

The Shattered Tree

ALSO BY CHARLES TODD

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The Shattered Tree

A Bess Crawford Mystery

CHARLES TODD

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For Jane Chelius

For being the most extraordinary agent any author could have

For the books

For the birds

For the travel

And above all for the friendship.

With much love from both of us.

The Shattered Tree

CHAPTER ONE
Where It Began

October 1918

HE CRAWLED AS far as the shattered tree and lay there, faint from the effort. But he knew he had to keep moving. When he stopped, when the sweat dried on his skin, he'd begin to shiver again, wracking his body until his teeth chattered. There wasn't enough left of his uniform to keep him warm, and his captors, God help them, had taken his boots. Good English leather. He'd stolen them himself from a corpse.

He grimaced, afraid to look at his torn feet. He'd lost too much blood from his other wounds. The one in his leg had mercifully stopped bleeding, and the cut in his hairline had clotted over, but the damage had been done. He was light-headed from lack of food, finding it hard to concentrate. A crow couldn't find enough to eat in this countryside after four years of war. He'd be dead soon if he didn't reach his own lines.

To his left the firing was heavy. Rifles and machine guns. An assault under way. *But in which direction?* He could see the flashes, but they told him nothing. *Which way?*

He forced himself to sit up against the torn bark of the trunk.
Think! For God's sake, collect your wits or you're done for.

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But the firing was fading, and he knew in some corner of his mind that the battle hadn't stopped. He was losing consciousness.

Fighting it, clenching his teeth with determination, he dragged himself upright, holding hard to the shattered trunk. The ground moved under his feet, heaving and shifting, and he thought he would fall down again, unable to hold on. Wet earth pummeled him. And then the shifting stopped, and he realized a sapper's tunnel must have gone up somewhere in the sector to his left. Shaking his head to clear it, he nearly fell down.

Voices. Hands. He blinked, trying to see. *Pray God, no. Not now—*

They had to force his fingers from the bark of the tree before they could lower him to the stretcher, and then they were doing something else.

A blanket. Something between him and that wretchedly cold wind. The warmth betrayed him, and he lay there, unable to put up any defense at all.

He didn't care any longer. He couldn't fight any more. Let them take him back, it didn't matter.

The ground was rough; the men handling the stretcher stumbled across it, jarring his body from side to side. He remembered some of it, in and out of awareness. Listening to the soft grunts of the men carrying him, watching the stars pass in and out of light clouds overhead, struggling to keep his bearings. He was still shivering, vaguely aware of being warmer but not yet warm enough. They had put a strap across the blanket, across his chest, holding him and it in place as they tramped in the darkness.

Lamplight turned low. Voices. A face peering down at him. Blurred. The straps taken off, the blanket lifted. He almost cried out as the cold swept in. And then it was lowered again and he clutched at it desperately.

"And what have ye brought me this time?" a Scottish voice demanded. A woman's voice. "He's deid. A waste. Ye ken I'd hoped for a live one."

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“Shall I put him with the corpses, then?” Another voice, nearly as unintelligible.

“That’s shivering, no’ death throes,” the stretcher bearer at his head said impatiently.

“No, bring him forward. We’ll give it a try. Anyone else out there?”

“He’s the last.”

“Good. Deliver him, then get yourselves something to warm your insides.”

He could hardly decipher the exchange. He tried to groan, to make some sign that he was still clinging to life, however tenuous his hold on it. But what issued from his mouth wasn’t a groan, it was a croaking laugh, rising from his parched throat.

The face peered down at him again. He could make out straggling sandy hair beneath a once-white cap. Pale blue eyes, kinder than the voice. Freckles, a sea of them, running together as his vision failed him.

“God save us,” the voice said. “I think we’ve caught ourselves a frog.”

CHAPTER TWO

Somewhere in France, October 1918

I WASHED MY hands, then dried them quickly, nodding to the orderly to bring the next patient into the tent.

Dr. Winters turned from scrubbing his instruments to peer at the man being lifted to the table.

“Shock,” he said. “Loss of blood and shock. I see he’s French. Odd, in this section. Do we have a name?”

The orderly said, “No, sir.” He shrugged. “There’s hardly enough of his uniform left to find a pocket.”

“Then let Base Hospital sort him out.” Dr. Winters lifted the blanket, did a cursory examination, and lowered it again. “All right, get him to bed, a hot water bottle or two, and tea, as much sugar as you can find. He’s no longer bleeding, there’s nothing here that can’t wait.” He raised one of the wounded man’s eyelids. “Possibly concussed from that head injury, but the eye is responding normally to light. Where are the ambulances?”

“They’re just coming in, sir,” the orderly reported.

“Then he’s for them. Sister Crawford, is this your run?”

“Yes, sir,” I told the doctor. “Nothing was said about sending

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anyone else up to replace me. Sister MacRae is on duty until dawn, and Sister Marshall is sleeping.” I cocked my head to listen. The firing had stopped, and the shelling hadn’t begun. Respite. “You’ll be all right. It should be quiet enough.”

“I doubt it,” Dr. Winters replied wearily. “I could use a dozen of you. See that they don’t keep you.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said with a smile. “And I’ll bring back as many nurses as I can find.”

“Half a hundred will do. All right, off with you.” He turned to the orderly as they heard the ambulances pulling in. “Get him stabilized as best you can, then put him aboard. And afterward if you can find a cup of tea for me as well, I’d be grateful.”

The orderly summoned the stretcher bearers, who had been squatting just outside the tent, enjoying a cigarette.

As they began to lift the stretcher, one said, “Good thing he’s out, poor sod.”

The orderly followed them. “Easy, lads. Let’s warm him up as best we can, and straight on to the line.”

Dr. Winters and I watched them go, then I went to fetch the hot water bottles and another blanket against the cold night air. There was hardly any sugar in the emergency tin, but I did what I could.

Sister MacRae was supervising the loading of the other patients as I came back.

Dr. Winters was waiting for me. “Bess?”

He was the same height as I was, a sturdy man with prematurely graying hair and sharp blue eyes. He’d worked himself to near exhaustion, and the fighting hadn’t let up, despite the promise of an end to it. I was worried about him.

“Sir?” I paused at the tent flap, looking back at him.

“Nothing. Go on. Just—tell them we need more hands. And supplies are low. Ask them to resupply us as soon as they can. The next run, if possible.”

“I’ll speak to Matron myself,” I said, and he smiled.

“Yes, do that.”

Our latest patient was hunched into a knot, still shivering in spite of the blankets covering him. With the help of the orderly I put one hot water bottle at his feet, and the other close by his hands, then added another blanket from our precious store. He wasn't awake enough to swallow the tea, and so I sent it on to Dr. Winters, who needed that bit of sugar too.

The light was a little better where he lay now, and I gently searched again for a name. Officers generally wrote them in a pocket or on the underside of a lapel, sometimes even at the neck, so that their body could be identified if they were dead or too badly wounded to speak. As the first to treat a patient, we made every effort to identify him, because whoever brought him in was likely to know who he was, or the sector where the stretcher bearers found him might well connect him to a man later reported missing or thought to have been taken prisoner. With casualties running high, the task of keeping up with the living, the wounded, and the dead was enormous.

As I pulled at the remnants of the pocket, it came away in my hand. I could just see where a strip of something had been ripped out of the uniform's fabric. As if the owner had sewn in a piece of cloth with his name written in permanent ink. Then why rip it out again?

The only reason I could think of was to keep the Germans from knowing who he was if he was taken prisoner. A general's son—or that of someone in the French cabinet—someone important enough to become a hostage?

It didn't matter. When he was awake, he would be able to tell the base hospital what his name was.

That done, I hurried to my quarters and picked up my kit, stuffing a half-dry uniform in the top and a sack with a pair of muddy boots on top of that. I hadn't had time to clean them. Closing the flap, I went out to make certain I had all the paperwork I needed

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for each patient being transported. We were halfway through the process when a star shell burst almost overhead, and one of the men swore. It was always a forerunner of an attack.

“Don’t they ever stop?” he growled. “We’ll hardly be able to keep up with what’s coming.”

In the strange glare of the shell, slowly descending, we looked drained of color, our faces deeply shadowed and almost frighteningly unfamiliar. It had faded by the time we had the last patient safely strapped down, and I was turning to find my seat in the ambulance carrying the severely wounded.

Sister MacRae appeared out of the darkness, holding a letter.

“Will ye post it for me?” she asked, and before I could answer, she was already making her way back to the surgical tent.

I tucked the envelope into my pocket, and waved to the lead driver. He was already rolling as I took my seat in the second vehicle from the rear.

I’d ridden with our driver before, a man named Robinson, square face, sandy hair, tired eyes. We were all tired, I thought as he greeted me.

“Sister,” he said, starting the motor. “How bad is our cargo tonight?”

“Two bleeding still, one of them worrying. One with broken ribs, haven’t punctured the lung yet, but I think he’s wound tight enough to keep them in place for now. A head wound, and a man delirious from fever. He’s the greatest risk. A case of appendicitis. And one weak from loss of blood.”

“They’ll be starting the shelling shortly. I’d as soon not stop unless we have to.”

“Then fingers crossed.”

I’d been at this aid station for a week now, and we’d moved up twice, to stay within reach of the worst cases. Sister Nelson had worried that the Germans might push back and we’d be overrun, but I didn’t think it would happen. This sector had made fairly even

progress for days, and it seemed likely that we could keep up the pressure on the German lines. But, I thought as we bounced over a rut deeper than most, war didn't follow rules. Still, losses had been fairly heavy on both sides, and I rather thought it was HQ that pushed so hard, not the men in the field. A respite in the worst of the fighting would be welcomed if only for a chance to sleep. One of the artillery officers had already warned me, though.

"We'll use up our stock of shells. A mad barrage. Wait and see. No one wants to transport the damn—the blasted things back to England."

We rattled and bounced and slid through the dark, following the ambulance ahead of us, lights dimmed almost to the point of vanishing from sight if we fell too far behind. Robinson did what he could to prevent the worst of the jolting, but there was no way to avoid much of it.

Robinson said, in the darkness, "Your father's Colonel Crawford, is that right?"

"Yes." My father had retired from active service a few years before the war had begun, and he had made up for that by doing his duty wherever he could. London had often found a use for him, much of it too secret to discuss with my mother or me, which sometimes meant that he disappeared for days or even weeks at a time. We had grown used to that over four years of war, but it had not got any easier. He had been in France more than a few times, although he never spoke of it. Nor did Simon Brandon, my father's Regimental Sergeant-Major. London had not wanted him to return to active service for reasons that were obscure but took him into danger more often than not. As my mother had said dryly on one occasion, "The Army seems to prefer to kill him their own way, rather than allow the Germans to try their hand at it."

But of course the Germans had tried. More than once. And almost succeeded.

Robinson threw a quick glance my way. "I'm not supposed to talk

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about what I see, but the Colonel was in Calais this week. Spy hunting, gossip had it.”

Surprised, I looked at him. “Was he indeed?”

“Aye, I took wounded down to the port for loading, and there he was, coming off the *Sea Maid*. Arthur pointed him out to me.”

Arthur was another orderly I’d got to know fairly well. His cousin had been in my father’s regiment, and if Arthur claimed he’d seen my father, then I believed he had.

There had been no word from home for a fortnight. That was not unusual, given the volume of mail the censors were required to deal with, but I couldn’t stop a niggling worm of worry from creeping in when the post was slow in arriving. It was one reason I wrote home as often as I could, so that they wouldn’t worry about *me*. Careful letters, light ones that wouldn’t trouble the censors. But my mother knew how to read between the lines.

Robinson swore, then apologized as we hit a particularly deep rut and the ambulance struggled to bridge it and stay on track. I clutched at the handle of my door and braced myself. Behind me I heard one of the wounded cry out.

But we made it safely to the base hospital after all, and I was relieved to turn my cargo, the worst of the wounded first, over to one of the Sisters there. It was her task to assign them to wards.

“I don’t like the look of the appendix case,” she said quietly, for my ears only. “I’d best send him straight to surgery.”

I nodded, and after instructing the stretcher bearers, she moved on to the next man.

Soon afterward, I presented our list of much-needed supplies to Matron, and then she and I went through the list of incoming patients before walking to each bedside, assessing their condition after the arduous journey.

The ribs case was breathing well enough, the bleeding patients were still stable, and a doctor was already bending over one of them.

The delirious patient was being strapped down, and a Sister

was preparing to give him something to bring down his fever. His wound didn't appear to be gangrenous. Yet.

The appendix case was already being prepped for surgery.

We came to the last bed, and I thought at first that this patient was asleep. A sister was just bringing in a fresh hot water bottle wrapped in a towel to put at his feet, and another had warmed the blankets that had been spread across him. The shivering had stopped, and it was likely he'd dropped into an exhausted state. We still had no name for this one. *Lieutenant X* was on his chart. The orderly at the forward aid station had just been able to make out his rank.

The ward was quiet, it was an ordinary transfer, and someone was already packing the ambulance with our precious supplies, thanks to Matron's efficiency. I'd even managed to persuade her to send us another Sister. Dr. Winters had wanted two, but he'd be grateful for one.

And then without any warning, the night was torn apart by a scream.

The delirious man, an officer with one of the Highland regiments, had flung the Sister buckling his straps halfway across the ward, glass breaking and the tray she had set on his table falling to the floor with a ringing *clang*. Matron and I turned quickly, but the Scot was across the empty cot where the appendix case would have been, and before we could stop him, he had clamped his hands around the throat of the French officer.

Blankets went flying off the bed; the Sister with the hot water bottle backed away in surprise. The patient under attack had come alive with such an astonishing burst of strength and energy that Matron, reaching for the Scot's right arm even as I caught at the left, was thrown back into me.

I could hear someone shouting for help as Matron and I went down on our knees. In the same instant, the Scot's flailing foot grazed my forehead and struck Matron squarely on the chin. Dazed,

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she sank to the floor even as I fought to get to my feet. By this time, the doctor who'd been examining the ribs case was there, and I shoved Matron into his arms. As he was dragging her to one side, out of the fray, I turned back to the two men, who had been struggling on the cot and were now fighting on the floor on the far side.

I went after them, trying to break the grip the Scot had on the other man's throat, but he was large, and I was making very little progress when the doctor caught the Scot's hair in one hand and pulled his head back. And then two burly orderlies were dashing down the aisle between the rows of cots. One of them set me aside, and I left them to it, scrambling out of their way as the Scot flung the doctor off. I heard him swear as his head hit the side of the cot.

Either the Scot was tiring, or the two orderlies were more than he could deal with. He was still fighting them, but they'd pulled him off the Frenchman, who was still doing his bit, landing a blow himself. I turned to check on Matron and the Sister who had been attending the Scot before all this began.

Matron was still dazed, but I managed to get her to a chair. The doctor, his face flushed and angry, was bending over the Sister who had been thrown to one side. He seemed to be working with her left shoulder.

As the battle surged back and forth, it moved out into the aisle, leaving the Frenchman half sitting up against the cot, wild-eyed and breathing hard. I wasn't sure he even knew where he was or what had just happened to him. I turned my attention to him, bending over him, intending to help him back into his own bed. But he held me off, his hands shoving me away as he shouted something that was nearly lost in the uproar the orderlies and the Scot were still making just behind me.

"It's all right, it's over. He's very ill—the Scot. He had no idea he was attacking you—sometimes that happens," I said, trying to calm this man down as well.

He shut up in midsentence, staring at me, then turning his gaze

toward the Scot, whom the orderlies and the doctor were finally dragging back to his bed. Someone else had come in and taken the doctor's place, attending to the Sister with the shoulder injury. Every other patient in the ward was wide awake and staring toward the commotion.

"It's all right," I said again, but he shoved himself to his feet and started for the door of the ward. I had all I could do to stop him, catching his arm, reminding him of his wounds, of his exhaustion, anything I could think of to turn him about.

But it was his own weakness that betrayed him. Faltering, all at once he leaned heavily on me, and in the next instant, he passed out, nearly taking me down with him.

I lowered him to the wooden floor of the ward, and there were others coming in now, another Sister and two more orderlies. We got my patient back into his bed, covered him again, found the hot water bottle—which had rolled under a neighboring bed—rewrapped it in the towels, and put it at his feet.

At the forward aid station, Dr. Winters had been too concerned by the wounds on the man's head and leg to pay any attention to his feet. And in the dark, shoving the hot water bottle under the blankets as he lay waiting to be loaded into the ambulance, I hadn't seen them either.

Now I realized how badly cut and bruised they were, as if he'd walked a long way without shoes. How he'd managed to hold me off just now, on his way to the door, was a mystery. Saying nothing, I tucked him in and asked one of the other orderlies to sit with him for a bit.

"He was badly frightened by that attack," I said quietly. "Coming up out of a deep sleep to find someone trying to throttle him. He may still be unsettled when he wakes up again. Keep an eye on him for a while."

"Yes, Sister. You've got a scrape on your forehead. It's starting to bleed."

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I put up my hand and realized he was right. I remembered the toe grazing my head as Matron and I tried to pull the two men apart. "Thank you. I'll attend to it."

Matron had come up to me. "Are you all right, Sister Crawford? Have someone look at that scrape."

"Yes, thank you, Matron. And you?" By this time the Scot had run out of whatever mad strength he'd found in his delirium, and his shouts had become agitated mumbling dwindling into muttering. I thought they must have managed to sedate him somehow, and that it was slowly taking effect. The orderlies were replacing the straps across his chest and legs; the doctor was watching grim-faced and still out of breath, to make certain the man was not feigning. In the other cot, the Frenchman was lying there with closed eyes, but I could see the tightness around his mouth.

"I'm fine," Matron lied, for I could see that she was still shaken by the suddenness of the attack. We all were, and the other Sisters were trying to settle other patients back into their cots. "I expect your ambulance is ready to return to the aid station. I'll leave you to meet it. Thank you, Sister Crawford." She cast a glance at the now subdued Scot, breathing heavily and only partly conscious, then turned to the ward at large.

"All right, then, as you were, gentlemen. Lights out in five minutes."

They subsided, and I took a last look at my patient before walking on to the ward door. There I stopped at the ward Sister's table and asked for something to clean my forehead.

She had stepped out to accompany the appendix case to the surgical theater and so had missed the start of the commotion. As she reached for a pad and poured a little alcohol over it, she said, "I was shocked. According to the report you brought with you, Lieutenant MacGregor has been quiet until now. Did he know the other patient? Was that the problem?"

I took the pad and pressed it to the scrape, feeling the sting as

it touched the raw skin. "His fever must have spiked. We had no trouble with him at all at the aid station. And as far as I know, he's never seen the Frenchman before."

"What's wrong with the Frenchman?" She pointed to a set of charts on her table. "I haven't had a chance to look."

"Exhaustion. Possible concussion. Loss of blood," I said. "Keep an eye on him if you can. And have a look at his feet, will you? As for Lieutenant MacGregor, he may reach a crisis tonight, unless you can keep that fever down. I'd watch his breathing as well. Pneumonia. There's a possibility of gangrene. That wound doesn't look very good."

"Yes, of course." There was little we could do for the pneumonia cases but try to lower the fever and give them something to help clear their lungs. "But he's a big man. He could well be strong enough to overcome the infection."

"I hope so," I said, and thanking her for her assistance, I tossed the pad into the bucket for waste that was to be burned, and walked out to meet Robinson and my ambulance. The new Sister was already in the back, and I could smell the strong soap that had been used to clean there. She wrinkled her nose at me and settled herself. Dr. Winters would be happy to see me returning to the aid station, and I could just make out the boxes piled high in the rear all around her. Badly needed supplies that he would welcome even more.

I was already in my seat, my door closed, and Robinson, looking over his shoulder, was busy reversing, to head back toward the front. And in that instant I realized something.

The shivering man, the one too weak with exhaustion to be treated by Dr. Winters, wore the uniform of a French officer. But when he was shouting at me back in the ward, he'd spoken German. Fluent German.

"Wait," I said, quickly reaching out to touch Robinson's arm before he could start the ambulance. "There's something I must do."

"Too late, Sister." He gestured forward. "The shelling's started."

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We'll be needed."

I could see the horizon bright with flashes from the German guns, and hear the rolling sound of a barrage. The respite I'd counted on had been all too brief.

"It's urgent," I said. "I must speak to Matron." Something in my pocket rustled as I turned toward the door, already opening it. "And there's Sister MacRae's letter. I promised to post it."

He grumbled, but I was already out, nearly slipping in the mud, heading back the way I'd come. I reached the ward, and handed Sister MacRae's letter to the ward Sister, then asked where Matron was.

"She's in her office, I believe. She's just ordered tea. Can I help you?"

"Thank you. I had a question to put to her, nothing urgent."

But it was, and I tapped on her door.

"Come," she said, and I stepped inside.

She was an older woman, well into her thirties, but she looked even older tonight. I could see a bruise starting on her chin, where she too had been caught by one of the flailing limbs. It would be painful tomorrow.

"Sister Crawford?" she asked. "I thought I'd heard the ambulances leaving."

"I felt I should tell you. The patient. The one who was attacked. Did you hear what language he was shouting in?"

"French, I expect," she said wearily, and at that moment one of the Sisters brought in a tray with her tea. I waited until she had set it on the table and closed the door behind her.

"It was German," I said.

She forced a smile for my sake.

"Perhaps he's a Frenchman from Alsace-Lorraine. It's not unusual."

Perhaps he was. I felt a little foolish. Even after nearly fifty years of German rule, many people from that area were bilingual, using

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their French secretly.

The French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine along the Rhine frontier were given to Germany by the Treaty of Frankfurt after the 1870 war with Prussia. The excuse was that parts of the area spoke German, although the real reason—according to my father—was military. Memories were long, and much of Europe hadn't forgot Napoleon's victorious campaigns. Territory on the far side of the river—the western side—was considered a necessity to protect Germany from any future French dreams of a European empire.

“I thought I ought to mention it,” I said, suddenly uncertain.

“And very rightly so,” she told me, but her eyes were on the steaming pot of tea.

I thanked her and left her to it.