Marina sprang out of bed and rushed to her wardrobe to change while Svetlana stuffed her sister's personal items into the waiting travel

bag. Father had told them this day would come and they had prepared well.

Svetlana scrounged through the jewelry box. "Where are the rubies?"

Marina patted her stomach as she jammed her feet into thick stockings. "Finished sewing them into my corset last week."

Another preparation. Their carried items were bound to be searched or confiscated, but their most precious items, the ones that would keep them alive, would never leave their bodies and hopefully slip right under the rebels' noses.

Dressed in heavy layers and thick coats to withstand the malevolent Russian weather, the sisters grabbed their two small cases and left the chamber, stealing down the corridor of their family's home as swift as shadows. The light beyond the windows grew brighter as if a bonfire had ignited just outside the palace gates. Gunfire ricocheted off the surrounding buildings.

Soon. They would be here soon.

A cry of despair echoed down the corridor. "The day has come!" Their mother's wail reached them a split second before she hurtled around a corner clutching her fur coat and *kubanka* hat. "They will kill us all!"

Marina gasped. Svetlana placed a steadying hand on her shoulder to ward off their mother's hysterics. "They will not find us, Mama. Where is your travel case?"

"Well, I . . ." Mama looked around as if the bag would appear by sheer willpower. "I see no reason to pack as if we are leaving forever. Your father will fight. We'll return in a matter of days. They have no right to be here!"

Svetlana stepped forward until she was inches from her mother's pale face. "We may never return."

"The tsar cannot abandon us to these madmen!"

Glass shattered.

Mama screamed, clutching her cross necklace. "Saint Peter preserve us!"

Voices shouted from the foyer. Boots pounded across the marbled floors.

A dark figure flashed around the corner leading up from the back staircase. "Svetlana! This way. *Toropis!*" Sergey. One of her brother's oldest friends.

"No. This way." Svetlana turned away from the front of the palace and down a twist of passageways to a small closet in the servants' hall. She pushed a back panel to reveal a hidden staircase. "Go down. Quickly!"

Marina and Mama disappeared into the secret entrance. Svetlana and Sergey followed and sealed the door behind them.

"Sergey, what are you doing here? Where are Nikolai and Papa?"

"Called to defend the Winter Palace. The Bolsheviks have broken in. I knew it was only a matter of time before they came here. I've come to take you to safety." His heavy breathing echoed in the tight space as they fumbled their way down the darkened stairs. The barest light seeped through the cracks to keep them from complete treachery. "Where is this leading us?"

"To the gardens." If they weren't caught.

The tunnel grew steadily brighter, but the night they emerged to was far from clear. It was red, exploding with horror and treason. Behind them, the palace, their home, shimmered with rage as dark figures raced along the windows. Their torches and guns refracted against the glass. Mama sobbed as Marina whimpered. Svetlana turned them away and out through a rusty gate. The street was quiet and slick with rain from the day before.

The day before their world ended.

Sergey herded them away. "We must hurry to the train station." He took Svetlana's hand and tucked her close to his side.

It was only a few blocks to the train station, but the distance

seemed a hundred lifetimes as they darted around buildings and ducked behind carts to avoid the roaming mobs of citizens crying hateful threats of violence to anyone daring to cross their path.

A mass exodus of nobles swarmed the train platforms as women in jewels and men in fur hats crammed their panicked selves into already full cars.

“This way! Up front.” Tall, with long arms and legs, Sergey pushed his way through the crowd holding tight to Svetlana. Marina and Mama hooked their arms through hers as they wound through the sea of desperate humanity.

Svetlana’s travel case was ripped from her hand. A young woman with frayed clothing clutched it tight in triumph. “Give that back at once!”

The woman grinned, revealing rotting teeth. “It belongs to the People now. Your time is over, *Printsessa*.”

Grubby hands reached out and snagged Marina’s case. “Long live the People! Long live the Revolution!” They disappeared like smoke.

Svetlana caught glimpses of the train through the teeming bodies. Of people standing cheek to jowl inside. Of men kicking women off the ladder as they attempted to board the crammed cars. All of Petrograd was fleeing, but not all would make it. Fear curled cold and hissing in Svetlana’s stomach. They would make it. She would ensure her sister and Mama made it.

The crowd thinned to allow for a gasping draw of breath as the engine belched its black smoke. A whistle trilled. The crowd screamed and plunged toward the train in final desperate flings to find space.

Sergey pushed them to the front car. Grabbing Marina, he shoved her onto the ladder before hoisting up Mama. The train wheels started to turn.

Tweet! Tweeeet!

Soldiers with red arm bands flooded the platform, striking at men and woman alike with clubs and trampling anyone knocked under

their black boots. The Bolsheviks. “Get them! Don’t let them flee like rats.”

The soldiers rushed forward and ripped people off the train as it started to move. Sergey grabbed Svetlana, kissed her on both cheeks, and threw her up the ladder. “Paris. I will find you.”

“Sergey!” Svetlana hoisted herself to the rail and held out her hand, begging him to take it. “Sergey!”

Arms striped with red bands locked around him and dragged him back where he was swallowed into the rioting of chaos.



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CHAPTER 1

JULY 1918
PARIS, FRANCE

Edwynn MacCallan poised his scalpel over the beating heart. A wonder of sheer beauty with its miraculous chambers and thin veins coursing with life. The bullet pointing directly at the left ventricle threatened to end it all.

“Heart rate is falling, Doctor.” Gerard Byeford, Wynn’s colleague and surgical assistant, shifted uneasily on the opposite side of the operating table.

“A minute more.”

“We don’t have a minute.”

“Fifty seconds, then.”

“Wynn. You arrogant—”

Wynn heard nothing more as the bullet slipped free from its place of intended death, captured in the forceps’ unrelenting grip. It clanged a solid peal of demise as it dropped into the sterile metal tray, rolling back and forth until it came to a final stop among the smears of blood.

Gerard wiped the blood trickling from the incision as Wynn handed the forceps to a nurse who then placed a needle driver with a suturing hook into his hand. Wynn made quick work with the catgut thread in a neat row of stitches that would leave the patient with a slightly puckered scar for his Blighty badge. Proof of honor earned on the battlefield. Lucky blighter. Too many of the Tommies claimed theirs with an eternity box or a mud pit in no-man’s-land.

The next patient was not so lucky. Sent from a casualty clearing station near Amiens, his tag reported shrapnel to the abdomen, but with the mass moving of the wounded at such places his kidney concussion had been missed. The soldier, no older than twenty, died before the first incision was made.

Wynn ripped off his surgical mask and gloves and tossed them into the bin of soiled linen, then made his escape from the taunting smells of death and failure. And thousands more coming as the wretched war dragged them into its fourth year of death and destruction.

If he allowed the sobering thought to settle for too long, it would drive him straight out of his senses. A batty medical officer was the last thing the army needed at the moment, so he would have to reserve his mental breakdown for another time.

He slipped out the back door of the Parisian hotel turned hospital and dropped onto the stone steps. The bright orange ball of sunlight hung low in the sky, skimming the tops of Parisian buildings that had yet to crumble beneath the weekly barrage of Hun guns. Most days he couldn't tell if the sun was rising or falling as each day blurred into another. Only the smell wafting from the kitchen—congealed eggs to announce breakfast or boiled beans for supper—kept him straight. Neither a pleasant marker of time, but at least the food was hot.

"Here you are."

Wynn scrounged up a grin at the familiar voice. "Thought I smelled carrots."

Hair blazing like the ripened root vegetable, Gerard plopped next to him on the step. His once bleached surgical apron was covered in all manner of operating byproduct. Then again, so was Wynn's. "Ha-ha. That joke never gets old, does it, my lord?"

Wynn scowled at the title he tried to shuck off every chance he got. As the second son of the very wealthy Duke of Kilbride he never had to worry about the pressures of title and land hefted onto his

brother, Hugh, the first born and heir. Surgeon was the only position Wynn cared about. "Told you not to call me that."

"Pardon me, Doctor Marquess."

"Another joke that never gets old."

"Never. Just when we uppity surgeons start to think too highly of ourselves, we find our elbows rubbing against nobility. Come to find out, you're not such a bad lot. In small doses."

"Don't let the others in the rank and file hear you. They'll think I'm not pulling my weight to keep the commoners down. As if we need one more thing."

Gerard hunched forward, his freckled hands clenched between his knees. "How many today, Wynn?"

The question had become common enough among the doctors at the end of their shifts. Not because it was some sick competition or morbid curiosity, but so they could spot who most needed a break. So busy caring for others, medical staff often forgot to care for themselves. This was one small way they could look out for each other.

Wynn took a deep breath of the humid evening air that hung over the small garden. Once a fashionable patch of grass for hotel guests to stroll, the area had quickly filled with hospital supplies and cleaning tents. Hopefully the smell of jasmine and orange trees would blossom again here soon instead of canvas and bleach.

"Six. Two hemorrhages. Kidney contusion. One loss of blood during an amputation. Seizure under the knife, and another infection. That lad had been left in a mud pit carved by a mortar for seventy-two hours. He didn't stand a chance when they put him on my table. I didn't even have morphine to give him." He rubbed a hand over his bleary eyes. "They keep coming. Wave after wave, and half of them never reaching my table. The ones who do . . . Well, you know."

"Yes. I know. Lost two myself."

After four hard years, there was nothing left to say. All that remained was the hope that it would end soon.

Wynn slapped Gerard on the shoulder, jostling the thinner man who not only had the misfortune of carrot-colored hair but the build of one too. "Tomorrow will be better. Bet my best retractor on it."

"Retractor, you say? I could use a new one."

"Tired of having the nurses hold incisions open with their fingers?"

"We do what we must, mate. Pardon, my lord."

"That's Doctor Lord to you, commoner." Wynn yawned and stretched to his aching feet, checking his wristwatch. Nearly eight hours since he last sat down. Once he stepped into the operating theater, time no longer qualified for concern. All that existed was the patient before him. A moment off duty was quick to remind him of the mundane aches and pains of mere humans in need of rest. "I best be off to my bunk. Nestor needs to know where to find me when the cases start piling up in a few hours."

Gerard rolled his eyes at the mention of the hospital's administrative director. "I'll keep him at bay long enough for you to get a few minutes of shut eye this time."

"Thanks, mate. If you see me go down, prop me up with a broom."

He walked around to the side of the building where large pots of boiling water had been set up for disinfecting stained aprons, gloves, and masks. A good soak in bleach and a vigorous scrubbing with lye and the surgical items would be ready to greet the next patients with medical cleanliness. Hurrying back inside, he was careful to stay out of view. If he were spotted by a militant nurse he'd never find his bed.

He quickly checked out. The nurse on duty tipped her head as Wynn signed the logbook. "See you in six hours, Doctor MacCallan."

"Aren't you the wishful thinker?" Wynn slipped his arms into his constricting jacket, not bothering with the tie.

"Someone has to be."

"Too right about that. Good night."

"Good night, Doctor."

Leaving the hospital, Wynn turned down the empty Boulevard

de Courcelles and started walking the two blocks to where he and the other doctors were quartered. He was grateful his special pass allowed him out after curfew or he'd be forced to pitch a tent in his office until morning. The cobblestone street was lined with tall maple trees in the full bloom of green. Quintessential Parisian sandstone buildings with tiny wrought iron balconies and intricate carvings stood guard against the slow passing of time as hurried generations passed before their solemn gazes. Gas lamps rested silently from their hooks on street poles as the City of Light was forced to extinguish her glow while surrounded by war. She sighed now after the exhaustion of a washed-out day as her beauty sparkled under the brilliant coaxing of moonlight.

The air was heavy with summer, a blessing after one of the coldest winters in France's history. The people of Paris had taken to chopping down doors and furniture that had withstood innumerable revolutions to keep fires going in their homes, but it couldn't prevent the numerous deaths from exposure. Conditions on the battlefield were a thousand times worse. It was a miracle any of the soldiers had survived. Injuries of shell fragments, shattered bones, and bullet holes had turned to frostbite and hypothermia.

"*Non!*" The shriek carried down the empty street. Three doors ahead, a woman stood in the entrance shouting in French at a person standing on her front steps.

The person, draped in a long shawl that covered their head, took a step back and held up their hands as if pleading. A woman by the slender shape and fringe of her covering.

"*Non!*" The Frenchwoman grabbed a bottle from behind her and raised it as if preparing to hurl it.

The shawl woman stumbled to the footpath, blocking her face and head with her arms. With a vicious screech, the Frenchwoman lobbed the bottle into the street, then turned and slammed the door behind her. Glass shattered. The panicked woman turned away but caught her foot on the edge of her shawl, tripping her into the street

and the broken glass. As she cried out in pain, her hood toppled back to reveal a sheen of silver hair and face that could have been carved from exquisite ice. Yanking the covering back in place, the woman stumbled to her feet and lurched forward.

“Miss!” Wynn hurried toward her. “You’re hurt. Let me help you.”

Clutching her shawl, the woman hobbled across the street and slipped between the gates to the Parc Monceau. Wynn raced after her. She was quick, darting among the trees and their shadows until breaking through the tall black gate on the opposite side. By the time he reached the gate, she had vanished across the five-point intersection of Rue de Courcelles and Avenue Hoche. Commonly filled with the clatter of carriages and carts and pedestrians, it lay empty in the hours after curfew.

How could an injured woman move that fast? The injury was most likely bleeding. He scanned the ground. Drops of blood leading down Avenue Hoche. Feeling all too much like a hound, he followed the wet trail until it turned down an alleyway. The tall, surrounding buildings closed around him as he slipped down the narrow passage and emerged into a small courtyard behind a squat building with conical roofs topped by gold balls and crosses. A church. A Russian Orthodox church, to be exact. He’d never been in this neighborhood before.

The woman crept from a dark corner of the courtyard. Her limp had worsened and she was breathing hard. She needed medical attention.

A siren exploded in the distance. Hospital alarm. Wounded conveys incoming, which meant all hands to the operating theater.

There were other doctors. Wynn wasn’t needed despite the urging in his veins. He stepped into the courtyard and collided into a set of rubbish bins. The metal lids clattered to the stone ground.

The woman dashed across the courtyard and yanked at a cellar door at the back of the church.

“Wait!” Wynn called.

The woman rushed inside and slammed the door behind her. The sound of a rusty lock clicked in place.

The siren sounded again. He could ignore it no longer. With one last frustrating glance to the door, Wynn took off running back to hospital.

The operating theater bustled with activity until the wee hours of the morning. Soldiers from the offense exploding around Reims. Sometime around five, after his last patient was carried off to a recovery room, Wynn dozed off in a corner chair only to be awakened by the gentle shaking of a nurse.

“Doctor, there’s no need for you to remain. Please go home and rest.”

A flock of Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses had descended to clean and tidy the once grand dining room that was now filled with operating tables, surgical tools, and apparatuses imperative to his work. Only a bin filled with filthy and bloody bandages served as proof to the night’s frantic endeavors.

Wynn came awake in an instant. A habit forged in occupational necessity. “I’ll check on my patients first. There was one head case—”

“Doctor Byeford is doing a round and has promised to alert you if there is a need. Shoo, Doctor.”

“Aye-aye, Sister.” Pushing to his feet, he gave her a mock salute. One never argued with the Sisters. The medical staff would be hopeless without them.

After discarding his surgical apron, mask, and gloves and a good scrubbing of the hands, Wynn made for the front door with his bed calling to him. This time he might actually make it.

“We don’t take your kind here. Find the All Saint’s Chapel. They’re taking on cases likes yours.” A baby-faced lieutenant straight out of medical school blocked the front steps to what appeared to be two women wrapped in colorful shawls despite the summer air.

“Please. She cannot make it so far,” said the taller one. Russian. And highly cultured from the sound of it.

"I'm sure you've a mystic in your traveling caravan to chant over your troubles. What was that chap's name? Rasputin? I hear he took real good care of your Imperial family. Especially the tsarina."

"You know nothing of which you speak, impudent *slovach*." The woman's tone was brittle as an icicle.

Wynn stepped forward before the lieutenant could further prove his worthlessness. "May I be of assistance?"

The little man whipped around and paled. "Doctor MacCallan. I was telling these people that their needs will be better assisted at the refugee chapel in Paris. Where their kind are."

"That's over eight kilometers from here."

"Yes, sir, but they can't—"

Wynn sidestepped his blethering. "What needs have you, ladies?" Any further words stuck in Wynn's throat as the woman turned to face him. The early gray morning light sculpted her like white marble just as she had appeared a few hours before, falling in the street. In a word, breathtaking. "You!"

"I beg pardon?" She didn't recognize him. Her ice blue gaze held him with a haughtiness that bespoke a life of bowing down to no one. Tall and slender, she held herself like an aristocrat.

He wanted nothing more than to get to the bottom of her midnight escapade, but not standing on the front steps for all of France to see. He dragged his attention to the other woman with a face full of wrinkles and a wrapped hand cradled to her bosom. The one in need of medical attention. "Come inside. Please."

The lieutenant moved to block the steps. "But, sir—"

Wynn pinned him with a superior look of disgust. He hated throwing his rank around, but in this weasel's case he was willing to make an exception. "You may resume your duties. Bed pans, was it?"

Scowling, the lieutenant scurried off. Wynn stood aside and swept his arm toward the hospital entrance. "Ladies. After you."

Anchoring her arm around the older woman, the younger lady

guided her up the remaining steps and glided into the hospital. Or glided as best she could while favoring her right leg.

The Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse, or VAD, glanced up from reception. A welcoming smile on her young face. “Back so soon, Doctor?”

“Can’t keep me away. I’ll be in my office for examination.”

“Yes, sir.”

Under ordinary circumstances Wynn would never allow a patient into the private sanctum of the medical staff, but every available room was stuffed to the brim with wounded Tommies. Plus, there was one other rather alarming reason he didn’t wish to open his work quarters. At least not to ladies.

Wynn swung open the door and winced. Shoved together in the center of the room were two desks, littered with clamps, linens, and glass bottles of carbolic lotion and disinfectant. Maps of France, battlefields, and train depots were tacked to the walls, and an overflow of charts were stacked on the desks. The results of doctors being too busy binding up patients to hassle with paperwork.

“Excuse the mess. This is what happens when you throw in two bachelors and hope for the best.”

The young woman’s gaze scanned around the room before cutting to him and revealing a razor-sharp intellect. “Are you a doctor?”

“Hope so. Otherwise I’m going to be in trouble when they find me in here.” Her expression didn’t crack. *Tough crowd.* Shuffling the papers off his chair and abandoning them to the abyss of Gerard’s desk, Wynn pulled out a chair and indicated for the old woman to sit.

She shuffled forward and plopped down, clinging to her injured hand. Wynn gave her a quick assessment: ashy skin, cracked lips, dry eyes, onset of arthritis. Frizzy gray hair receding under a black shawl tied under a sagging chin. Worn but sturdy clothes. Cracked boots and hunched back. Diagnosis? Accustomed to hard work and plain food. A meager lifestyle, but not poor. Until now.

Kneeling, he took her hand and gently unwrapped the cloth to reveal a cut forefinger and thumb. Bright red blood trickled from the cuts as air hit the skin. He quickly rewrapped it. "Squeeze to keep pressure on it." Rummaging through the supplies, he scrounged up fresh gauze, linen strips, lysol swabs, and ointment and set them on the desk next to her. "How did you cut yourself?"

Neither woman said a word.

Wynn reached for the stained cloth around the old woman's hand. She slapped him away and pointed at the younger woman, speaking in fervent Russian. The younger woman shook her head, seeming to argue as she tried to draw attention back to the old woman's hand. Exasperated, the old woman yanked at the young woman's skirt. It was then that Wynn noticed the tear and the stain of blood.

The injury from when she fell before running away from him. An injury she was now trying to hide in favor of her elder companion's wound. Admirable, but pride had no function in the medical ward.

"I'd like to exam your leg," Wynn said. ®

"See to her first."

"Miss, you're bleeding and limping, which is a more serious case. Your companion is well enough for now."

Those ice blue eyes cut into him, assessing his capability of determining such a conclusion no doubt. Only with a tug from the old woman did she acquiesce and take a seat in the chair Wynn pulled out from Gerard's desk.

Though dressed simply in blue and gray, her clothes were of a fine quality despite the hole torn over her shin. Ladies were not often found begging in the streets. If she wanted to maintain a sense of mystery, she had perfected the art.

Attend to her medical issue. He was a doctor first, for crying out loud. "Will you lift your skirt, please?"

Lips pursed in distaste at his choice of words—he hated saying them himself—she lifted the hem of her skirt to just below her knee.

Thin, cotton stockings covered her shapely legs, but one had been rolled down to expose a piece of glass embedded in the shin. A thick, green paste had been applied to the area, but bright red dots of blood trickled down her leg. The fragment had most likely loosened during her walk to hospital.

“You’re in luck,” he said. “We won’t need to amputate after all.”

She gasped. “It is not so bad.”

“No, it’s not.”

“You are funny.”

“Thank you.”

“I did not mean it as a compliment.”

“Well, that’s put me in my place.” Moving to the stack of supplies, Wynn found an extraction kit complete with forceps, iodine, gauze, linen, and suturing needle. He’d used these on shrapnel patients more times than he cared to count. This would be the first on a woman.

“How did you come by the injury?” He was fairly certain he knew the answer, but how far to prod? Forthcoming with information the woman was not.

Panic flashed across her face. She quickly smoothed it over. “I fell.”

“On a bottle?”

“There are many things on the ground that should not be there and I tripped.”

Clearly she didn’t want to confess the true origin of her injury. He would respect her desire for privacy. For now. Rubbing his hands with a few drops of iodine, Wynn quickly laid out his tools in order of necessity, then patted the top of his desk.

“Apologies for not having a proper examination table, but this will have to do.”

Maneuvering gracefully to sit atop the desk, she then straightened out her legs with toes pointed and back straight as a board. Impeccable posture considering the pain she must be in.

Using the forceps, Wynn dipped a pad of gauze into the iodine.

“This will sting a wee bit.” He swabbed the area around the wound. She didn’t flinch. Good. That was the easy part. “Now, with your right forefinger and thumb I want you to pinch the skin between said fingers on your opposite hand. Pinch as hard as you dare.”

“This will help my leg how?”

“It’s part of the procedure. Trust me.” It had nothing whatsoever to do with the procedure but gave patients a task to occupy them for the seconds he needed to extract the foreign object. No one had ever questioned him before. Taking a firm grip on the forceps, Wynn pinched the glass and tugged. It moved slightly. The woman made a slight noise in her throat. “Are you squeezing?”

“Yes.” Her voice was tight. He knew how painful it must be, brave girl.

Steadying himself for the required exertion, Wynn gave a mighty yank. The glass pulled free. Bright red blood spilled out. He wiped the area clean as best he could, then made a neat row of quick sutures before dabbing on more iodine and wrapping a clean bandage around her leg. He pulled her skirt down for modesty and stepped back.

“All done.”

The woman’s white fingers were latched around the edges of his desk, her mouth a colorless slash across her pale face.

Wynn gently touched her shoulder. “You can breathe now.”

She took a deep breath, breaking free from the protective shell of silence the wounded often enclosed themselves within to endure a procedure. “Thank you.”

“Care for the souvenir?” Wynn pointed at the jagged bit of bottle. Dirty piece of work that. The Frenchwoman who threw it ought to be forced to crawl over the fragments herself.

“It is common to keep an object of such torment?”

“Many of the soldiers do with their shrapnel and bullets. I wrap the items in a strip of cloth and tie it around the patient’s arm after surgery. It’s a badge of honor that they like to show the folks back home.”

“It is not a reminder I need.” Smoothing her skirts, she eased off the desk in one fluid movement.

Wynn turned to his other patient with an encouraging smile. “Now, madam, it’s your turn.” Kneeling, he quickly unwrapped the older woman’s hand. The bleeding had stopped to reveal clean but deep cuts. The kind only slivered glass or metal could inflict. “How did she receive this?”

The young woman hesitated. “She tried to remove the glass from my leg. In Russia she is considered a great healer.”

“It was you who concocted that green paste.” Wynn held up the linen he’d used to clean away the mixture. The old woman nodded in a knowing manner and replied in Russian.

“A mash of yarrow mixed with comfrey water,” the young woman translated.

“Good work,” Wynn said.

The young woman translated softly in Russian, each word brightening the old woman’s face. She seemed to ask a question in return.

The young woman nodded. “*Da, babushka.*”

Grinning to reveal a missing tooth, the old woman patted Wynn’s cheek with her free hand. Dabbing more iodine onto a clean swatch of gauze, he cleaned her cuts. A hiss of air escaped her cracked lips.

A thick braid of pale blond slipped over the young woman’s shoulder as she bent close to the old woman’s ear. “*Uspokoysya, babushka.*”

Wynn nodded in encouragement. “You’re doing fine, Mrs. Babushka.”

The young woman’s eyebrows drew together. “Why do you call her this?”

“Is that not her name?”

“*Babushka* is Russian for ‘grandmother.’”

“Oh. Forgive me. I meant no disrespect.”

“It is very respectful to call older generations this in recognition of their wisdom.”

“What a relief. My own grandmother would’ve skelped me if I

dared to call her something so informal in public. A great protector of propriety, she was.”

The old woman looked up at the younger lady and asked something. Nodding, the younger lady spoke quickly, gesturing to Wynn a few times. As she finished translating, the old woman’s face crackled into a smile.

She patted Wynn’s cheek. “*Golubchik.*”

“Mrs. Varjensky says you are sweet.”

Wynn bowed over the injured hand still in his grasp. “A pleasure, Mrs. Varjensky. I’m Edwynn MacCallan, but I prefer Wynn.”

“*Golubchik.*” Mrs. Varjensky patted his cheek again, then indicated the younger woman. “*Yeyo Spokoystviye Printsessa Svetlana Dmitrievna Dalsky.*”

Did she say princess?

The young woman blanched and placed a hand on Mrs. Varjensky’s shoulder. “Svetlana Dalsky. Please.”

Brow wrinkling, Mrs. Varjensky rattled off a string of Russian, which Svetlana’s response quickly combated.

Taking it as a conversation on the forgoing of noble titles that he wasn’t intended to hear, Wynn grabbed a bandage and quickly wrapped Mrs. Varjensky’s hand.

“It may take a few days to heal, but if the pain worsens you and your grandmother—”

“She is not my grandmother,” Svetlana said.

“No? I thought . . . Well, that’s me with both feet in my mouth now.”

She glanced down at his feet. “What does this mean with feet still on the ground? They are too large and unsanitary for such a task.”

“It’s an expression. Means I don’t know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“We are speaking. Why would you wish to remain silent?”

“I don’t translate into Russian very well, do I?” Wynn laughed

and set about tidying the used supplies before Gerard could come in and question the impromptu surgery. “It means I say the wrong thing sometimes. Not usually on purpose. Don’t tell me you’ve never slipped and said something you shouldn’t.”

“No.”

“Never?”

“I have been trained out of the habit.” Taking Mrs. Varjensky’s arm, she helped the old woman to her feet. “How much do we owe you?”

Wynn waved his hand. “On the house.” At Svetlana’s confused look around the room, he clarified. “We don’t charge for patients in need at wartime.”

“*Spasibo*. Thank you.”

“*Spasibo, golubchik*,” repeated Mrs. Variensky with another pat to Wynn’s cheek.

Wynn followed them out into the grand lobby turned waiting room. The smell of eggs and bacon drifted from the industrial-size kitchen as breakfast was readied for the patients.

With the immediate distraction of wounds and blood taken care of, Wynn’s curiosity about the previous night swung back at full force. “Allow me to escort you. I would call for a carriage or one of those new motorcars, but most of them have been commandeered to support the frontlines.”

Svetlana pulled her colorful shawl over her head. “That is not necessary. We can find our way on foot.”

“You may be able to find your way, but I’d rather not find you tottered off into a gutter come morning. Doctor’s orders.” That and he had no intention of allowing two injured women to wander down the road alone. Paris was far enough from the frontline, but that didn’t make the streets safe.

“If you insist.” Without waiting, Svetlana took Mrs. Varjensky’s arm and left the building, leaving Wynn to follow in their wake.

As he hurried to take the older woman's other arm, she winked up at him and hobbled around to the other side of Svetlana, leaving him to walk next to the princess in hiding. Seemed no matter the culture all grandmothers and *babushkas* maneuvered the same way. Not that he minded walking next to a beautiful woman. He just preferred one who spoke to him without frowning.

The sun peaked over the blue and gray slate roofs of buildings, dusting the world with brilliant orange light that reflected off the hundreds of windows lining the sandstone facades, rousing the sleeping inhabitants within from slumber. Paris was a city of life, but here in the quiet one could take a deep breath before the bustle seized it away. His favorite time of day.

"How long have you been in France?" he asked.

"Six months."

"Traveling in the middle of winter. That must have been difficult. I hear Russian winters are brutal."

"Yes." With each limping step her mouth pressed tighter and tighter. Wynn reached for her arm. "Lean against my arm. It'll take the pressure off your leg."

She pulled away. "I can manage alone."

She could manage her stubbornness sure enough. If the pain grew to be too much, he'd have to carry her. He could imagine the protests at that prospect.

"Did you travel alone?"

"No."

"With family?"

"Yes."

Like trying to crack a wall of ice with his bare hands. Wynn changed tactics as they bypassed Parc Monceau and with it the memories of last evening's chase through the foliage.

"My brother and I used to travel all the time together. Growing up in Scotland, it's easy to lose your way for a day or two. Of course, we

were never lost. We knew every tree and rock by heart on MacCallan land. Got into all sorts of trouble.” Sadness pricked at the bygone days of carefree youth. “That was back before the war.”

A cat scampered by, its ribs poking against its skin. Not one element of life had been spared the hunger of war. It stared at them a moment with ancient eyes, then with a flick of its mangy tail, disappeared down an alleyway.

Svetlana dared a glance at him. “You have been in France long?”

“Ever since the war broke out. I had just finished my second year at Edinburgh Hospital. My brother was the first to sign up, but I felt I was of better use remaining a civilian. Most of my days are spent here at hospital. No military red tape to bother with there. I’ve been swabbing the mud ever since.”

“Your brother is here?”

Wynn turned them off the boulevard and onto Rue Daru, into the neighborhood he was unfamiliar with. And for good reason. In the clear light of day he noted the signs over the doors were written in Cyrillic. Men in thick leather boots and long tunics smoked cigarettes in doorways as hunched old women in faded black scarfs ambled along with baskets tucked over their arms. Russians. A few blocks more and they’d be in front of the mystery church that Svetlana had conveniently found a back door to.

“Hugh’s commanding a battalion somewhere near Verdun. Haven’t seen him in over two years, but we promised to meet up right here the day peace is called.”

“A strange place to meet.”

Wynn thought of their family’s townhouse located in the fashionable 8th Arrondissement and all the times they had spent summer holiday there wandering the Jardin des Tuileries and listening to concerts at the Petit Palais. He and Hugh would always sneak off to search for treasure buried by Napoleon rather than listen to another woodwind quartet.

“You could say it has sentimental value to us.”

“Sentiments are not always practical.”

“True, but the world grows tedious and life hopeless without them.”

“You may keep your hope. I know better.” Her voice held a thousand lives of bitterness, too many for one so young.

At last the church rose into view among the gray and beige sandstone structures, the rising sun glancing off its onion domes in shots of orange and gold. Svetlana stopped cold.

“Where are you leading us?”

She couldn't outrun him now. “This is where you're going, isn't it?”



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798