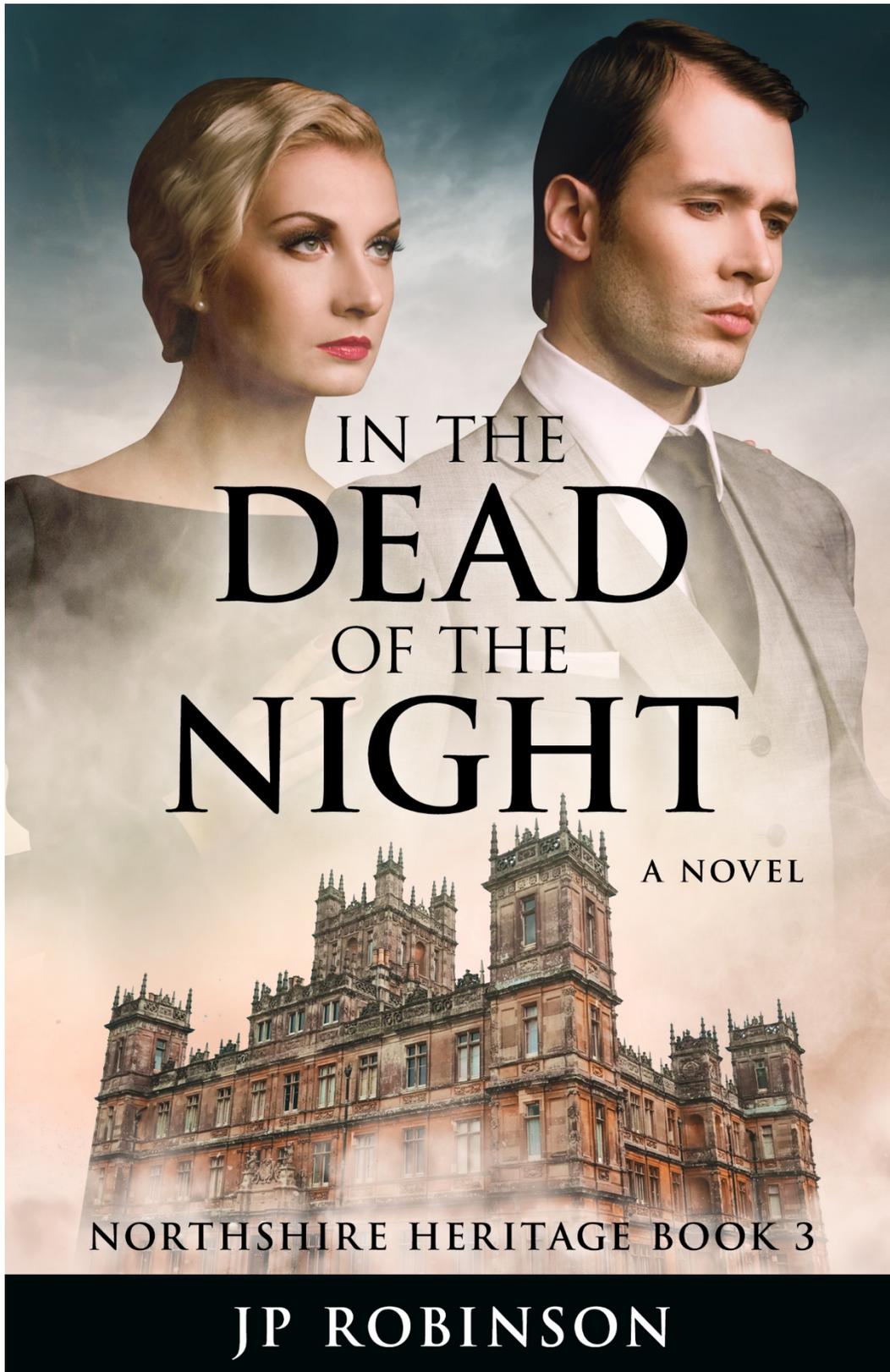


JP ROBINSON



IN THE
DEAD
OF THE
NIGHT

A NOVEL

NORTHSHIRE HERITAGE BOOK 3

JP ROBINSON

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In the Shadow of Your Wings (Northshire Heritage 1)

“Robinson’s eclectic array of characters and high-stakes scenarios make for an immersive beginning to a series that will appeal to fans of war dramas.”

Publishers Weekly

In the Midst of the Flames (Northshire Heritage 2)

“dramatic and intricately plotted”

“Rich with political intrigue and subtle nods to the Bible, this novel’s strength comes in the precise attention to historic detail and evocative imagery.”

“This should be a hit with fans of inspirational historicals.”

Publishers Weekly

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Prologue

January 1918. Whitehall, London

Sir Robert Hughes stood in the rear corner of his office before a wall-length oval window. He counted as an army of raindrops slammed against the panes, spilling out their watery blood as though trying in vain to break through this translucent “front.”

His eyes moved beyond the streaks carved by the raindrops in the grime, shifting to focus on the crenelated spires and rectangular rooftops that made up the administrative center of British government.

Whitehall.

It was just a road, really. A simple road that trudged through a host of brick buildings filled with snub-nosed politicians and draconian bureaucrats. All of whom impeded progress like an army of Goliaths.

Hughes shoved his hands in his pockets as he continued to count the raindrops that spattered against this one window into his clandestine world of secrets and lies.

Politicians.

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The thought turned the lingering taste of his afternoon tea sour in his mouth. He wanted to spit.

“Let it go, Hughes.” The voice of Britain’s prime minister, David Lloyd George, interrupted his count. “You’ve won your share of battles. Let Thomas Steele keep what little he has.” David snorted as he shifted in his seat, a brown leather armchair. “Think of it, man. In the year since we released Steele’s daughter-in-law, you’ve helped put down a rebellion in Ireland. Your men obtained vital information that helped us end the butchery of Passchendaele. You’ve redeemed yourself. Now let the past be.”

Hughes turned around slowly, massaging the spot in his right leg just above the wooden prosthesis. “Nine hundred seventy-six.”

“I beg your pardon?” The prime minister blinked.

“Nine hundred seventy-six raindrops died on my window in the last three minutes.”

David stared at him, jaw slack, for a full thirty seconds before speaking. “You know, Hughes, there are moments when I truly question your sanity.” He sat up straight. “W-why on *earth* are you counting

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raindrops? Aren't there more important things to count? Such as the rising number of our dead in this ghastly war?"

A momentary silence filled the space between the two men.

"The raindrops. They're our soldiers." Hughes gave a tight smile as he stumped to his desk. "A thousand raindrops ended their miserable lives in less than three minutes. Like as not, just as many of our lads have died fighting for law and order around the world while you sit here and insist that a man who has betrayed his king and country should go free."

David tilted his head to one side, eying him like a hawk might eye a potential rival. But Hughes had no interest in political games. Not anymore. One thought alone burned in his mind.

"What is it about Thomas that galls you? What is it, really?"

"Thomas is a transgressor." Hughes's jaw tightened into an inflexible line. "He broke the law. He must be punished."

"And . . . unless he is punished by law, you will not be satisfied?"

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“How can I be satisfied?” Hughes laced his fingers together behind his back and began to pace, an awkward thumping rhythm, teeth gritted. David was a politician—a man whose personal standard of right and wrong was determined by the will of his voters. He could never understand Hughes’s mind. “Every transgression, each tiny infraction of the law, must receive just retribution. It is the only way. The right way.”

“I suppose the idea of mercy is a foreign concept?”

“Mercy?” Bile rose in the back of Hughes’s throat. “There is no mercy. There is only the law. The law, Prime Minister!” He released a ragged breath. “Did you know that when my wife and I married, I took her last name?”

“Really?” David arched a silver eyebrow. “How very . . . progressive of you.”

“Hm!” Hughes snorted. “It was part of our marriage contract. Her father insisted so his name wouldn’t be lost when his only daughter died.” He stared out into middle-space, lost for a moment in the fog of memory. “I wanted her inheritance. After the marriage I could have

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worked to change the situation. But, you see, every word of the original document had to be kept or my entire marriage would become a sordid affair.”

“Every . . . word.” His gaze shifted back to the prime minister. “That is why Thomas must face our justice. Not our mercy. In violating one part of the law, he is guilty of breaking the whole.”

“And what of Thomas’s son Malcolm? What part of the law has he broken?”

“None.” Hughes spat out the word. “At least none of which I am aware. I have sent a message to his commander, Colonel Stewart, however. I want Malcolm Steele to answer some questions for me in London. If he is collaborating with the enemy, I *will* find out.”

“I see.” David leaned back in his seat, resting his forearms over his slight paunch. “But back to Thomas. You know he is beyond your reach. He’s untouchable in Switzerland.”

For the first time all day, the hint of a smile creased the corners of Hughes’s lips. Yes, political figures stood in his way like an army of Goliaths. But that story had a happy ending.

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“I am expecting a guest.” He pulled out his bronze pocket watch, glanced briefly at the insignia of the British navy on its polished surface, and flipped it open. “He should be here . . . now.”

A knock sounded on the door. Hughes turned to it, thrusting the watch back into his pocket. “Enter!”

The prime minister stood as a thin, pale man wearing a plaid jacket and maroon pants skulked into the room. A small, black briefcase hung loosely from the fingers of his left hand. With his right, he smoothed out his short-cropped moustache.

Hughes narrowed his eyes. The man was small and unimpressive like the giant-killer of biblical times. And like him, this man also carried a weapon that, if used correctly, would bring Thomas’s world crashing to the dust.

“You are Sir Robert Hughes, head of British Foreign Intelligence?”

“Yes.” Hughes leaned forward, peering at his guest through his monocle. Satisfied at length, Hughes nodded. The man before him matched the description and photograph he had received from his agents abroad.

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“I am Arthur Hoffman of Switzerland.” A leer twisted Hoffman’s pointed, sallow face into a rictus. “And I have come to help you destroy Thomas Steele.”

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Part 1

November 1918

Chapter 1

Geneva, Switzerland

The evening sky above Geneva swore the apocalypse had come. Feather-like clouds curled upward, painted various shades of red by the dying sunlight. To Thomas Steele, it seemed the heavens burned.

As he moved away from the building that housed the administrative department of his watchmaking facility, Thomas caught sight of dark thunderheads on the distant horizon. They scudded northwest toward Britain, pushed along by a stiff breeze.

With a sigh, Thomas tugged the lapels of his brown suit jacket, picked up his briefcase, and stepped into the flow of traffic on Rue Lombard.

Pedestrians and motorized vehicles shared the streets of Geneva, sometimes with devastating consequences. The city's population had more than doubled as refugees from both sides of the war sought shelter and medical attention in neutral territory. A kaleidoscope of languages buzzed in conversation around him. French. German. Even Italian.

But not English.

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Thomas fought a wave of nostalgia as the thought slipped to the forefront of his mind. While business had often led to extended stays in Switzerland over the past thirty years, there had always been the assurance of a return to the quiet pastures of Sussex County, England.

But now that assurance was gone.

Thomas's footsteps slowed as his mind rolled back through the series of unprecedented events that had unraveled his world. Last summer, Robert Hughes had arrested his daughter-in-law Leila and had wrongfully concluded that Thomas was in league with the Germans. The evidence against Leila had been overwhelming, and she had been condemned to execution.

In a desperate bid to save both Leila and his unborn grandchild, Thomas had used his influence in Switzerland's political spheres to pressure the British government into releasing Leila. London had ultimately relented, but Thomas had been branded a traitor. If he ever set foot in England again, he was a dead man.

Not that I regret it.

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The joy of seeing his son Malcolm reunited with Leila when he had joined them in Switzerland last winter and the warmth that flooded Thomas's heart each time he held his grandson in his arms more than compensated for the grief of exile.

“But Northshire is our home. It will *always* be our home,” Thomas said in a forceful whisper. He set his mouth in a grim line as he strode forward, wending his way through the crowds.

His every hope now lay in his son Malcolm. If only—

Someone jolted him from behind. Thomas staggered forward, losing his hold on his briefcase. His hands flew out to break his fall. He cried out as his knees slammed against the uneven cobblestones. Stabs of pain splintered through his shins and radiated up through his thighs.

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” a woman said in clear, unaccented German. Laying a gentle hand on his shoulder, she tried to help him up. “My thoughts were so far away, I didn't see—”

A gunshot echoed off the ancient buildings surrounding the square.

A puff of wind brushed past his head.

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The woman's apology died in a gurgled shriek. Thomas whipped his head around. Clawing helplessly at her throat, she slumped across his back, pushing him down toward the unfeeling stones.

Rolling his shoulders, Thomas shrugged off her deadweight. He pushed himself up to a semi-crouch, ignoring the fire in his knees. Pulse hammering in his throat, he took in a barrage of details at a glance.

The green cross near the door of a pharmacy to his left.

The woman in a nurse's uniform—white knee-length dress, gray striped shirt, a red cross emblazoned on the white patch across her chest—sprawled across its concrete steps.

Her life blood spurting out of a neat hole in her throat. Passersby screaming. Running in all directions.

Thomas snatched up his discarded briefcase and darted a few steps from the body. He took shelter behind the low-hanging branch of one of several plane trees that pushed up out of the cobblestones. Sucking in deep breaths, he ran his well-trained eyes over the crowd, looking for something—a furtive attempt to conceal a weapon, someone trying to quietly flee the scene—*anything*.

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But he saw nothing.

“God have mercy on that poor woman’s soul.” Thomas glanced back at the body, remorse swelling within his chest. There could be no doubt that *he* was the target. If he hadn’t stumbled . . .

“You!” Thomas grabbed the arm of a young man who darted past him. “Go get the police.”

The man—an overgrown boy, really—blinked at him from behind a pair of wire-rim glasses. He looked from Thomas to the body and back again with wide eyes. “M-me?”

“I saw some not long ago.” Thomas jerked a thumb toward the opposite end of Rue Lombard. “They’re probably still there.” Thomas spun him around and shoved him forward. “Go. Now!”

“Right. Right.” The lanky teen licked his lips, then scurried away.

The square was largely empty now. A few bold pedestrians remained, staring at the body on the steps with morbid fascination. A clear path lay from the far end of the square to the victim’s corpse as though an invisible hand had drawn an unseen line on top the stones, dividing the horrified spectators into two groups.

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Thomas curled his fingers into a tight fist, teeth clenched. The shock of the attack had faded, melting into a familiar desire to find and destroy his enemy. He was a soldier. This was not the first time someone had tried to kill him. Nor was it likely to be the last.

Brushing a few strands of silver hair out of his eyes, Thomas leaned forward. *Where is he?* Thomas glared at a row of brick apartments that rose above the square like unfeeling collaborators. Any one of the dozens of curtained windows opposite him could have been the killer's vantage point.

Thomas grunted. Crime was not unheard of in Geneva. Many of the war's refugees were desperate people. With the increase in population had come an increase in robberies. But this was a different animal altogether.

His mind skimmed through the details, picking up facts as though they were pieces of some invisible puzzle. Thomas laid the irrelevant aside, sifting through the barrage of information until only two main points stood out in his mind.

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One: The shooter had uncommon skill. Rue Lombard wasn't a wide street, but a moving target in a crowd was difficult at best. Only someone very skilled—or very desperate—would attempt it.

Two: Thomas was a man of wealth, power, and politics. The kind of man that attracted enemies like a dog attracted fleas. A skilled assassin would not have come cheaply. But two governments—Britain and Germany—could potentially benefit from his death. He had outmaneuvered both of them, an act that neither party was likely to forgive.

So which one stands the most to gain from my death?

“Get out of the way. Move!” Rough voices from the far end of the square cut through the crowd. Bystanders quickly stepped aside as five Swiss *polizei* rushed to the scene. A few moments later, a tan ambulance screeched to a stop behind them.

Thomas waited until their milling bodies temporarily obscured the view from the apartments from which the shot had been fired. Then he quietly slipped into the crowd, his mind still churning.

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Could this killer have been hired by someone in Switzerland? It was possible. His manipulation of Arthur Hoffman had certainly ruffled some high-ranking feathers. But Switzerland stood to lose much if he died.

A sick feeling akin to nausea rose in his gut as he allowed the most obvious thought to surface. Had the killer been commissioned by London? Had the British empire decided assassination was the only way to chastise its wayward son?

Thomas quickened his pace, turning off Rue Lombard into a small, quiet park, then made his way toward a bench that lay between two plane trees. Women chatted amiably nearby. Children played at a small fountain in the park's center. Apparently, none of them knew that murder had been committed just a short distance away.

Thomas looked upward once more. The orange in the sky had yielded to a morbid red as though the heavens reflected the blood that had been shed on earth.

“Quite beautiful, isn't it?”

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Thomas stiffened as Arthur Hoffmann's unwelcome face came into view.

Hoffmann had been the pawn that Thomas had sacrificed to secure Leila's release. Publicly named a disgrace, Arthur had been expelled from the Swiss government. The man had disappeared for the better part of a year, and Thomas had hoped that the river of life would push them in separate directions.

Apparently, he was to be disappointed.

"What do you want, Arthur?" Thomas straightened, every sense alert. Had Hoffman come to finish the botched job on Rue Lombard? Thomas doubted the spindly erstwhile-politician had the gumption to use a gun, but one could never be too careful.

"Oh, not much." Loosening the buttons of his black suit jacket, Arthur sat on the unoccupied part of the bench. "Just to talk. After all, that is what we politicians do best." His gaze slid to Thomas's face. "But you'd know all about that, now, wouldn't you?"

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“If you’re implying that we’re alike, you are sorely mistaken. I am a businessman, not a politician. For you, time is a way to buy support. For me time is—”

“Running out.” Arthur tapped his fingertips together as if he were praying and looked up again at the gory sky. “Such a sight! I could almost believe today is Judgment Day.”

“I thought you don’t believe in God.”

“Oh . . . but I do.” Arthur’s lips twitched. “But your God is an invisible being with intangible power whereas I . . .” He leaned forward, eyes glittering. “I *am* a god.”

“You are sick, Arthur. You need help.” Thomas shook his head. “I have neither the time nor the inclination to debate with you.”

“There’s no debate.” Arthur sniggered—a thin, wheezing cross between a cough and a laugh. “Doesn’t your God make things happen through words?”

Thomas hesitated. “Yes.”

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“So do I. With words, I bend situations to my will.” Arthur paused. “I may have left politics, but believe me, Thomas, my influence is still very real.”

“And this has something to do with me?”

“Oh yes.” Arthur’s voice dropped to a silken whisper. “But to continue, doesn’t your God punish the wicked?” He spoke louder now, his voice rising with each syllable. “Doesn’t He bring down the proud and destroy every liar?” He didn’t wait for Thomas to reply. “Yes! He does.”

A sense of foreboding gripped Thomas, building on the nausea. “As I said before, my time is valuable. If you have something to say, spit it out and be done.” He stood up, gripping his briefcase. “If there is nothing more, I bid you good day.”

“Thomas, you are about to see that I have the same power.” Arthur rose, jerking a newspaper from the pocket of his black pants. “When you *do* find the time, take a look at the article on page 21. You’ll find it most enlightening.” His thin lips angled into a vicious smile.

Thomas said nothing.

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Hoffmann tossed the paper onto the bench, then rebuttoned his jacket. “I leave you with the words of Saint John the Divine. ‘For the day of His wrath is come and who shall be able to stand?’” Hoffmann sniggered again. “Judgment Day is here, Thomas. And now it is *you* who will fall.”

Chapter 2

Château des Aigles, Switzerland

Streaks of auburn gold streamed through patches in the clouds that floated across the evening sky. Filtering through the glass dome of the castle study, they came to rest upon the upturned face of Leila’s son. Propped upon a supporting cushion, Michael squealed as he tried to catch the solitary rays in his chubby fists.

“Just look at the young master!” Jenny stopped dusting a bookshelf at the far end of the study, her narrow face wreathed in a smile as she placed one hand on her hip. “Just a few months old and reachin’ out as if he owned the castle and everythin’ in it already!”

Leila squatted next to her son, dangling a small wooden eagle that Thomas had carved a few inches above his face. “That’s because he’s a man who knows what he wants. Isn’t that right, Michael my angel?”

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With a loud chirp, Michael lurched forward and gripped the eagle.

“You see?” Leila let him have it and straightened, smoothing out the skirt of her simple ivory dress. “Once Michael makes up his mind, he doesn’t stop until he gets what he’s after.”

“Just like his father.” Jenny came closer, the white feather duster tucked beneath her arm.

Leila let out a deep breath but didn’t respond.

“Oh, forgive me, Lady Steele. I . . . I wasn’t thinkin’. I shouldn’t have—”

“No.” Leila stopped her maid’s apology with an upturned palm. “It’s all right, Jenny. Really.”

Jenny gave a sympathetic cluck, shaking her head. “All *will* be well, you’ll see!”

“Yes, it will. I know that.” Lifting her head a fraction of an inch, Leila forced a smile, pushing past the fear that clawed at her insides. Much like the shadows that darkened the skin beneath her emerald-green eyes, fear was a constant companion.

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Malcolm was doing his duty at the battlefield. Defending his country. His family. His honor. But the cold reality that every second of every day could end her husband's life kept Leila praying long into the lonely nights.

“It does seem that this ridiculous war just goes on and on.” Jenny puffed out her cheeks. “What are they out to prove exactly? By the time they decide who owns the stupid patch of earth, they'll all be dead!” Dropping the duster, she cupped both hands over her mouth. “E-except Lord Malcolm, milady.”

Leila slanted her a wry smile, this one a little more genuine. “Well, there's been no word from Mr. Mara. And that's a measure of comfort.”

Joseph Mara, Thomas's erstwhile trusted legal advisor at the Bank of England, had quicker access to the British casualty lists. If the worst should happen, he would get word to them in Switzerland.

“That's right, milady. You know what they say. No news is the best kind in times like these.”

“You're right, Jenny. But it's harder on us. Most women get constant letters from their husbands while they're at war.”

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“But you can’t write to Lord Malcolm because that curmudgeon in Whitehall might accuse him of bein’ a traitor?” Jenny brushed back into place a strand of chestnut hair that had somehow escaped the prim bun behind her head.

“Exactly. Hughes and British intelligence monitor all mail to and from the Front. If there’s any hint of communication between myself, Thomas, and Malcolm, he could use it to fabricate charges that Malcolm is working with the enemy.” A hard edge crept into Leila’s voice. “With . . . me.”

For a moment, Jenny’s face screwed into a tight ball. “Oh, of all the hairbrained, foolhardy notions! Let the old cripple think what he likes. You’ve seen worse than this. Why, only this time last year you were locked up in the Tower, expectin’ death at any minute.”

“I remember,” Leila said. She’d spent weeks in the Tower, waiting on Hughes to carry out his threat of execution. It was in the cold, damp cell that Leila had learned she harbored new life within her womb.

“But was Hughes able to do it? Of course not.” Jenny, who had become more of a sister than a servant, grabbed Leila’s hand. “Then

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there was the time when those Irish savages came screamin' up the lane, bent on murdering us all back home at Northshire. Did it happen?"

"No."

"Right. So, since things have worked out this far, let's just believe that nothin' bad will happen now." She jerked her pointed chin in Michael's direction. "At least you're here. With the young master. Just as a mother should be."

"A mother." Leila winced. She turned back to her son, who had now rolled on his side and was gumming the soft edges of his blue-and-white blanket. "A mother who's robbed her son of any chance he has for a future."

"Milady! What are you sayin'?"

"You see, Jenny, I never expected this." Leila's voice hitched. "I never thought I would become . . . a mother."

"Well." Jenny's angular cheeks reddened. "'Tis only natural. Every wife should—"

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“Natural?” Leila whirled around, a fist clutched to her heaving chest. “No, Jenny. It’s not natural. Not when you’ve been sterilized.”

“What?” Jenny recoiled, jaw slack.

A coldness rose up in Leila’s gut, wadding itself into a tight iron ball. For a long moment, Jenny, her surroundings, even the glittering lake on the other side of the window faded out of sight, suppressed by a tidal wave of dark memories. Once again, she stood in the narrow corridors of Antwerp’s espionage training center, the *Kriegsnachrichtenstelle*.

Once again, she faced a nondescript door outside a medical room in the basement. Faced down the fear that made her wipe her moist palms on her skirt. Today would be the final operation. The first two sessions had been brutal. The recovery had been prolonged. But *this* was what she wanted to do. What she *needed* to do if she wanted to be the best. And she would do anything to be the best.

“They took me into a room with no windows.” Leila’s voice was quiet. Small. “Dark. It was so dark.” She closed her eyes. “I lay down on a steel table. Just like I had done before.”

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The surgeon had insisted she remove all her clothes from the waist down. The cold had been numbing, permeating her bare skin. “Only one bright light shone down from the ceiling.”

That light revealed the gleam of lust in the surgeon’s eyes. Only the stoic presence of her mentor, Elsbeth Schneider, kept Leila from leaping off the table, grabbing the vicious needle filled with formaldehyde from the surgeon’s hairy paw, and ramming it down his fleshy throat.

But Elsbeth had promised she would remain at her side throughout the entire operation. Once Elsbeth gave her word, Leila knew she would be safe.

“He used ether as his anesthetic.” Leila’s eyes flickered open. “When I woke up, it was done. I was no longer a woman.”

According to the surgeon, the series of injections would produce internal scar tissue that would prevent conception. If the pain was an indication of progress, the treatment was a success indeed.

Jenny’s face was the color of bone. “You mean they...
But... *why?*”

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“I was a spy, Jenny. Did you know that?”

No. Of course Jenny didn't know. Only Malcolm and Thomas knew the full truth of her past. But Leila was beyond caring now.

Jenny's hand flew to her throat. She gawked at Leila, mouth opening and closing wordlessly. “So it was true? What Sir Robert Hughes said when he arrested you last year? It was all true?”

“Yes,” Leila said slowly. “I was a German spy. The sterilization process was still new, but my superior wanted it done.” She paused, glancing at the floor. “You see . . . we often used our bodies to get the information we needed. A procedure like this would prevent unwanted consequences.”

Silence spread between the two women. After a moment, Leila looked up. “I can't make excuses for what I did, Jenny. It was wrong. Dead wrong. But God gave me a new beginning, and Michael is my proof that everything is made new.”

Bending down, Leila scooped her son into a protective embrace and kissed the fuzz on top of his head. His tufts of hair were a mixture

of her own mane of gold and Malcolm's shaggy brown, but his eyes were the same shade of green as her own.

He's perfect, Malcolm. I want you to see him. To hold him. To love him as I love him.

"I-I can see that, milady," Jenny said at last.

"This child is a miracle, Jenny. A miracle in every sense of the word. If Malcolm dies—"

"Please! You mustn't say that."

"I have to consider all possibilities. If my husband dies, Michael will ultimately stand to inherit Northshire Estate." Leila paused again, steeling herself against the dread spawned by the thought of Malcolm's death. But this was her way. To distance herself from the emotion of the moment and impassively consider the facts.

"Forgive me for askin', milady, but can that happen? With us in exile and all?" Jenny bobbed out a quick curtsy. "Beggin' your pardon."

"Don't apologize for speaking your mind, Jenny." As a girl who had grown up in a primal German village, Leila had never accepted the

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strict hierarchy of British aristocracy. Truth was truth no matter who said it. “Besides, you’re right.”

“Thank you.”

Leila shifted Michael into the crook of her arm. “Elsbeth said a woman could never be both a mother and a spy. Not if she wanted to be the best.” She let out a ragged breath. “Because I was determined to be the best, I almost lost my chance to bring life into this world.”

“Well, that Elsbeth sounds like a right cheery old dame to me!” Jenny leaned forward, her hands angling like the crooked arms of a teapot on her thin waist. “The sheer cheek of it! I mean, what gives that old crone the right to say what you can and cannot be?”

“I know what I am, Jenny. I am the reason we’re in exile. Were it not for my past, Michael would have a future in England.” She swallowed. “God alone knows if we’ll ever be able to go home.”

“Don’t think like that, Lady Steele. You really mustn’t.”

“But it’s the truth!” Stepping toward an immense bay window that jutted over the blue waters of Lake Thun, Leila stared out into the distance, the gentle sound of Michael’s coos kissing her ears.

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For the past year, Leila, Thomas, and two trusted servants from Britain—Jenny and Greyson—had been forced to remain as exiles in Thomas’s castle in Switzerland, known as the *Château des Aigles*, or Castle of the Eagles. Thomas had acquired the castle over a decade earlier as a second property, hoping that the pristine alpine climate would help his beloved wife recover her health. He was to be bitterly disappointed.

Leila could endure the exile without complaint. It truly was no hardship. But the real struggle lay in knowing that Northshire Estate was lost to their son. *Because of me.*

Leila let out a deep sigh. “Did I make a mistake, Jenny? Am I wrong to love Malcolm as I do?” Life was complicated. God had forgiven her past, but it seemed that those made in His image would not. One mistake had spawned a litany of consequences that she couldn’t outrun no matter how hard she tried.

“’Tis never wrong to love.” Jenny stood next to her. “And if Lord Malcolm were here, he’d not abide such words.”

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“But Lord Malcolm is *not* here.” Leila’s voice took on a sharp edge. “I owe it to him and to our son to set things right.”

Leila rubbed her cheek against the soft top of her son’s head, savoring the fragrant mixture of life, hope, and new beginnings. She would not—*could* not—allow him to pay for her sins. Which had led her to this point.

Leila had not been idle during the past year in exile. She had analyzed the situation from multiple angles, poring over the news from the various warring nations. In that time, one thing had become clear. The Great War had shattered her dreams for a future. Only the Great War could rebuild them.

While Leila wanted peace more than anything, the truth was that it offered her a chance to clear her name. If the war ended and London still considered both herself and Thomas to be traitors, the entire Steele family would bear the stain of treason for generations. The possibility of peace was real. Which meant one thing.

“Time is running out,” Leila said.

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“But there’s nothing you can do, milady. You can’t fight the whole British government.”

Leila stiffened. “For my son, I would fight the whole world.”

The first step was to buy credit with the British government. To prove that she was working with them by providing credible information London couldn’t afford to ignore. Her mind rolled back to the fateful night when her former handler, Werner Jaäger, had issued her orders.

Leila had been chosen to spearhead a high-profile assassination plot of the Allied leaders should it become clear that the Germans would lose the war. She had passed this information on to the British spymaster Robert Hughes, but he had refused to accept her intelligence as credible.

Leila’s brow furrowed. It was likely that the assassination plot—or some version of it—was still alive. It was a contingency plan in which the *Oberste Heeresleitung*, or German High Command, had invested heavily. Now, the German position was more tenuous than ever. The Americans had entered the war, and the newspapers claimed

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widespread riots rocked Germany from within. But the German army remained strong. Under the direction of an unscrupulous military leader such as General Hindenburg, the possibility of an unsuspected attack on the Allied world was very real indeed.

“Forgive me for askin’, milady, but would Lord Malcolm approve of your tryin’ to right the wrongs done to your family all alone?” The tips of Jenny’s ears turned pink. “He is your husband, after all.”

The ghost of a smile touched the corners of Leila’s mouth. It was forward of the maid, but Jenny only asked out of concern. Leila knew from personal experience that not all men were as understanding as Malcolm.

“My husband and I work as a team, Jenny,” she said. “Each of us supports the other—regardless of the situation. Restoring the family honor *is* Malcolm’s duty. But it is also mine. In his absence, I must carry on. But don’t worry. I know my husband will approve of my decision.”

Her mind shifted back to her original thoughts. It was time. The Allied powers were on the brink of victory—or so they thought. She had to unearth fresh intelligence that would benefit the Allied cause before

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the war ended. If she provided London with useful information, her success might earn her a small measure of trust. Trust that she could use to pave the road for her son's future.

But Leila would need the backing of the British government. And only one man could give her that—the British prime minister, David Lloyd George. *If* she could somehow convince him that she was a valuable asset to the empire, he might override Hughes's authority.

Lips pursed, Leila turned back to the window. Direct communication with the prime minister was impossible now. She needed an ally. Someone close to him. *Who can I trust?*

Her mind shifted to Thomas's old friend, Lord Curzon. It had been Curzon who had brought her to Switzerland after her release from the Tower. It was Curzon who had managed to carry out Thomas's wishes while keeping his own reputation intact. Of all the men in the prime minister's war council, Curzon was the most likely to consider the plausibility of her innocence. He was also the most likely to present her proposal to the prime minister in a favorable light.

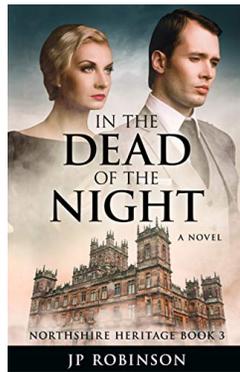
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“Well, tears serve no purpose unless they’re the seeds of change.” Jenny’s voice snapped her back to the moment. “Tis what my mum always said.”

“And she was right,” Leila said. *Change*. She would ask to spy for Britain in areas under German control. Success could alter everything. “Against all odds, I became a mother. Against all odds, I’ll ensure my son has a future.”

“What will you do?” Jenny took a step back as though she feared the next words that would leave her mistress’s lips.

Lifting her chin, Leila met her gaze. “Change everything.”



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