

PART 1

“And out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Genesis 2:9 NKJV

CHAPTER 1

Northshire Village, Great Britain. January 1, 1915

The dark skies above Sussex County belied the fact that the New Year had come. No fireworks illuminated the darkness for fear that the German zeppelins would drop their own firepower on those who watched from the ground. Instead of joyfully proclaiming the hope of a new beginning, church bells tolled an incessant dirge for the dead.

None of this could stop Malcolm Steele from celebrating *his* good fortune, however. The affluent son of Sir Thomas Steele, head of the Bank of England, slid his free arm around the bare shoulders of the woman whose blonde head rested lightly on his chest. With the other, he caressed the walnut-trimmed Bakelite steering wheel of his ivory Rolls-Royce. He chuckled as his wandering gaze caught sight of the raised pores on the woman's skin. Defiant at all costs. That was Leila Macleod. *Leila Steele now.*

Despite the frigid temperature that permeated the vehicle's beveled glass windows, Leila's scarlet evening gown hung low on her shoulders and her black mink fur remained discarded on the supple leather seats behind them. She confronted the cold with the same feminine grace with which she rebelled against the stagnant rules of society. It was this spark of insubordination that made her utterly irresistible. With just one look, she made his heart throb. With one touch, she stole his mind.

Leila gave a contented sigh and sat up.

"What are you laughing at?" Her voice was a throaty whisper that electrified him.

"At you." The edges of Malcolm's narrow mouth curved up in a grin.

"Me?" Leila pulled away, pretending to pout. Her eyes wandered over the wild curls of his slick black hair and the

scruffy beginning of a goatee. His red tie dangled loosely around a white collared shirt whose top two buttons were undone. The jacket of his tuxedo lay next to her shawl, discarded in the back seat.

“So, you forget how much you love me only a few hours after you marry me?”

Malcolm’s grin broadened as the memory of their midnight wedding flashed through his mind. It had been done secretly at Leila’s request. No flower girls. No witnesses. Just a priest old enough to be Methuselah’s grandfather, himself and her. While the country soberly contemplated another year of the Great War—a conflict that had already claimed the lives of thousands of British soldiers—Malcolm and Leila had celebrated their nuptials in an inebriated frenzy of wine and lust.

“Not at *you*.” Malcolm brushed her face with the backs of his fingers. “At your utter contempt for rules.”

She threw a teasing smile at him. “But this pleases you?”

“Of course!” He let go of the wheel and pulled her close, covering her face with kisses.

Leila pushed him away, giggling. “Malcolm, you’re driving!”

Laughing, he grabbed the wheel and pulled the swerving vehicle back onto the road. “We’re so alike that, even though we only met a few weeks ago, it’s as if I’ve known you my entire life. We’re both nonconformists, yearning to break free from draconian rules.”

His smile faded. “That’s why I’ve asked Father to advance my inheritance. You and I will finally be rid of this cage and escape to a country that’s not obsessed with this war. Holland for instance. They’re neutral, right? We’ll live there and show everyone just how perfect we are for each other.”

Her thick lashes closed over her mesmerizing green eyes.

“Some would say that we couldn’t be more ill-suited for each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well... for one thing, I’m twenty-six and you’re twenty-five. I’m a few months older than you.”

He shrugged. “Not important.”

“For another,” she hesitated, “you don’t really know anything about me.”

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“I know that you’re irresistible. You’d have to be to stand out from the competition.”

She arched an eyebrow. “The competition? You mean that gaggle of women at the party you held while your father was away in London? You seriously think they were competition... for me?”

“Well, I have to admit, I forgot all about the others when you showed up.” Malcolm winked then expelled his breath in a sigh. “I’ve never seen a woman bold enough to come to a party in a devil-red dress that showed more than it covered and challenge me to a drinking match. That’s when I knew you were the one for me.”

“Hmm... was that before or after you lost?” Her laughter, bright and honest, warmed the air between them. “Eight shots of vodka and you passed out. I was still on my feet.”

“Yeah.” He slanted her a rueful grin. “I forgot everything that night. Everything but your name.” A comfortable silence fell between them, then he spoke again. “Look Leila, I know everything I need to know about you. I don’t care about the past, only the future that we’ll build together. Nothing else matters.”

Malcolm sobered, staring ahead at the dark path that curved upward before them. “It’s too bad my father came home earlier than I expected the night of the party.”

One look at Leila’s outfit and Thomas had taken him into his study and launched into a fiery diatribe about the evils of lust. He had punctuated his sermon by ordering Greyson to throw “the Jezebel” out. Leila had been so furious she didn’t speak to Malcolm for a full half-hour.

“Do you think your father will agree?” She too had become serious.

“To giving me my inheritance?”

“To our marriage. You said he threatened to disinherit you unless you stopped seeing me.” She pointed to the diamond ring that glistened on her finger. “Obviously, you didn’t listen.”

Malcolm’s mouth flattened. “He wouldn’t throw me out.” He rubbed his hand over the shadow of a beard that clung to his narrow chin. “I’m all the old man has left. He wouldn’t have the heart to take it all away from me now.”

The Rolls-Royce slid forward, gliding over the snow-spattered gravel road. While automobiles were becoming common in the metropolitan areas of Great Britain, Sussex was a rural county. The road they travelled was, in fact, better suited to a carriage than a motorized vehicle.

“Darling,” Leila moaned and placed a hand across her stomach. “Could you pull over for a moment? I think I might be sick.”

Concern flashed across Malcolm’s face and Leila averted her eyes. His naiveté was an endearing quality she could not resist.

“Of course.” Malcolm slowed the car down. “Just hang on a minute.”

Ahead, the tree-lined path yielded to a prominent hill that protruded out over the small village of Sussex and the vast, wooded acres of Northshire. The light of a brilliant moon flooded the valley. They crested the hill and Malcolm pulled the car to a stop. The instant the car was still, Leila opened the door, and rushed, groaning, to the side of the road.

She paused by a flat-topped rock and doubled over as though retching. With one hand on the rock for support, she slipped the other beneath her shirt and tugged a small, nondescript cylinder free from its place in the padded wire of her corset.

The fingertips of her right hand groped against a small ledge along the back of the rock, probing until they touched the edge of a wicker basket.

Finally!

She pulled the basket out and lifted the lid. A soft cooing reached her ears. Inside, a small homing pigeon, who trembled despite the warm fur that lined the carrier, cocked its head to one side.

“Leila are you alright?”

Malcom’s voice wafted over to her and Leila replied with another pretended groan as her hands worked feverishly.

She tugged an identical cylinder free from the small satchel beneath the pigeon’s feet and quickly replaced it with the one from her corset.

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Then, coughing while pretending to vomit one last time, she released the pigeon, groaning to cover the sound of flapping wings. She slipped the basket back into the narrow crack between the flattened rock and an adjoining boulder. Straightening, she kept her back to the automobile while shoving the tube she had retrieved underneath her clothes. Satisfied at last, she turned around, wiping her mouth with a handkerchief.

“Leila, what is it?” Malcolm rushed over and Leila felt her heart clench. One day she would tell him the truth. One day, he would understand. One day.

“I’m fine, darling, really.” She threw him a pretty smile.

He eyed her skeptically. “Do you think you’re...?” His voice trailed off and she found herself laughing at his unspoken question.

“Malcolm, we’ve only been married for one night!” She laid a hand lightly on his arm. “Children take time to show they’re on the way.”

“Oh. I see.” Malcolm chuckled and let out his breath in a *whoosh*. “Well, I’ve got just the thing for you.” He took her hand and led her back to the car.

“Oh?” She leaned against the sleek surface of the Rolls Royce. “And what is that?”

Smiling, he pulled a lever and she watched, slack-jawed, as the rear passenger seats pulled back to reveal a full picnic basket and a set of six decanters.

Malcolm opened the basket and pulled out a bottle of sparkling wine. “Pour it out and let’s have one last go before we face the old dragon!”

Leila shook her head and reached for her glass. This was why she loved him. His devil-may-care approach to life sent surges of fresh exhilaration through her veins. She unleashed his inner beast and he satisfied her raw hunger to challenge the unknown. *Perhaps we are not so ill-suited after all.*

He had draped her mink shawl over her shoulders while she poured the scarlet liquid, but now she shrugged it off, letting the chilly air ignite her passion.

Malcolm tossed back the drink, eyeing her carefully. She caught his gaze and mimicked him, gulping down the contents of her glass in one swallow. She refilled their glasses and this

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time he lifted his in a toast, then turned to gaze at the valley below them.

“May we always be free to stand in the night and drink until we forget our troubles!”

“Oh.” She purred as she leaned into his arms and traced her index finger slowly down the curve of his neck. “We’ll do much more than that, my love. Much... much more than that.”

CHAPTER 2

Northshire Estate, Great Britain. January 1, 1915

Sir Thomas Steele, Earl of Northshire, stood with his spine stiff, chest thrust forward, and hands clasped behind his back near an immense oblong window. On the other side of the drawing room, a crackling fire radiated heat from the confines of a marble hearth.

It was four o'clock in the morning of New Year's Day but Thomas, who directed the Bank of England, was still dressed in the same dark-gray suit and red necktie that he had worn to an emergency meeting with Prime Minister David Lloyd George in London earlier that evening.

This was not a time for sleep. Doubts riddled his mind like bullets, wounding him in a way that no one could perceive. Whereas most of Europe saw only the war that soaked the battlefields of Belgium and France with human blood, Thomas was aware of another battle that raged in the spiritual world. Millions had perished in a struggle for the land, but countless more stood to lose the unseen conflict between good and evil that raged over their souls. Tonight, both struggles had come to his home.

Thomas sighed as he massaged his temples. Some would call him a success. He was a venerated retired general and a friend of Robert Hughes, the head of the foreign section of the British Secret Intelligence Service. He led the nation's most powerful financial institution. The Bank of England funded a large portion of Great Britain's war expenses. After the war—assuming the country survived—he stood to gain quite a bit of profit. But everything he had achieved was ashes without the love of his son.

Malcolm. He turned and cast somber brown eyes around the expansive drawing room. "Where have I failed as a father?" Ceiling-high bookcases, filled with thousands of volumes, sprawled out on either side of the hearth. A gleaming revolver—

a relic from his participation in the Tirah Campaign of India twenty years earlier—caught his eye. *Was that it?* Perhaps it had been his periods of extended absence in service to his country that had destroyed his ability to connect with Malcolm.

He was a patriot. When serving as a senior officer, Thomas had gone without question wherever his king had sent him. It was only now, as he battled his dying relationship with his son, that he wondered if the price of his service had been too high.

His gaze shifted to the right. Above the fireplace hung a massive portrait of Malcolm's mother, Isabella. "I'm sorry, my love."

"Forgive me, your Lordship, but you must not continue to blame yourself for her death."

Thomas swiveled to face his butler, a giant of a man who had become more of a friend than a servant over the past two decades. Since his conversion, during what was now called the Welsh Revival, he had done his best to serve God. Greyson had also been among the converts. It was then that their bond had evolved from master and servant to a sort of fraternal camaraderie.

"Greyson." His eyes shifted from the butler's black swallowtail coat and spotless white shirt to the face of his dead wife. He steeled himself against the dull ache in his heart that never faded despite the incessant march of time. After Isabella's death, Thomas had been unable to deny Malcolm any of his varying wants.

He had given his son free reign while drowning his grief in his work at the Bank of England, hoping that material trifles would distract the boy from the emptiness caused by his mother's passing. It appeared that his indulgence had created yet another problem. He now had a reckless prodigal on his hands.

"The cancer was too far advanced, your Lordship." Greyson's resonant voice broke through his troubled thoughts.

"I should have found a way." Thomas pounded his fist against the palm of his left hand. "A new doctor. Another new medicine." He gripped the back of a leather-embossed armchair. "Think of it, man. We live in an age of science and still diseases can rip out our hearts at any time!"

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His butler arched an eyebrow. “We both know that science is not the answer.”

“I know.” Thomas exhaled slowly. “It is God who gives life and God who takes it when our purpose is complete. But it *hurts*, Greyson.”

His gaze shifted to the portrait of Malcolm. Slick black hair crested a narrow face and scruffy beard. He looked more like a playboy than the son of a renowned officer of the British Armed Forces. But that was what Malcolm had become—a selfish embarrassment who stood to inherit an immense fortune upon his father’s death.

“Isabella would have known how to keep him in line.” Thomas folded his arms across his chest.

“You believe the Lady Isabella could have stopped him from choosing this path?”

Thomas barked out a laugh as his eyes flitted to the butler. “Of course! I could always rely on her to get through to our son.”

“Then perhaps, Sir Thomas, that is why God has taken her away from you.” A faint smile touched Greyson’s lips. “So that you will rely only upon Him.” He dipped his head. “Sometimes a father must break his son’s heart, so he can prove just how much he cares.”

For a moment, Thomas couldn’t answer. A part of him rebelled at the thought that a loving father would take such extreme measures, but the soldier within him recognized the truth of Greyson’s words. Discipline. It was the difference between a murderer and a soldier, between a mob and an army. Realization flooded his mind. There was only one way to deal with the rebellion brewing in his own son’s heart.

Thomas narrowed his eyes. “Send Malcolm in the moment he returns.”

“He is already here, Your Lordship. He is waiting in the antechamber outside.” Greyson cleared his throat. “I felt it best to give you this telegram before he entered.” He withdrew a crisp envelope from the inner pocket of his white waistcoat.

“Thank you, Greyson.” Thomas opened the message. His eyes flew to the bottom of the page where he immediately recognized the scrawling signature of Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

His servant turned to leave but paused at the door. "You should know, your Lordship, that your son is not alone."

Thomas's face darkened as Greyson's implication became clear. He tossed the note onto the oval mahogany table before him. "So be it."

By defying his father and bringing his whore to their estate, Malcolm had declared war. And war was a game Thomas played only to win.

Steele squared his shoulders and spread his legs apart, his mouth settling into a grim line. The father was gone, replaced by the commanding officer who would achieve his objective, no matter the cost. "Send him in."

Malcolm's first thought upon entering the room was that his father had abandoned his retirement and returned to the army. There was no trace of the indulgent parent now. This man glared with eyes that seemed to rip through his body, leaving him feeling naked and vulnerable.

For the first time in his life, Malcolm felt fear in his father's presence. He licked his lips and sneaked a glance at Leila who stared at Thomas with widened eyes.

She had good reason to be nervous. Her last meeting with Sir Thomas Steele—the night of Malcolm's wild party—had been nothing short of a nightmare. Malcolm balled his sweaty palms into fists, ignoring the racing of his heart. He would not be intimidated again. Not now that she was his wife.

"When I told Greyson to admit you, your woman was not included." His father's voice had the warmth of a floor tile in the dead of winter.

"She has as much right to be here as I."

"This is a family discussion." Thomas thrust a finger in Leila's face. "*She* is not welcome in my home."

"It's okay." Leila patted his wrist and turned for the door. "I'll leave."

"No." Malcolm felt the back of his neck grow hot. He moved closer to his father, every muscle taut.

“This *woman* is now my wife!” His arm curled around her waist. “I love her, and you’ll just have to get over whatever problem you have with her. Father.”

He added the word as though it were an afterthought. For a moment he had indeed forgotten that this man, who now seemed ready to pound him into the floor, was his father.

Thomas’s face paled. “You... *married* her?”

“Malcolm, really, I think the two of you should discuss this without me.” Leila pulled away from her husband. “I’ll wait outside.”

She blew Thomas a kiss then waggled her fingers. “Good luck, Old Man.” Then, with a confident smile, she tossed her head and swaggered out of the room.



Leila strode quickly down the hall, her agile mind moving even faster than her long legs as she analyzed the situation that unfolded around her. While Malcolm battled with his father, she would put her time in the Steele mansion to good use.

The servants, except for the oversized gorilla Thomas had called Greyson, appeared to all be asleep. By insisting that he meet with Malcolm alone, the old Scrooge had unintentionally given her the perfect opportunity to ferret out information that Germany would find useful.

The words of her handler, Werner Jaäger, rolled through her mind.

Thomas Steele leads the Bank of England. He is a friend of both the Prime Minister and the head of British intelligence. Infiltrate his home. Discover what he knows. Do not fail me.

She glanced behind her, making sure that no one followed, then slipped into the aperture of a wide, dimly-lit corridor.

Thomas had demanded Malcolm meet him in the drawing room which meant that, if he followed popular trend, his private study would be on the same floor.

Leila paused abruptly, noting the plush beige carpet yielded to glossy hardwood floors. She slipped off her scarlet shoes and slowly made her way forward on stocking feet. Mahogany walls

towered around her in solemn silence, ornamented with the heads of robust stags and a few electric lamps.

“Where are you?” She squinted through the gloom. She had no idea how long the battle between Malcolm and Thomas would last, but the subtle voice of experience whispered that she had only a few moments to find what she sought and return to the hallway outside the drawing room.

She paused mid-stride as a trio of immense portraits that hung on the wall opposite a sweeping staircase came into view. Her eyes widened as she stared, transfixed by the images of the men who made up the Steele bloodline.

She moved closer. Brown hair fell loosely to the first man’s shoulders in the style of the French, framing an oval face. An inscription in the lower right corner caught her attention. *Jacques Steele né Durand.*

She recoiled as though the painting were about to grab her by the throat and strangle her. *Durand?*

Hurriedly she glanced at the succeeding portraits.

John Steele.

Thomas Steele.

Evidently, the founder of the family had changed his name from Durand to Steele. A shiver snaked down her spine.

Focus Leila. The thought struck her like a bullet. She had a mission to accomplish and couldn’t afford any more distractions. Malcolm was distraction enough.

Malcolm.

His portrait was not on the wall with his ancestors. *Why not?*

She ground her teeth in frustration. *Durand.* The name clanged around in her skull, a memory from her own past. She inhaled deeply and tore her eyes away from the painting. She had a job to do.



“You defy my orders, marry that woman, and bring her to my home?” Thomas had long ago cast aside any semblance of calm.

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“Your *orders*, Father?” Malcolm’s face darkened. “You’ve left the army, remember? I’m not one of those stupid soldiers who jump at your every command!”

“Malcolm,” Thomas breathed deeply, trying to regain control of his emotions. “Your dissolute and irresponsible conduct disgraces our family name.” He gestured to the window. “Men are dying out there. They’re falling like rats on the battlefield while you spend your nights chasing women and drinking yourself senseless. Where is your sense of shame?”

He began to pace, but his eyes never left his son’s face. “It is our tradition to place the heir’s portrait next to those of his ancestors. Three generations of Steeles are on that wall. But I will not give you that privilege. Is that what you want? Is it?”

Malcolm flinched but thrust his chin forward. “It’s a new age, Old Man. People are recognizing that the world’s miserable enough as it is without a bunch of stuffy rules to dictate how we live. ‘Let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.’ Isn’t that somewhere in the Good Book?” He rubbed his hands together. “You talk about men dying. Well, I’m going to live life to the fullest.”

Thomas grabbed the note that lay discarded on a table and waved it in Malcolm’s face. “I have just received a letter from the Prime Minister. He writes that it is shameful for my son to remain at Northshire while millions of Britain’s sons are volunteering to fight for hearth and home. Prove yourself a man, Malcolm, and put on a uniform.”

He slammed the paper against his son’s chest. “Give yourself a greater purpose than the pursuit of your own pleasure.”

Malcolm scanned the letter and then shoved it in his pocket.

“Not for me.” He sniffed and inspected his fingernails. “I’d rather stay home and make love to Leila than sleep in a cold, muddy trench any day.”

“Think of what you’re doing, man!” Thomas resisted the urge to throttle his son. “Is that the kind of girl God would want you to marry? A half-naked drunk?” He gestured toward Isabella’s portrait. “What would your mother say about her?”

“God?” Malcolm’s jaw tightened. “Since when did He ever take an interest in my life?”

Thomas stiffened. “What do you mean?”

His son stalked closer, his face twisted with fury. “Where was God when cancer ate Mother from the inside out?” He grabbed the lapel of his father’s jacket. Flecks of spittle flew from his mouth as he shouted, “Where was God, when we begged Him to spare her life? Did He listen? Did He?”

Releasing his father’s collar, Malcolm shoved him back. “Is God listening now? If He is, I want Him to know that I spit upon His idea of love.”

“No.” Thomas staggered backward. “You don’t know what you’re saying!”

Malcolm turned his back to his father and took two steps in the opposite direction. “If God didn’t listen to me then, why should I listen to Him now?”

Thomas’s anger melted before the harsh reality of his son’s sorrow. “Malcolm, please, don’t do this. Don’t let your anger destroy your faith.” He laid his hand on his son’s shoulder. “You’re worth millions of pounds, boy. Surely you can see that this woman’s motives—”

“The woman has a name, Father.” Malcolm shrugged off Thomas’s arm. “Leila. Her name is *Leila*.”

He sneered as he faced his father. “You think you know so much but, when Mother died, you never knew what to say whenever I was around. Why? I’ll tell you why. We had nothing in common.” He pointed to his mother’s portrait. “You always counted on her to raise me while you ran away from home like the coward you are.”

“I-I was protecting you.” Thomas’s voice faltered. “I was fulfilling my duty to my country... to my family.”

“What a hero!” Malcolm’s laughter mocked him. “You pitiful old fool.”

Thomas clenched his jaw. “What do you know about life? What gives you, a selfish playboy, the right to question my sacrifice?” His palm chopped downward. “My orders were clear. Break off your relationship with that *woman* or be disinherited.”

Malcolm’s chin jutted forward. “You wouldn’t dare. I’m your only child. I’m *the* heir of Northshire. You won’t go through with your threat. Who would inherit the estate when you finally die? That pathetic psychopath, Greyson? I can see it now—words of

wisdom painted on every corner of Northshire!” His hands flew to his hips. “I’m too old to play your childish games, Father.”

Thomas was quiet for a moment and, when he spoke, his voice was hollow. “I am not playing, Malcolm.”

Silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire, held the room in its grip.

“W-what are you saying?” Malcolm’s hands fell to his sides. “You mean you’re actually...”

“You will take the clothes you are wearing and leave *my* home at once. In the morning, I will draw up the necessary documents legally stripping you of your rights to inherit Northshire and our other assets.”

Malcolm’s face drained of blood. “N-no! Father you can’t be serious! I mean that’s—”

“You have lost the right to call me ‘Father.’” Beads of sweat spread across Thomas’s brow. “Until you prove to me that you are worthy to inherit this estate, all your rights and privileges are completely revoked.”

Malcolm stared at him. “That’s insane.”

Thomas did not reply.

“I-I’ll have no money.” Malcolm wrung his hands together. “I’d have to work.”

He fell to his knees, clasped hands upraised. “Father, I’m sorry. I’ve been foolish. I’ll do better. I swear it.”

Thomas gazed down at his son. “Get up.” He jerked him to his feet. “You chose to disregard my word and follow your own path. Now, see where your stubbornness will lead you.”

Malcolm balled his hands into fists, his eyes flashing. “So, you think that by a few strokes of a pen, you can deny that you ever had a son?”

“No.” Thomas’s voice was calm. Detached. Unfeeling. “The name Steele is still yours, but you will no longer be recognized as *my* son. You will have no access to the family credit. You will be expelled from our estates. You will have no legal right to act on my behalf.”

Malcolm’s mouth flopped open.

“The road you are travelling will lead only to ignominy. I will not destroy all that my ancestors built by handing it over to a

reckless, pleasure-mad prodigal.” He pointed to the door. “Now, take your wife and get out of my house.”

Malcolm reeled as though Thomas had planted his fist into his gut. “*Your* house?” He leapt to one side, grabbed an ornate Grecian urn from off a nearby pillar and smashed it to the ground.

“You stupid, stupid man! I’ll hate you till I die.” He spun on his heel and stormed toward the door. “You hear me? I hate you!”

Hot tears spilled over his eyelids, but he dashed them away. Jerking the door to the drawing room open, Malcolm was about to leave when Thomas’s voice, now choked with emotion, stopped him.

“If you ever change your ways, then come back home.”

Malcolm paused for only an instant then, without a backward glance, slammed the door behind him.

The vibration made a few of the books fall from their place on the shelves. Thomas stared at the broken pieces of the vase for several moments, then slumped to one knee. He knew he had made the right choice, but nothing could have prepared him for the heartache that ripped through his chest with the efficiency of a jagged sword.

“God!” He clutched his silver hair between his fingers. How he longed to rush after Malcolm and pull him back into his arms! His heart ached to tell his son that everything was forgotten. *Sometimes a father must break his son’s heart, so he can show him in the end just how much he cares.*

“Go after him, Father.” He clutched a shard of the shattered vase. “Pick up the broken pieces of his life... and bring him home.”



Leila had just passed the paintings when a wooden door, inlaid with swirling patterns of glass, caught her eye. She knelt and peered inside. Light from a glowing fireplace revealed a walnut-stained desk and towering bookshelf that lay adjacent to the opposite wall. *This is it. His office.* Glancing behind her again, she pressed down on the door’s handle.

The door swung open on well-greased hinges and she slipped into the office. Her heart threatened to burst out of her chest but she breathed deeply, willing herself to be calm. It was not as though this was her first mission. *Easy Leila. You were trained for this.*

She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling another twinge of remorse. This might not be her first mission, but it *was* the first time she had fallen in love. The ring on her finger suddenly felt heavy. Or was that her conscience?

Malcolm thought their relationship was perfect but, what he called perfection, she knew was a dream—an illusion birthed by an endearing naiveté on his part. Possibly, her insight stemmed from the fact that she knew men better than most men knew themselves.

She bit her lip as her mind flipped through the pages of her life. Her previous marriage to an abusive monster in Indonesia had ended when her husband had almost killed her in a drunken rage. A cold feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. *You'll never hurt me again, you swine.*

Battered and defenseless, Leila had fled home to Germany aching to find a sense of purpose. She had found that purpose when she had been recruited by Department 3B, her country's foreign espionage unit, a year before the start of the war.

Leila had been sent to Antwerp for intense training under the notorious Elsbeth Schragmüller. A woman with a tumultuous past herself, Elsbeth had become her mentor, helping her slowly piece together the fragments of her shattered life while teaching her skills that would make her formidable in the field. Over time, Leila had developed a callous mentality, believing that men were to be used rather than loved. Elsbeth had taught her to overcome her fears—at the point of a gun if need be—and to wield her mind like a weapon.

She had arrived in England bolstered by a burgeoning sense of purpose and confident in her ability to successfully manipulate the feelings of any man.

Then she had met Malcolm.

Leila slowed to a standstill as her mind shifted to their fatal first encounter. She had come to Northshire determined to worm her way into his heart but their first meeting at Malcolm's party

had reawakened a deep yearning for something more, something for which every woman longed but few ever found.

Despite the overbearing arch of his father's despotic rule, Malcolm had a real thirst for life that had reignited her own passions. *Carpe diem!* was a motto he lived as well as said, an attitude that pulled her heart close to his.

A frown flickered across her face. This was all wrong. She was a spy. Love was a weapon, a tool designed to bring down an enemy, nothing more. But the feelings that clouded her mind and unhinged her senses whispered that love *was* more... much more.

The shadows of the Great War hung over the world, steeping humanity in a vortex of depression. She had never so keenly understood that each moment could be her last. In a world of uncertainty, why hold back? One way or another this mission would ultimately come to an end and then what would she have? Another mission? More empty lies?

Malcolm awakened a sense of colorful liberation that contrasted sharply with the grim shades of gray in which her life had been painted up to this moment. He was a swirling current of fresh air that left her breathless. He knew nothing about her previous marriage and she saw no need to damage the bliss that ignorance offered.

At least he won't be hurt by the information I send back to Germany. Great Britain did not mandate military service and the thought of Malcolm volunteering to fight was laughable.

Opening her eyes, Leila waited until they adjusted to the gloom then padded toward the desk. Three rows of small drawers lined its back frame, but she ignored them. Experience had taught her that classified information was more likely to be found in a bottom drawer than a top one. Her eyes slid to a lower right drawer that protruded slightly from underneath the desk's writing surface.

She tugged on it. *Locked.*

A faint smirk touched her lips as she slipped a pin from her hair. Within moments, the drawer slid open and she pulled out a stack of papers then shifted closer to the firelight.

The first was a series of handwritten notes documenting past meetings with the Prime Minister. Her eyes scanned over

Thomas's precise, angular handwriting, skimming over notes about mundane banking arrangements. Leila flipped the paper over and continued. She had almost reached the bottom of the page when a single line of text screamed out at her.

Our contact in Berlin will monitor Haber's work and sabotage it as needed.

Leila sucked in a breath. Fritz Haber was a well-known chemist, the architect of a project that could alter the outcome of the war and the future of Europe.

She squinted, peering closer at the document. There was no date. At a quick glance, it appeared that the ink was not recent which meant that Thomas could have written the note some time ago. If the British had compromised a member of Haber's team, Werner needed to know. She would have to get another message to him tonight. She was about to flip to the document below when the faint *thud* of a slamming door reached her ears.

"Leila!"

Malcolm. Her pulse spiked. She spun back to the desk then threw the documents into the drawer. She waited for the telltale *click* as the lock engaged then dashed toward the door.

"Leila!"

She stepped outside, mind whirling, and softly pulled the door shut behind her. Malcolm's feet clicked on the hardwood floor. *He's at the edge of the corridor. I've got four seconds.*

Leila slipped her shoes back on, held her breath to still her racing heart, then plastered on a sedate smile. "Oh, there you are darling!" She minced toward him, eyes wide. "So, did you conquer the old dragon?"

He caught sight of her and paused, standing before the three paintings of his ancestors. His face was worn, creased by lines that hadn't been there only a few minutes earlier. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. "Malcolm?" Her voice quavered. "Malcolm, what is it?" His eyes had never been so dull. Whatever had happened in that room seemed to have sucked the life out of his blood.

"We... we have to leave, Leila. Now."

Her blood ran cold. "He's done it, hasn't he? He's disinherited you."

JP ROBINSON

Malcolm nodded, averting his eyes. “He’s kicked me out of my home.”

“It’s my fault.” Leila touched his chest as guilt washed over her. “Malcolm, I’m to blame. Were it not for me...”

He stepped closer and cupped her cheek with his hand.

“No, Leila.” His blue eyes roamed over her face. “I made my choice. I love you.”

Tears stung the back of her eyelids and she looked away. *What have I done?* If he only knew the truth...

“You don’t understand.”

“Shh...” He pressed her to him and she listened to the rhythm of his heart. She had been sent to use him, not fall in love with him. But she did love him. And he loved her enough to walk away from his father and all that he knew—for her.

Her cheeks burned as she pulled away and glanced at the portraits.

He followed her gaze. “I brought you through the side entrance because I didn’t want you to see that I wasn’t... on the wall.”

“Now you’ll never be there.”

“I know.” His head drooped.

She took his hand. “Leave me Malcolm.” Jaeger would see this as a betrayal but she loved Malcolm too much to see him throw everything away. “Only your father knows about our marriage. Tell him you’re sorry and you’ve made a mistake. Tell him—”

He crushed her lips against his own. For a long moment, he just held her, ignoring the tears that slipped down her cheeks. At length, he pulled away. “That’s a no, in case you were wondering.” A faint smile touched his lips as he fingered a few strands of her blonde hair.

She hesitated, her heart splitting with guilt and concern. “I have a flat in London,” she said. “We’ll go there and sort out what we’ll do next.”

He nodded, and together, they slowly descended the grand staircase that spiraled down to the main landing. She squeezed his hand, her heart aching for him. Each step must seem to be a thousand miles in Malcolm’s eyes.

IN THE SHADOW OF YOUR WINGS

“How many times have I taken this place for granted?” He sniffed, glancing around at the massive columns that supported the upper levels. “Now, when I’m being stripped of it all, it feels like I’m being expelled from paradise.”

Footsteps echoed on the tiled flooring and the imposing butler that had met them at the door stepped from between two pillars.

“Sir Thomas sent this to help you on your journey.” He extended a small wad of bills.

Malcolm stiffened. “We don’t need his charity.”

“Yes, Malcolm. We do.” Leila stepped around him and took the money.

“I trust this ‘psycopath’ may offer one more piece of advice.” The butler’s face was stern.

Malcolm flushed. “I didn’t know you were snooping around, Greyson.”

The older man ignored his barbed words. “The path to redemption is long and often difficult to perceive, but those who have eyes to see will find it.”

Then, stepping back into the shadows, Greyson opened the door. A blast of wind swept into the massive hall, raising the pores on Leila’s bare arms and neck.

“Come, Leila.” Malcolm pulled her close and she shivered as she clung to his crumpled shirt. Then, the rejected couple staggered out of Northshire’s light and into the dark embrace of the cold winter night.

