

Gone
by
Nightfall

DEE GARRETSON



Swoon READS

SWOON READS • NEW YORK

A SWOON READS BOOK

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*To my nieces and nephews, Heidi, Matt, Mark, and Jessie
You've been an important part of my life.*

Chapter One

FEBRUARY 1917, PETROGRAD, RUSSIA

I PULLED THE collar of my coat close around my face as I sneaked between the sleighs and automobiles parked in front of the grand duke's house, hoping I could get beyond the light of the braziers before our coachman spotted me. If Yermak saw me, he'd want to know why I was leaving the ball early and without my stepfather.

No one inside would miss me. The partygoers were too busy sharing the latest rumors swirling around the czar and the czarina. And even though I liked dancing, the choice of partners was limited to friends of my stepfather, or staff officers who had wrangled headquarters jobs for themselves to keep away from the fighting. For some reason those men felt the need to constantly remind one of their great wisdom and wit.

Sewing up a saber cut is not like embroidering a handkerchief, my dear Miss Mason! You should stay with your nursing instead of trying to become a doctor, though you should really attend to soldiers instead of working in that absurd hospital for women. I must say, you American girls find the strangest ways to occupy your time!

The captain who had made this pronouncement about my future was so pleased with himself that I wished I'd had a suture needle handy. I would have sewn the ends of his overly long mustache to his

overly bushy eyebrows before he knew what was happening. I hoped by the time I returned, he'd have found another victim to bore.

The sounds of the orchestra faded as I walked away toward the square, picking up my pace as I moved into the darkened streets. The snow had tapered off, so I was at least able to see where to put my next step. I loved Petrograd during the day, when the sun shone on the beautiful buildings painted in a dazzling array of pastels, but at night the city changed. Then the silent buildings felt more like giant tombs, and I could never forget the story visitors were told: that the city was built on bones, the skeletons of a hundred thousand serfs who were forced to erect a city on a swamp, all to please the ego of a czar.

I breathed easier when I saw Znamenskaya Square ahead of me. Since it was nearly two a.m., the square was mostly empty, though there were a few groups huddled around small fires, refugees who had poured into the city from the war zones with nowhere to go and no money to procure a bed or even a warm spot on a floor.

When I reached the entrance to the hospital, I didn't see the dark shape standing outside the circle of light the streetlamp cast until I heard a soft voice that made me jump.

"Charlotte, I'm here," Raisa said as she moved into the light.

"You were holding so still I didn't see you." I put my hand on my chest. "I think my heart skipped a beat or two."

She laughed, a sound I hadn't heard from her for a long time. "Then my practice has paid off. Tell your brothers I've been working at staying still so I can be a better vanishing lady in your magic show. When we're able to practice again, I want to be ready."

"I'll tell them," I said, though it was a bit of a struggle for me to imagine a future that included amusing ourselves with our little family circus again.

She loosened the shawl that was draped around her head, shaking off the snow. "I want you to teach me the trick of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, too. I promised my sister I would show her that when I see her again."

"We'll have to recruit some new rabbits," I said. "Mr. Hatter and Miss Fluff have grown too big to fit in a hat. They spend all day lazing around their pen being spoiled now."

Raisa smiled, but then a shiver overtook her, and she wrapped her arms around herself. I noticed that her gloves had holes in them. I knew I wouldn't be able to get her to take mine, but next time I'd bring her another pair, some that had been my mother's. She wouldn't refuse those.

"Come into the hospital and get warm," I urged. "We can talk a little. It's been weeks." I'd missed her so much, and I didn't know when we'd be able to meet again.

"I wish I could, but I don't want anyone inside to see me."

"There is only a night nurse on duty. We can trust her. You'll be safe, I promise."

"You don't know that." She lowered her voice. "People are so desperate, they'll try to sell any information they have to the Okhrana for a few kopeks."

Even the mention of the Okhrana, the secret police everyone feared, sent a shiver down my back. I knew the nurses were on my side, but I understood why Raisa didn't trust people she didn't know. Her father had been betrayed by one of his own employees and sent to prison for speaking against the czar inside his own newspaper office.

Raisa pulled a chamois bag out of her pocket and gave it to me, the bottles inside clinking together. "It's only four. I was afraid to take more."

“Four is more than I’d hoped for! We ran out of the last of our laudanum yesterday, and we don’t have anything else that helps with the patients’ pain. Are you sure your uncle won’t notice?”

“He won’t. I changed the inventory numbers, and he’s usually so drunk he can’t remember what he has.” She shuddered. “It’s amazing he still has any patients left at all. I wouldn’t let him near me if I was sick. The fumes from his breath would be enough to finish me off.”

I hated that she had to live with that man. I knew she wasn’t even allowed to practice her music anymore, because her uncle said the noise of the piano irritated him. “I wish you would come stay with us,” I said. “You could find another job, or if you can’t, the offer for you to be the twins’ governess still stands. The two of them are too much for their poor nursemaid.”

Even in the faint glow of the streetlights, I could see her face take on the fierce look she so often wore. “You know I don’t take charity,” she said. “And I would be a terrible governess. Besides, I have to stay in good graces with my uncle so he’ll keep sending my mother and my sister money. He says he’s sure they are wasting what he sends them, though I know from my mother’s letters he’s only giving them a pittance. I can’t give them anything at all, so I can’t make him angry.”

If I believed in curses, I would have put a particularly potent one on the man. Just when I thought he couldn’t get any worse, he found a way. “Have you heard any word about your father?” I asked.

“The guard who takes the bundles of food I bring him said he is all right, though his hands are swollen with rheumatism.” She brushed at her face and I knew she was trying to get rid of a tear. Raisa hated crying. According to her, it served no purpose, so she didn’t allow it. I pretended not to notice, because I knew she wouldn’t want me to. Better to talk of something else.

“Where is your uncle getting the laudanum?” I asked. “It’s dangerous for you to keep taking it. Maybe I can go directly to his source.”

“He’s got a friend at one of the embassies who has them brought into the country in the diplomatic bags. I don’t know which embassy.”

An embassy contact didn’t do me any good. Even if Raisa could find out who it was, I doubted they’d admit to their black-market work unless I could offer far more money than I had to get in on it.

“I need to get back if I’m going to get any sleep tonight.” Raisa reached into her pocket and pulled out a small book. “I brought this for you to give to Miles. It has some poems he might like.”

I tried not to show my surprise at the gift. I had thought Raisa had gotten over her infatuation with my brother months ago. Raisa was so sure of everything that she couldn’t comprehend Miles wouldn’t return her regard. She didn’t seem to realize he barely noticed her, and I didn’t want to hurt her by pointing that out.

“How is he?” she asked. “He looked fine when I saw him, but I know that doesn’t mean much.”

“When did you see him?” He hadn’t mentioned it to me.

“I . . . I ran into him on Nevsky.”

“Oh,” I said. That was an odd place for Miles to frequent. Nevsky Prospekt was Petrograd’s main shopping street, and I couldn’t imagine Miles actually shopping. He expected most things to appear before him as if by actual magic. “He’s been better this winter than last, at least.”

“I’m glad.” She looked around before she spoke again, even though we were all alone. “When revolution comes and my father is let out, Miles can come work for the newspaper. He’s such a good writer, and I’m sure his health will improve when he can do something he likes.”

Raisa sounded so sure about revolution, but I didn’t know what

to believe. It felt like we were in limbo, where just one act could tip us one way or the other. If she and I had had more time, I would have asked her what rumors she'd heard about the political situation. Even stuck at her uncle's, she seemed to hear far more than I ever did.

"Thank you again for the medicine," I said, taking off one glove to get the bundle of rubles out of it.

As I handed the money to her, a voice called, "You there. What are you doing out here?"

I turned around, trying to block the view of whoever it was so Raisa could put the money away. At first the man's black uniform blended into the night so that his white face was like a specter hovering toward us. As he got closer to us, I realized he was a policeman, one of the regular force, not the secret one.

My heart sped up. I wished there were more people around, even though I doubted anyone would be brave enough to intervene if he decided he wanted to arrest us.

He came too close, towering over me. I forced myself to stand still, though the smell of him made me want to gag. He stank of bad teeth and pickled fish.

"What are you girls doing out here this late?" I knew he was trying to figure out where we ranked in the hierarchy of Petrograd society. If he noticed Raisa's threadbare coat, he might very well haul us in. A certain class of not-too-poor people often found themselves in holding cells, bargaining to be let out, under the threat that they'd be charged as nihilists agitating against the czar if they couldn't pay a small bribe. The police knew those people wouldn't go to anyone higher up to complain, so the officers could pocket the money themselves.

I didn't want him to notice the bag, either. The laudanum wasn't illegal, but if he saw the bottles, it would only lead to more questions.

The police were always on the lookout for any signs of black-market activities.

I needed a distraction to hide the bag. It would have been a good time to pull a rabbit out of my dress, but since I didn't have a bunny handy, I did the only thing I could think of.

I took a step back and then acted as if I'd lost my footing on the slippery snow, dropping the book and flailing my arms. The book fell down by my feet and I screeched as loudly as I could, pretending I was in incredible distress at having dropped it. The sound of the bottles knocking against one another was so faint compared to my other noises that even I couldn't hear it as I reached down to pick the book up, stuffing the bag in the top of one of my boots at the same time. The boots were the traditional Russian felt ones that were big enough for a dozen bottles.

I straightened up and brushed the snow off the book. "I don't think it's damaged," I said, hugging it to my chest. "But how clumsy of me."

"You didn't answer my question," the man said, his tone a bit more menacing. "Who are you?"

I stuck my nose in the air and tried to sound snobbish. "I'm Charlotte Mason, General Cherkassky's stepdaughter. My mother founded this hospital, and my friend and I are stopping in to check on a patient."

The man contemplated that as if weighing whether or not to believe me. "English?" he asked.

"No, American."

"Your Russian is very good for an American." I heard the suspicion in his voice.

"I've lived here a long time."

"I've heard that name . . ." His voice trailed off.

“Of course you have. General Cherkassky is a war hero,” Raisa said.

“No.” He stared at me. “Something in a report about a redheaded girl named Mason.”

My breath stopped. It was extremely unlikely there were any other redheaded girls named Mason in Petrograd. I couldn't be on a police report. The only people who knew about my various black-market arrangements would never tell. He had to be bluffing, to try to scare me into paying him a bribe to forget he'd seen me. I clenched my teeth together, determined not to let him see my fear.

“You say this is a hospital?” The policeman looked up at the building. “It doesn't have a sign on it. It looks like a house to me.”

“It's a small hospital,” I said. “There's a plaque by the door. It was a house, but my mother turned it into a hospital.” I decided I had to take some action to get rid of him. The longer he talked to us, the more likely we were to say the wrong thing.

“Good night,” I said. “We need to get inside.” I put my arm in Raisa's and pulled her up the steps, my shoulders tensing as I waited to hear if the policeman would call for us to stop.

He didn't, and when I pushed open the door, I felt the tension ease. I didn't look back to see what he was doing, and once I shut the door, I leaned against it in relief.

“I'll just tell the night nurse I'm here so she knows it's not a new patient,” I said to Raisa, “and then we can go out the back door, but now that we're in, you can at least stay for a minute. The fire will be lit in the sitting room, and it will be warmer in there.”

She nodded, so I took the bottles to the night nurse and gave them to her to log in. The nurses were used to me coming and going at all hours bringing various supplies, and we were in such desperate need that they never asked questions.

When I went into the sitting room, I got a look at Raisa in a stronger light and was shocked at how thin she'd gotten. Her cheeks seemed almost caved in, her neck too fragile to hold up her head.

"You can't save all your food for your father," I scolded. "You have to eat too! He wouldn't want you to starve yourself."

"I know. Don't lecture, please. Every time I take a bite, I think of how hungry he must be, and that spoils the food for me." She sighed and leaned her head back against the chair. "Two years ago, I never imagined how much I'd think about bread. Now I think about it every day, how to get it and how to hide it." Her fingers moved up and down on the arm of the chair as if she were playing the piano. "Back then if I thought about the future it was to imagine I'd be getting ready to perform my first public concert, and you would be in medical school, already on your way to making great discoveries."

I didn't really want to talk about the past. "We were silly school-girls back then. We should have known that plans don't always work out, especially when war changes everything."

"I think about those days," she said in a dreamy sort of voice, one I'd never heard from her before. "About how I didn't have anything to worry about except practicing enough so my teacher wouldn't get angry at me. And I think about how much I loved going to your house after school. Your mother was always so kind to me, asking me questions as if every detail of my life was so important to her."

Raisa closed her eyes as her fingers moved up and down again, like she was playing heavy chords faster and faster. Then in one quick movement she was back on her feet and back to herself. "Enough of all that. I want to talk about you."

"Me? Why? There's nothing to talk about."

She came over and sat down next to me. "Yes, there is. You shouldn't be doing this, putting yourself at risk to get medicine for

the hospital. I know the hospital was important to your mother, but you need to think about you. Even though I don't want you to go, you have to get away from Russia. Pavel is dead, and you staying here won't bring him back. Go to America and visit your grandmother. She can't be as bad as you say she is. Or travel. Your stepfather would give you the money." She grabbed my hand, and when she spoke again, her voice was almost frantic. "Other people can manage the hospital and take care of your little sisters. Your mother would want you to go. She was always saying don't let the past hold you back."

I didn't understand why she was so upset. "Raisa, don't fret about me. You have enough to worry about."

She bit her lip, and I saw that her eyes were full of unshed tears. "I do worry about you. You don't have to have your life ruined because of the war. I'm afraid it's going to drag on and on, and everything is just going to get worse and worse."

I wanted to cover my ears and pretend I hadn't heard her. She of all people should have understood I'd never leave my family. "No, the hospital is important to me too, and I'm sticking to my plan." I wanted to remind her it was the plan she had encouraged me to make, back when we thought writing down our future would make it become a reality. "My mother's death isn't going to stop me from going to medical school. And the war isn't going to stop me either. Besides, I barely remember the United States. This is my home."

"You wouldn't have to go away forever. When do you have time to study with all you do? The entrance exam is brutal. And missing the last year of school is going to make it that much harder for you."

I should have known she would keep pressing me. Raisa was relentless when she got an idea in her head. I tried one more time. "I do study on my own at night when I get back from the hospital." I didn't say that most nights I only managed a few paragraphs in my

Greek or Latin textbook before I fell asleep. “And as soon as I manage to find a governess for the twins, I’ll have more time to study.”

I looked over at the clock on the table. “I have to get back. It’s getting late,” I said as I pulled my hand out of hers and stood up. This hadn’t been the kind of talk I’d hoped we would have.

“You sound angry,” Raisa said. “Don’t be, please.”

“I’m not angry. It’s . . . it’s just . . .”

“It’s just you don’t like to be told what you should do.” She jumped up and hugged me. “I know you. I’ll stop, but think about what I said. And give everyone my love.”

We went out the back door, both of us acting as if we’d see each other soon. Raisa darted away, and I turned back to the grand duke’s house, trying to concentrate on the task at hand. I had to get back into the party without anyone noticing I’d been gone.

Chapter Two

I DECIDED THAT if anyone saw me coming back in to the ball, I could say I'd felt a little faint and needed some air. I hoped no one would question that, even though the temperature outside was well below zero, the kind of air that took your breath away rather than gave it back to you.

The two footmen by the front door were polite enough to act as if they didn't notice I'd walked in shivering with cold and carrying a book I hadn't had when I left. I went into the little sitting room off the hall that had been set aside as the women's cloakroom and left my coat, my boots, and the book there and put my dance slippers back on. I'd be too noticeable if I wandered the party looking for my stepfather all bundled up.

Back out in the hall, the scent of the orchids was so strong it made my head ache. The grand duchess had gone overboard with the flowers, as if filling the house with a jungle of them could make the partygoers forget the bitter cold and the war raging not so far away. There were so many, she had to have ordered several heated railroad cars to bring bushels of them into the city from the southern greenhouses, taking up space that should have been used for food supplies.

I was about to go back to the ballroom when I heard the voice of

the obnoxious captain I'd been forced to listen to earlier, so I darted behind a pillar wrapped in a garland of orchids. I listened as his voice moved away from me and toward the door, hopefully on his way out.

A little voice came from above me, startling me so much I bumped into the pillar, crushing several orchids and releasing yet more fragrance.

"Charlotte, why are you hiding?"

I looked up to see the grand duke's youngest granddaughter, Anna Andreevna, wearing her nightdress and peering through the railings of the staircase.

"Are you playing a game?" the girl asked. "Can I play too?"

I put my finger to my lips. "I am playing a game, but it's hard to hide in this dress. I'm waiting for a man to leave the party."

"Why?" She was five, the same age as my little sisters, so I should have known she'd want a reason.

"I don't like him very much."

Anna stood up. "You don't have a very good hiding place," she said in a loud whisper. "I always hide under a bed. Do you want me to show you a good spot upstairs?"

I was actually tempted. A nice quiet spot under a bed would mean I could sleep for a few hours undisturbed before I had to meet Ivan coming in from the country with food supplies for the hospital. Probably not the best idea to take a nap, though. "No, but thank you anyway. Next time I bring the twins over, you can show me."

I peeked around the pillar to see the captain going out the door.

"That's not the man who was looking for you before," Anna said.

"I don't think there is anyone else who would be looking for me."

"There was," she insisted. "The man asked the footmen and said your name and described you. They said they hadn't seen you. He had a mean face. I think you should hide from him, too."

Bless the footmen. I didn't know why they hadn't given me away, but I was thankful they hadn't. I had no idea why a different man would have been looking for me, and I couldn't really think of anyone I'd danced with who had a face Anna would call mean. And none of the men had been that interested in me besides the captain, who would have talked to a pillar if it had been wearing a dress. Even if I had wanted a suitor, which I didn't, I'd be unlikely to attract one. My red hair, freckles, and sturdy frame did not measure up to any standard of beauty in Russian society. And besides that, my mother's reputation preceded me.

Everyone assumed I would follow in the footsteps of my mother: an American actress labeled a gold digger for bewitching an elderly Russian count into marriage and adding her three unruly American children into the bargain. The mothers of marriageable sons were particularly wary of me after Pavel showed an interest, and when the war took him, they saw me as a continuing threat to the others. I couldn't exactly shout at them that I didn't want their sons, that I had other plans, which didn't involve marriage. Pavel had been a little like a dream out of nowhere, and I had no desire for anything like that to happen again, at least not for years and years.

Anna forgot to whisper. "Is the party almost over? Are there any chocolates left? The chocolate mice looked very good. Mama said I could have some if there were any left, but I'm afraid they'll all be gone." Her mouth turned down. "The musicians are allowed to eat after the guests leave, and they always eat everything. I promised I'd bring Nadia some if I could."

"Who is Nadia?" I asked. I thought it was probably the name of a doll and Anna Andreevna wanted the chocolate mice for herself. It was a scheme my sisters would try.

The girl twirled one of her braids. "Nadia is the new helper in the

nursery. She's very nice. She doesn't pull my hair when she brushes it. She's never had chocolate mice."

The taste of a chocolate mouse from one of Petrograd's best chocolatiers was something everyone should experience. "We'll have to make sure she gets one," I told Anna. "I'll go look and bring a plate of them if there are any left." If there was enough, I could have one too. A bit of chocolate might tamp down the ache in my head. After that, I could go in search of my stepfather and try to get him away from the card table.

"Hurry!" Anna clutched the railing. "I don't hear the music anymore. The orchestra will be there any minute!"

The supper room was empty when I went in, but I knew that as soon as the musicians had finished packing up their instruments, they'd be here. Grabbing a plate, I scanned the tables. There had been no skimping on the choices. Even though the party was nearly over, platters full of smoked salmon, eel, and smelts interspersed with bowls of caviar still filled the tables. If I hadn't been aware of the severe food shortages crippling the city, I'd never have guessed it from the display of abundance.

I realized what had bothered me about the room when I'd been in it earlier in the evening. The artful displays of white roses and ferns cascading down the walls behind the tables were supposed to give the illusion of a series of waterfalls, but they more closely resembled the shrouds we used at the hospital to cover the dead. The fishy smells from the food mixed with the heavy scent of the roses and made my stomach do a little twist. I hurried to fill the plate so I could leave.

No chocolate mice remained on the dessert table, but there were plenty of bonbons. I selected a variety of flavors, piling the plate high. Even without adorable little eyes and ears and tails, the bonbons would taste just as good as the mice.

I was about to go back to Anna when I spotted one lone chocolate mouse that had fallen off a tray. It was missing a tail, but I thought Nadia wouldn't mind. I put it on the very top of the pile.

I heard the clicking of boots behind me. Someone else had entered the room, and the clicking meant someone in uniform, which meant a man.

Baron Eristov, one of the czar's closest military advisers and some sort of cousin to my stepfather, came up to the table and stood right next to me. I hadn't expected to see him at a party, not with the war going so badly. He should have been at the front. We'd lost so many men; every last soldier was needed there. The baron and I had never actually spoken beyond a long-ago introduction, so I assumed I could just give the man a polite nod as I left the room.

I nearly dropped the plate when he spoke. "There you are, Miss Mason. I've been looking for you. I was hoping for a chance to have a private talk with you."

His expression was grim, not the look you'd see on the face of someone who wanted a social chat. Some found the baron handsome, but he'd always repulsed me. Everything about his face was as if someone had drawn in his features with thin lines, except for his mouth. His lips were too big and too pale, like slugs that had been plucked from the ground. I closed my eyes for a second, willing another image into my head before the thought of slugs made my stomach twist again.

When I opened my eyes, he leaned in close and motioned to my plate. "I know Count Cherkassky's gambling debts are building up and his money is being wasted at that ridiculous hospital, but I didn't know he was putting his household on such lean rations that you must fill up at parties."

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks. I wanted to snap at his rudeness,

but I suspected he was bringing up my stepfather's debts to make me react. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. I couldn't keep quiet about his slur on the hospital, though. "Women need medical care just as much as men, even with a war on," I said.

He made a snorting sound and then took hold of my elbow. "Shall we sit? I believe you'll want to hear what I have to say."

I was too curious to say no, so I let him guide me to one of the small tables set about the room. As soon as I sat down and put the plate on the table, he began to speak. "I'll get right to the point. Your stepfather doesn't need the aggravation of three nearly grown stepchildren, especially not ones such as yourselves and at such a time. You should leave Russia, you and your brothers."

Not ones such as yourselves. The contempt in those words was like an actual slap to my face.

I clasped my hands together so I wouldn't make throttling motions with my fingers. "I don't think you are the one to determine what my stepfather needs or doesn't need."

"And you are?" The snorting sound came again. "Not from what I've seen of your actions. You and your brothers are bringing down the reputation of the Cherkassky family by associating with the wrong sort of people."

"Which people?" I suspected I already knew the answer.

"The Tamm family and their disreputable theater." He paused as if he expected me to protest. When I said nothing, he continued. "I suppose it all seems rather daring, especially for a young girl, to attend their parties and meet the radicals who associate with them, but you need to stay away. All the talk of revolution will come to nothing, and in the meantime your connection with them is drawing too much attention."

"I've met no radicals at the Tamms'." Not exactly, anyway. I didn't

add I had heard the same talk that was everywhere, the endless gossip about the precarious state of the monarchy. We all wanted change. As much as I loved Russia, there were some parts that were terrible. We wanted more freedoms for women, more elected officials who actually had some power, and a change in the laws that allowed the horrific oppression of Jewish people, so, yes, we talked of it, but if I said anything, it would make him more suspicious.

“Why are you worried about our reputation?” I asked. I had no intention of giving up visiting the Tamms, but I was curious as to why the baron was involving himself in our lives.

The man sneered. “I care nothing for *your* reputation, little girl. Your stepfather’s gambling debts are a problem, but he is a loyal supporter of the czar. However, when you associate with radicals, you become of interest to the Okhrana, and therefore your stepfather draws their interest too. Given the past history of the family, that could be very dangerous.”

Hearing mention of the Okhrana twice in one night made my palms start to sweat in my gloves. I didn’t understand what he meant about the “past history.” My stepfather had served in the army with great distinction as one of its top generals, and my mother had been completely uninterested in politics.

I heard someone come into the room. The baron leaned in even more and put his arm over the back of my chair. I forced myself not to cringe away from him. I knew he was trying to intimidate me.

When he spoke again, his voice was so low I knew he didn’t want anyone else to hear. “I realize girls are not interested in politics, but the situation is very precarious right now,” he said. “We must do everything we can to ensure stability if we are to win the war. Even though your stepfather is retired, he is still a notable figure, and unfortunately, he has enemies who have not forgotten the past. He

must be seen to be unwavering in his support of the czar. If you care for him at all, you won't want to be a burden on him."

His eyes were so fixed on me, I felt my mouth go dry. Did he want me to reassure him that there were no treasonous thoughts allowed in our house? What if the baron was part of the secret police himself? I wouldn't put it past him to have some devious plan in mind to trap me. He could report any response I made.

"Thank you for your concern," I managed to choke out.

A group of men came in, talking in loud voices. I shifted away from the baron to get a look. It was the orchestra. They ignored us as they surrounded the food tables.

The baron reached into a pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He set it on the table. "Look at the quote from the American and then show this to the Tamms. See what they say. Then burn it until there is nothing left but ash."

I picked up the paper and unfolded it. As soon as I understood what it was, I dropped it on the table, wanting to wipe my gloves on my dress as if the words had leaped off the paper and were stuck to me, screaming for everyone to read. Being in possession of a paper calling for the overthrow of the czar could get me arrested. Even sitting at a table next to such a paper could be grounds for arrest.

He pushed it toward me and smiled as if he was pleased with my reaction. "I suggest you read it all." I picked it up again. It was in Russian, but as I skimmed it, I saw what the baron had been referring to. One line stood out. *As the American Patrick Henry said in his country's successful bid for freedom, give me liberty or give me death!*

I recognized the name Patrick Henry. I was a bit shaky on American history because not much of it had been taught in the French and Russian schools I'd attended, but my brother Miles had many books on the American Revolution. He had gone through a phase where

he'd describe in excruciating detail seemingly every day of the fight for liberty. We'd had to beg him to stop talking.

Did the baron think I knew who had written it because it quoted an American? That was absurd. There were thousands of Americans in Petrograd and hundreds who spoke Russian well enough to write such a thing.

"Remember, you never know who is spying on you," he said. "Don't trust anyone. And you should think about how much easier your life would be in America. You don't belong here." He stood up and nodded to me, then walked out of the room without another word.

As soon as he was gone, the full implication of his words hit me, almost taking away my breath. Even though I doubted the Tamms had anything to do with the flyer, if the Okhrana suspected them of revolutionary activities, my association with them turned the spotlight on me too, and that meant they might put spies on me as well. So far my black-market arrangements for the hospital were secret, but it would be harder to keep them that way if I was under scrutiny.

But why give me a note to show to the Tamms while warning me away from them? I couldn't decide if it would be safer to leave it where it lay or take it away with me. I rubbed my temples, feeling the ache come back. I needed to be away from this party so I could think.

I folded up the paper as small as I could and tried to put it into the top of my glove, but my hand was trembling so much I dropped it instead and it fell to the floor.

Before I could reach for it, another hand appeared and picked it up. I looked up to see a young man in the dazzling white dress uniform of the Imperial Horse Guard standing in front of me. His image wavered and the room grew hotter. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, I realized I was not seeing a ghost. Pavel would

never come back, not even as a spirit, since he was buried a long way away in an unknown grave on a battlefield.

This young man was not nearly as tall as Pavel had been, though he had the same blondish hair and dark eyes. The line of his jaw wasn't quite as square, and there was something about him that made him look out of place in the uniform, though I couldn't pinpoint what that was.

He held out the paper. I snatched it out of his hand and squeezed my own tight around it as if it were going to somehow jump out and open by itself.

I saw a shudder pass through him, and I noticed he had a cane gripped in his other hand. His fingers were very long and white against the ebony of the cane, and he wore a gold ring with some sort of bird on it. It was only then that I noticed a bulky bandage around one of his knees.

"Where did you come from?" I blurted out.

"I've been sitting over there." He pointed behind me, and I twisted around to see a small table nearly hidden by some of the potted plants. He motioned to his leg. "Dancing does not agree with me at the moment."

The table wasn't close enough that he could have overheard the baron and me, which was a relief. Nevertheless, I wished this young man would go away.

"You managed to get a chocolate mouse," he said, motioning to my plate. "Lucky you. Those were my sister's favorites." His stared down at the plate of chocolates as if transfixed by them.

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't just snap my fingers to get his attention or get up and leave. "Would you like one?"

He gave a start and turned his gaze back to me; then his eyes flicked to the paper. So he'd seen the baron give it to me.

I felt the dampness in my palms again.

He shifted his weight, another shudder passing through him. When he spoke, I could tell it was taking some effort for him to get the words out. “I see you are acquainted with Baron Eristov. Have you heard the old saying ‘Be friends with the wolf but keep one hand on the ax’? In the baron’s case, I’d make that two hands, and I’d also make sure the ax was very sharp.”

In another circumstance I might have been interested to hear what he knew about the baron. With a piece of treason in my hand, I didn’t want to say anything that would encourage him to continue talking.

I stood and picked up the plate with my other hand. “I have to be going now.”

“Wait, if you could give me just a moment,” he said. “I wanted to meet you earlier, but I couldn’t find anyone to do a proper introduction and I couldn’t ask you to dance. I’d like to talk to you.”

As I walked away, I called back over my shoulder, “I’m sorry, I really have to be going. Perhaps next time.” I knew I was being very rude, but I didn’t need to get to know any more handsome young soldiers who would disappear within weeks. I couldn’t play the game of pretending everything was fine, writing them cheerful letters, waiting for them to return in triumph, and then have my heart ripped out and crushed when news came of their death. No more. One had been enough. And I didn’t need any distractions. Keeping the hospital open while staying out of the hands of the Okhrana was more than enough to occupy me.

Chapter Three

WHEN I GOT back to the hall, Anna was waiting at the bottom of the staircase.

“I thought you weren’t coming!” she said.

I handed her the plate and then tucked the paper into my glove, making sure it was pushed down far enough not to fall out. “I’m sorry. It took longer than I thought. There was only one chocolate mouse, but I’m sure Nadia will like the other chocolates. You’d better hurry up to bed before someone catches you.”

“Thank you, Charlotte! Nadia will love these!” The little girl smiled and then headed up the stairs, carrying the plate carefully. I watched her, hoping Nadia actually got to eat the chocolates. If the governess found them, Anna would be scolded, and Nadia would get nothing.

A group of people came into the hall, heading for the cloakrooms. From the lack of sound coming from the ballroom, there couldn’t be too many guests left. Before I could go in search of my stepfather, he appeared from a drawing room off the hall, leaning on one of his old friends, who was struggling to support him.

I rushed toward them. “What’s wrong? Papa, are you ill?”

He nearly fell, almost bringing both of them down.

“He appears to have had a little too much to drink,” his friend Prince Shulga said as he struggled to regain his footing. The prince was even older than my stepfather and not in good health.

I thought I hadn’t heard him correctly at first. My stepfather never drank to excess.

“There you are, dear Lise.” My stepfather smiled at me and then shook his head. “How do you stay so young-looking when I have gotten to be such an old man?” His expression changed to a frown, and a tear ran down his face.

A chill ran through me. Lise had been my mother’s name. I looked nothing like her, and she’d been gone for over a year.

“Time to go home,” the prince said. “Perhaps we old men should not drink so much nor stay at the card table so long.”

“I’m not drunk,” my stepfather replied, his words slurring. “Tell Sasha I’ll pay him tomorrow. And tell the baron to send the young man over to the house tomorrow morning. No sense in waiting.”

“Yes, yes, old friend. Come along now.”

I hurried to get our coats but fumbled putting my own on. I couldn’t concentrate on buttons. Papa hadn’t recognized me. He couldn’t be ill. We’d only just managed to find a way to go on after my mother’s death.

I reminded myself that I was a nurse and I should pull myself together. I was not going to panic.

The prince and I helped him into his coat and then out to our sleigh, where the coachman, Yermak, lifted him inside. Thank goodness Yermak had the size and strength of a bear. He acted as if he were lifting a child. My stepfather leaned back and closed his eyes.

“Is the general ill?” Yermak whispered to me.

“I don’t know,” I said, covering my stepfather with a fur from the

pile on the seat. “Let’s get him home and we can decide if he needs a doctor.”

My stepfather roused himself for a moment. “I’ve made arrangements . . .” A snore finished his sentence and he slumped back again. I wrapped the fur blanket more tightly around him. Maybe he was just overtired. He wouldn’t admit he was growing old. We shouldn’t have stayed so late. We shouldn’t even have come to the party, but he had insisted, saying I needed to get away from the hospital more.

As we drove away, I studied his face as if it would reveal what ailed him. Were we actually a burden to him? He’d never acted as if we were. He’d never once suggested my brothers and I should leave. He’d been wonderful to us from the very first day we met. I wished I were already in medical school and had some training. My exposure to medicine consisted of taking care of my brothers and sisters when they were ill and my nursing training at the hospital, which was mostly for women who had gone through difficult childbirths.

He’d never mistaken me for my mother before. Even if it turned out to be the ill effects of drink, I decided I’d send for the doctor anyway.

My stepfather coughed and struggled to sit up straighter. “Lise, we should have a picnic tomorrow,” he said, smiling at me. “The children can hunt for mushrooms in the forest.”

I clenched my hands together and tried to keep my voice from wavering. “We’ll see,” I said. We definitely needed a doctor.

When we reached home, the butler and the footman put my stepfather to bed while Yermak went for the doctor. The doctor arrived, grumbling about the lateness of the hour. I told the man all about the confusion and the stumbling, mentioning possible causes, but the doctor didn’t make any comment.

He made me wait outside in the hall while he examined Papa. When the doctor came out, he said, “Your stepfather is fine, but he’s an old man who shouldn’t be out gallivanting at all hours of the night. *I’m* an old man. I shouldn’t be out on calls all hours of the night just to reassure nervous girls. You should have asked the housekeeper her opinion about his condition. She may not be trained as a nurse, but she’s seen far more illness than you.”

“She was asleep,” I explained as I followed him down the stairs. “What about my stepfather calling me by my mother’s name? Why would he do that?”

“I’m sure it was just a slip of the tongue. Send a note tomorrow if he isn’t better, though I’m sure he will be.”

Once he was out the door, I went back upstairs not as reassured as I hoped I’d be. I decided I’d still talk to Dr. Rushailo when I got to the hospital in the morning. My stepfather would never consent to having a female doctor examine him, but she would be able to help me determine if there was something else I should do.

I walked to my room as the familiar pang hit me, the one where I wished I could talk to my mother. Right before she died, she asked me to promise that I’d take care of everyone. I’d said I would, not thinking at the time what that meant. I hadn’t even considered that I’d have to worry about my stepfather, and I’d just assumed that so many things took care of themselves, not realizing exactly how much my mother had done both with the hospital and at home. Every time I thought I had one problem solved, two more would appear. Dropping out of school had helped, though that hadn’t worked out exactly the way I’d expected either.

I’d been so naive not to realize that a war would make getting food and medicine so difficult, and I’d certainly never expected to have to worry about the Okhrana.

I wished the baron had never given me that piece of paper. I took it out of my glove and put it inside my Greek book. No one would pick up the book except me, so it was a safe hiding place until I could show it to the Tamms.

Once I closed the book, I thought I'd be able to take my mind off the paper, but it was as if I could see the words through the pages. I grabbed the book and put it on the top shelf of the armoire, then shut the door on it and made myself go to bed. I pushed the paper out of my mind by making a list in my head of things I needed to do the next day. I got to ten before I fell asleep.

I woke up to someone shaking my arm.

"Wake up, Lottie! Wake up! You've been sleeping for hours and hours and hours!" I recognized my sister Nika's voice.

When I opened my eyes, I could tell from the weak light slanting through the window that I had in fact not been sleeping for hours and hours. Maybe three at the most. I closed them again.

I felt Nika move closer, and then she used her fingers to pry open one of my eyelids. "I know you are in there," she said. "Don't go back to sleep. Did you meet a husband last night?" I opened the other eye. She was inches from my face. If Nika was in my room, then her twin, Sophie, had to be there as well, and sure enough, when I looked at the end of the bed, I saw her.

"Polina says she has a potion you can use if you find one you want to catch," Sophie said. "You sneak it into his tea. Her babushka makes it out of boiled frog legs. She's going to teach me how to make it next time we go to the country. We'll get you a husband in no time. And maybe if he likes cats, he'll give you a kitten and we'll take care of it for you."

I ignored the part about the kitten. The twins were always begging for one, but Papa didn't like cats. No, it was more than that.

He had a strange horror of them. No cats for us. I reached out and tickled Nika. “Why do I want a husband?” I said over her laughter.

“So you’ll have someone to give you presents. Like kittens. Polina says that’s what husbands do. And they kiss your hands all the time.” Nika looked down at her own hands. “I don’t know why girls like that, though.”

“Why are your hands orange?” I asked her.

Nika giggled and covered her mouth. I knew that gesture. It boded no good and made me realize something else was not right about her.

The early morning sunlight seemed to have added an odd orangish tint to both girls’ blond curls. But it was an unnatural shade of orange, more like the color of the fruit.

I sat up, trying to keep my wits about me. If I made too much of a fuss about what they had done, they were sure to do it again. They delighted in being naughty.

Reaching out, I touched one of Nika’s curls. “What a lovely shade! It looks like the orange from the paint box.”

She nodded her head, grinning. “Sophie helped me dip my hair in orange paint water, and I dipped hers.”

Of course they had. “Oh, I see. Where was Polina when this was happening?” Polina was their nursemaid. I didn’t know why the poor girl hadn’t quit long ago, but I was happy she had stuck it out so far. I’d have been pulling my hair out without her.

Nika wrapped a curl around her finger. “She was very tired last night, so we said we were tired too, but we really weren’t.”

“So after she fell asleep, you did this?” At least the paint was from a watercolor set. I assumed it would wash out. I didn’t know how they’d managed to get the color so vivid. I probably didn’t want to know.

They both nodded. An orange feather fell out of Sophie's hair. I noticed two more at the end of the bed. I picked up one of them. "Feathers, too?"

"Yes!" Nika jumped off the bed and ran around the room flapping her arms. "We're firebirds, but we need you to help us stick the feathers to us. Polina says we can't use paste unless she's there too."

I got out of bed and put on a wrap. "I suppose she didn't say the same about the paints."

They both shook their heads. "She never said anything about paints."

I sighed. No one could think of everything to tell the twins not to do.

Sophie climbed onto the bed and jumped up and down. "Once we have all the feathers stuck on, we'll be able to fly too!"

My heart skipped a beat. "No, no. That's not the way it works. People can't fly, even with feathers. Promise me you won't try. Promise!" I had a horrid vision of them leaping out a window without a second thought. Neither of the twins had any concept of second thoughts.

Nika gave a very loud sigh.

"Promise," I said again.

I saw Sophie give a slight nod of her head to Nika. "We promise," Nika said. "At least will you paste the feathers on us? We have a lot of them."

A lot. That could mean anything from ten to a thousand. How many pillows had given up their innards? "Show me."

It turned out there were less than a thousand but still a considerable number of feathers drying in the schoolroom. Polina was both mortified and angry the twins had tricked her. I left her to scold them about wasting good feather pillows.

Before I went downstairs, I checked to see if I had enough money to pay for the supplies coming in from the country. The hospital was very low on food, so I hoped Ivan, the man making the delivery, wouldn't be delayed or his sleigh stopped and searched.

I grabbed my Latin book and went downstairs, intending to get in a little studying while I waited for Ivan. Archer, Papa's English butler, was consulting with Osip, the footman, in the hallway.

"How is my stepfather this morning?" I asked Archer.

Archer gave me his usual look of disapproval, which on his skull-like features was not all that much different from his normal appearance, except for a tightening of his mouth and a frowning of his almost nonexistent eyebrows. "He's fine, Miss Charlotte. He's already breakfasted and is working in the library on the memoir."

The memoir took up a large part of Papa's day, given that he intended to record every detail of every day of his military career. I was glad he had something to occupy him. If he ever finished the book, I had no idea how he'd spend his time.

I went into the breakfast room to get some tea, settling down in a spot where I could look out the window at the frozen Neva and the sky above the broad river. I never grew tired of the view; it was like my own ever-changing watercolor.

The street along the quay was crowded with sleighs, their bells jingling so loudly I could hear them through the window as I opened the textbook. When we'd first arrived in the city, back when it was still called St. Petersburg, I'd loved the sound of all the bells, and it made me believe my mother's words about our new home. She had tried hard to convince us we would be as happy there as we had been in Paris, where we'd lived after my father died and during my mother's disastrous second marriage.

It's like something out of a storybook, she'd told us. Built by giants

who wanted a beautiful city with buildings that looked like a pastry chef made them. And in the winter, it's a wonder of glittering snow and gold domes and air so crisp, you'll feel the most alive you've ever felt.

She'd been right. I couldn't imagine living in any other city. I never wanted to live anywhere else. And once I became a doctor and opened a practice, other people would realize I meant to stay.

I opened my book and started memorizing verbs. I hadn't been at it for very long when I noticed the room getting darker. I looked out to see the sky turning to the color of an opal as the sun disappeared and snow began to fall. It fell heavier and heavier, floating down in big flakes. It reminded me of the times we had spent at Papa's dacha in the country, riding the horses, hiking through the birch woods, building fires to roast potatoes, and no matter what we did, we laughed, so much laughing.

I told myself we'd do that again, as soon as the war was over. I wasn't going to let it be just a memory. When the war was over, we could go back to the way things were before. Raisa's push for me to leave still stung. A person didn't have to be born in a place to make that place their home.

I spotted a man outside, standing on the quay, leaning against a lamppost. It wasn't so odd to see someone there, but it was odd that he wasn't looking out at the river. He was looking right at our house. All the stories I'd heard of people being watched by the secret police came rushing back to me, how people hadn't realized their everyday activities were being monitored until the police came pounding at the door.

We had our own watcher.

Chapter Four

I TOOK A few deep breaths, trying to stay calm. I knew the man outside was from the secret police. He had to be. There was no other reason someone would watch our house. The baron had made it sound like we didn't yet have the Okhrana interested in us, but he'd been wrong. If someone had put an observer on us, they weren't just sniffing around.

The front bell rang, and the sound of it made my hand jerk, knocking into the glass of tea and spilling some of it on the tablecloth. To hear the bell that early in the morning was odd, not only because we got very few callers, but because it was early for anyone to make a call. The watcher outside straightened up, his gaze focused on whoever stood on our front steps. I went out into the hall as the footman was taking the cloak of a person so covered in snow I couldn't make out much about him except that he was a man. I didn't think I made a noise, but the person turned in my direction as he handed over his gloves and shifted a cane from one hand to another. It was the soldier from the night before.

Since I'd been thinking about our times at the dacha, my first impression was that he looked like he'd just come from a hike in the

birch woods. His hair and his eyelashes were frosted with snow, making his dark eyes stand out in his face. My breath caught. He looked even better than he had the night before, especially since he was no longer wearing the elaborate white dress uniform. The simple dark blue uniform that was the standard daytime wear of Horse Guard soldiers suited him much better.

I froze, staring at him, unable to think why he'd be standing in our entry hall. Surely he hadn't really wanted to speak to me so badly he'd come to the house.

Archer cleared his throat. I glanced over at him. He was looking at me with a puzzled expression on his face, probably because I'd been standing there like a statue.

I managed to choke out a few words. "Good morning,"

The young man nodded at me without smiling.

"Lieutenant Dmitri Antonovich Sokolov to see General Cherkassky," Archer announced. "I was just about to show him into the library."

"No need. I'm right here." My stepfather came into the hall. He sounded perfectly alert, and he was walking just fine. Maybe the spell he'd had the night before had just been from tiredness. "Welcome, welcome, Dmitri Antonovich!" he said. "I'm so pleased to meet you. And there you are too, Lottie. Perfect timing. This young man is to be your brothers' new temporary tutor." My stepfather beamed as if he'd just given me a present.

"Tutor?" I said. "What happened to Monsieur Girard?" Girard had only been hired the week before. I'd been so pleased to find him, convinced he'd be the perfect fit since he'd spent his whole career as a teacher.

"I thought I told you. He quit yesterday." Papa shook his head.

“Just packed his bags and walked out. Some nonsense about his nerves and about the house being cursed. I’ve never heard such foolishness from an educated man.”

It took all my self-control not to yell for my brothers to appear that instant. A cursed house? I was sure the boys had pulled a devious prank on Monsieur Girard, and I was also sure I knew the identity of the ringleader. Miles.

“Very glad you are here, Dmitri Antonovich,” Papa said. “Tutoring the boys while you recover will help us all out. We’ll make sure you get plenty of rest so you can get back to your unit as soon as possible. I know the Horse Guard needs every man they can get. At some point, I do want to hear your impressions of conditions at the front.”

“Yes, Excellency,” Dmitri replied. He made the same motion he’d done the night before, shifting his weight, which caused another shudder to his whole body. I could see the pain on his face.

Papa beamed again. “No need to be so formal here, young man. I’ve been retired a long time now, and I promise I won’t report you to your commanding officer. I told the boys yesterday I’d find someone right away and gave them quite a stern lecture that they need to settle down and concentrate on their studies. They should be ready and willing to work at your direction.”

Which meant my stepfather had said a few words about studying and then one of the boys had asked a geography question, Papa’s passion, so the talk would turn to that. The boys were experts at deflecting attention from discussions of their own behavior.

I didn’t understand why a member of the Horse Guard would even want to be a tutor. They would consider such a job beneath them. Even before the war, being in the Horse Guard was a full-time occupation for those men who were meant to bring honor and glory to their families. Only the sons of the wealthy were allowed to join,

and their families supplied the money to purchase horses and all the elaborate dress uniforms. It wasn't for those in need of funds, who had to take extra jobs to make ends meet.

The baron's words came back to me. *You never know who is spying on you. Don't trust anyone.* The man I'd seen outside watching the house was an obvious danger, but I was sure the Okhrana had more devious methods, such as sending in a stranger who was not really a tutor.

Or was I just being foolish? Would a member of the Horse Guard lower himself to spy for the secret police? Pavel would never have done anything like that. Even those who thought the Okhrana were necessary still held them in contempt for the way they turned on ordinary citizens. There had to be another explanation for his presence.

"My boy Stepan will be joining the Horse Guard when he's old enough," I heard Papa say. "He'll be delighted to meet you. Charlotte, perhaps you can introduce Dmitri Antonovich to your brothers. I have to go out or I'd do it myself. Dmitri, Charlotte will help you with anything you need. I don't know what we'd do without her. She's the eldest, you know, so she takes care of everything."

She takes care of everything. A voice in my head wanted to yell, *No! She doesn't want to take care of everything!* but I gritted my teeth instead. I'd always be Charlotte, the eldest, never just Charlotte.

I scrambled to think of another way to forestall bringing this person into our house. Whatever reason he had for being here, he wasn't what we needed. We needed someone older who would be able to get some work out of my brothers and who wouldn't be run off by them. "Papa, perhaps we should talk before you hire a new tutor. I'm sure Dmitri Antonovich is very qualified, but the boys need help in specific subjects." The young man didn't appear to be much older than me, so he didn't actually look all that qualified.

“Mathematics, I know, Lottie dear,” my stepfather replied. “I’m told Dmitri Antonovich had the highest marks in mathematics on his university entrance exam, which he took three years early. It’s a shame the war interfered with the young man’s studies, but it’s lucky for us.”

I’d clearly lost that round. Time to try something else. “Their Greek is very poor too,” I said. “And their Latin only marginally better.”

Papa chuckled. “Lottie, I’m surprised. You aren’t thinking very clearly this morning. You know Dmitri Antonovich would have had to pass both Latin and Greek to get into the university. I’m sure he’s quite capable of teaching those subjects too. Aren’t you trying to improve in those yourself? Perhaps you could sit in on their lessons.” He turned to Dmitri. “Charlotte left school early when my wife was ill.”

“I’d be happy for you to join us,” the young man said to me as a flicker of a smile crossed his face.

I couldn’t swear out loud, though I really wanted to. I hadn’t expected my attempt to get rid of the tutor to be foiled so easily, and I did need help in Latin and Greek. Did I really want to accept it from this person, though?

I tried to picture myself sitting next to him reviewing Latin declensions while he watched me trying to come up with the right answer. He would be too distracting. I couldn’t do it. The word *formosus*, “finely formed and beautiful,” popped into my head for some reason. I hadn’t even realized I knew that word, but suddenly I could remember all the cases: *formosi*, *formoso*, *formosum*, *formoso*, *formose*. Finely formed.

Dmitri Antonovich’s smile disappeared and I noticed beads of perspiration forming on his forehead as he bit his lip. He was clearly in a great deal of pain. He’d never be able to tutor my brothers. They could wear down a healthy man in a few days. I realized I might

not have to intervene at all. Dmitri Antonovich would be gone by nightfall.

The housekeeper came into the hall, and when Archer saw her, he made his common noise of disapproval, a sound between a cough and a snort. I knew he didn't like it when Zarja appeared in front of guests.

Zarja ignored him, as she so often did. "Lottie, there is someone to see you at the kitchen door." She emphasized the word *someone*. I knew who she meant. Ivan had arrived with the delivery.

"I'll be there soon," I said to her.

I didn't want my stepfather to ask any questions about who had come to see me, so I decided I'd do what he asked and show Dmitri Antonovich upstairs and then escape to the kitchen.

"This way," I said.

Dmitri followed me up, though he took each step slowly. I could tell his leg hurt him by the way he grimaced. At the second landing, he stopped, his breath coming in short gasps. "Just a moment, please," he said. We'd been speaking in Russian, but he switched to English. "I forgot to ask the general which language he prefers I use to teach your brothers," he added.

Dmitri's command of English didn't surprise me, because most educated Russians spoke some, but I was surprised that he'd feel comfortable enough with the language to teach in it. As if he read my mind, he said, "My brother and I had an English nursemaid when we were children, and my parents spoke the language as well."

"Either Russian or English is fine," I said. "The older boys' Russian is very good, and Stepan is fluent in English because he's been hearing it for years, but his French needs work." I didn't tell Dmitri my brothers had tried to fool previous tutors by making up words and claiming they were obscure English ones the tutors should learn.

He nodded, his breath slowing a bit. While we stood there, I felt I should say something about the previous night. "I'm sorry I was so rude to you at the grand duke's party." I felt a twinge of embarrassment that I'd actually thought he was interested in me.

"Don't mention it. I wanted to meet you before I came to the house this morning. I'm sorry I said what I did about the baron. It's not my business to intrude in strangers' friendships."

He said the word *friendship* with a little too much emphasis, as if implying that the baron and I were more than friends.

I certainly wasn't going to explain why I'd been talking to the baron. "Let me know when you're ready to continue."

He nodded and took the next step. As we moved on, he began to hum under his breath. I thought I recognized the tune, a Russian folk song. "Isn't that the sleigh song about the galloping horses?" I said.

"What?" he asked, stopping again.

"The song you were humming. It's a sleigh song, isn't it? The one that goes 'Fly, my horses, at the gallop / to my dear, you know the way! / Fly, my horses, fly at the gallop / to my dear one's house, you know the way.'"

Dmitri's face turned red. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realize I was humming. A nurse suggested that in the hospital as a way to forget the pain. I've been doing it so much I don't even think about it. It's one I used to sing with my family when I was a child." He looked away from me, twisting the cane in his hand.

"Don't apologize. It's a good idea." I wished I had thought of it. It might help our patients too. "I like that song. We've sung it at my stepfather's dacha." Or rather, we *had* sung the song, when my mother was alive.

"Shall we go on?" I asked.

He nodded. By the time we reached the third floor, his face was wet with perspiration. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped it.

I wished I knew the extent of his injury. It felt wrong to be forcing him to do something that caused him such pain. “I’m sorry,” I said. “My brothers are very . . . lively. This may not be the best post for you. Please don’t think you have to stay if it’s too difficult. I’m sure my stepfather would understand.”

“I’m fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “I just need another moment.” He took a few breaths. “Perhaps in the meantime you can tell me about your brothers before I meet them. I wasn’t told anything about them except that . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Let me guess. You were told they were wild and undisciplined.”

He didn’t respond, as if weighing what to say.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” I said. “Now would be a good time to change your mind.”

“I’m not going to change my mind,” he said. “Tell me about them.”

We’d see how long his stubbornness would last once he spent a few hours with my brothers. “Well, there’s Miles, who is seventeen. He’s interested in history and politics and books and is determined to be a writer. He’s quite brilliant but will only work on what he wants.” I didn’t go into detail about Miles’s health. That would be obvious soon enough.

“Then there’s Hap, which is what we call Harold. He’s fifteen. He’s not the best student, because he concentrates on his music and his art. He draws beautifully. And there’s Stepan. He’s eight and obsessed with animals, especially horses, but not much interested in other subjects.”

Dmitri’s face took on a puzzled expression. “Why isn’t Miles

going into the Horse Guard if he's the eldest? I thought General Cherkassky said Stepan had been put down for a place."

I'd practiced the explanation about us many times. People were always puzzled that Stepan didn't resemble any of us and that he and the twins didn't have the red hair of me, Miles, and Hap. "We have a very complicated family," I said. "Miles, Hap, and I are stepchildren to our stepfather. Our father was an American named Daniel Mason. Stepan is the son of our stepfather and his second wife, so he's our stepbrother and the actual eldest son of our stepfather. That's why he'll go into the Horse Guard instead of Miles. Our mother was Papa's third wife, and they had two children, my little sisters, or, to be precise, my half sisters, Sophie and Nika. They are five years old."

Dmitri wiped his forehead again. "Complicated is an understatement," he said. "I'm ready to move again. Please, let's continue."

I hoped he'd remember I'd given him a way out but that he'd chosen not to take it.

"This way to the lion's den," I said.