

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

Tin and Paper
Ella Drake

Ella Drake

Tin and Paper

Copyright 2009, Ella Drake

Cover Art: www.ireadromance.com

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not construed to be real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely incidental.

All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief excerpts or quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Corporal Etienne Constantine leaned on his cane and stared up the torch-lit drive to the mansion, windows all ablaze, twinkling lights on the leafless trees. The holiday music reached down the dark road and nearly strangled him. He hadn't heard The Nutcracker since he'd gone to the ballet—right before he'd shipped out as a whole man. He blinked away the memories crowding him.

Ever the soldier, he gripped the slick handle of his cane and stood rigid, unmoving.

"Come on, Tin. Let's get out of this drizzle." One of the soldiers called over his shoulder. Far ahead of Tin, the other twenty-four made dark shapes in the chill, moonless light. Their boots clambered up the steps. Five-and-twenty, a band of brothers, but Tin was different.

Back straight, he leaned on his prop as little as possible, even in the night not daring to show the hobble. The chatter of a party blared as a blast of light nearly touched his boots. His compatriots filed in and the door slammed, dimming the raucous laughter and cheer. Once the fastest in Basic, now the one who lagged, Tin didn't hurry. He didn't want to arrive with a red sweat-streaked face and panting for a lungful of air.

At the bottom of the steps, he paused. A prickling heat ran up his spine. On instinct, he craned his neck to peer into the window straight above.

Perfectly framed, the renowned dancer Natalya Wildes stared blankly through the glass, her well-known appearance shone like radiance from her pale skin. Light bounced and shimmered off her like glitter—in her hair, her bared shoulders, her red as plum lips that didn't smile. Arms stretched wide, she lifted her leg until her pink satin ballerina shoe pointed to the ceiling.

It was if she had one useful leg, like Tin.

Her ethereal beauty sent him reeling, wanting. His mouth watered and his heart stuttered before beating wild and erratically, pounding over the rush in his ears.

The door opened and two of his compatriots trotted down the stairs.

"Here. Let me help."

"Lean on me."

They didn't wait for his response but grabbed each arm and nearly lifted him off the ground.

"No." He stayed steady and didn't admonish his friends, his brothers. "I can stand on my own."

They let go, and he wavered a bit when they removed their support, but he muscled his unbending leg up the steps and ignored his ungainly appearance.

In full swing, the New Years party was as expected. With more money than a third-world country, Jack Truzlan put on the type of show talked about all year in this bedroom burb outside the city until the next party surpassed the last.

"Friends." Dark as coal hair and matching tux, the tall, slim Turzlan boomed and spread his hands wide. "Welcome my bright shiny soldiers to the festivities."

His soldiers. Not likely. Turzlan wanted the glitz and glamour of their dress blues. He didn't want the story of how Tin got that combat duty badge. The only reason he'd come to this farce was that proceeds went to The Bereaved Families Fund. Anything to help his brother's wives, children, families.

With nowhere else to go, his brothers in arms dispersed to mingle in the wealthy crowd. Tread heavy, Tin stepped down from the front grand entrance and into the large ballroom crowded with elegantly clad partiers.

The crowd buzzed and laughed around him, the press tight enough that even at his height, he could barely see two feet in front of him. He had to get out. With his stiff-legged gait, he couldn't move, hemmed in by the bodies. He shifted his shoulders, cane leading the way, and pressed his way through. A man lurched, and his elbow slammed into Tin's chest. Tin took it stoically and brushed past. A glass of champagne spilled down onto his boots. A woman tripped over his cane, turned with a harsh frown toward him, but once she looked at him, dropped her expression and looked away.

Tin moved onto the patio, lit with more twinkling lights and a large bonfire. He took a deep breath and enjoyed the stillness.

The prickling along his spine turned to heat that raced over his skin to land heavily in his chest. She stood there. Natalya. In the doorway of a gazebo, perfectly framed by the latticework grown through with vines that reached for her as he wished to do. Surrounding the gazebo, a pond graced with elegant swans added to the fairytale image. Her gauzy dress, thin as tissue paper, floated around her. A blue ribbon wrapped her waist and a tinsel rose adorned the pearly skin of her cleavage, a taunting flower that begged to be plucked.

"That is the wife for me." He whispered the wish aloud to give it wings, strength, and his heart fluttered with the words that escaped his hearing. "But she is too good for me."

The last thought, he couldn't even whisper, and it shivered across his soul.

I will know her. Again.

In the shadows, sure she hadn't seen him, he remained steadfast when a hand gripped his elbow. Tin didn't react, but stayed rigid, barely leaning on his cane, and stared at Natalya, the woman of his dreams. He didn't need to turn. He recognized the voice that admonished him.

Turzman.

"Soldier-boy. Don't wish for what is not yours."

At the noise in the hush, Natalya stopped her stretching, poised on one leg and squinted into the darkness. Her familiar, sultry voice sent a pang of remembered lust straight to his groin. "Tin?"

Turzman hissed in his ear. "She is mine. You will leave."

Before he could respond to Natalya, Tin was grabbed by dozens of hands, hefted into the air, and carted around the house filled with merry sounds. With a death-grip on his cane, he managed to keep ahold of it when unceremoniously dumped on the front drive. The Turzman body guards high-fived one another, the clap of their hands making them seem as boys taunting Tin.

Thunder ripped through the skies. A flash of lightening highlighted the mansion, ablaze with the party. Rain rumbled in and drenched him within seconds. Cane already slick, it slipped when he tried to leverage himself off the ground.

Tires crunching on the road, wipers swishing, a taxi pulled up, a dark green fish emblazoned on the door. The driver put the window down and leaned across the seat. "You called for a ride?"

"We did," one of the guards answered.

Before he could gather his senses to fight back, they threw him into the back of the cab, banging his knee in the process.

The car sped away, and he gripped the overhead handle bar to keep his leg from being crushed against the door. He clenched his teeth to deny the pain and tried to see out of the window.

Unsure of his direction, adrift on the sea, he ached for Natalya, the woman too good for him, who he wanted as no other. He'd not made her his wife before he'd ruined his leg. She wouldn't want him now.

"Where to?" The cabbie who smelled of fish, broke into the silence.

Tin gave his address.

The drive from the wealthy burb to the rundown section of town reminded Tin of his station. A soldier. His gut burned. He swallowed hard and let his defeat wash over him. His knee pulsed. It'd be one massive bruise in the morning.

He looked down at his bedraggled uniform. "I have nothing to offer her. Not even the faded uniform from my back."

"What's that? You don't have the fare?" The taxi driver didn't wait for his answer, but spoke into his radio. "He doesn't have the toll."

A hollow answer crackled back over the radio. "Didn't you pick him up at that fancy joint? Take him back and get the fare. Charge double."

When the taxi went silent, dark, as it moved from the city and back into the burbs, Tin decided fate led him on this path, back to the Turzlan house. Back to Natalya. The rain stopped in a sudden hush.

The car came to a halt. Through the windows of the mansion, the partygoers appeared in full swing. His brothers, his compatriots, had cleared an area of the floor and entertained the guests with mock battles, hand to hand exhibitions. Tin struggled out of the back seat, his leg dragging uselessly behind him. Cane in hand, he didn't bother with the entry stairs, but headed to the path around the side of the house. Behind him, the cabbie yelled after him. "Wait a minute. I need the fare."

Tin didn't answer.

He had to get back to his paper ballerina. Now. The urgency gripped him as real as the danger of a roadside checkpoint. His life lay in the balance, like then, in someone else's hands.

When he found the gazebo, he halted, breathing heavy against the pulsing agony that was his useless leg. Natalya remained there, transfixed in the entrance of the gazebo. Like in his dreams, her beauty radiated out and clutched him, forever yearning and aching for her, the woman he wanted as his.

Before he made it all the way to her, she held out her elegant hand and beckoned him. "Tin. I waited."

"You didn't wait very long. I was only deployed for six months." Thankful for the dark, he couldn't help the stiffening of his leg that made his limp more pronounced as he approached.

Overhead light shining down on her, catching on the glitter covering her shoulders and in the valley between her breasts, she frowned and shook her head. "I waited here, for you to come back tonight."

"You couldn't wait for my rotation to end, though. What we had wasn't enough for you then. It won't be enough for you now that I'm half a man."

She sucked in an audible breath.

"Or will it? What I have between my legs still works just fine." He wanted that back as soon as he said it. She'd never promised. He'd only wished, and she'd never done anything to deserve such talk.

"You're right." She stepped down from the gazebo and into his personal space. He welcomed it. Every movement a study in grace and style, she even smelled expensive. Her perfume subtle and compelling made his mouth water. But she didn't touch him. "I didn't wait to get on with my life. I found a sponsor for the tour. Turzlan."

Tin shuddered and leaned heavily onto his cane. Knowing it in the weeks since his return hadn't made it one iota easier to hear, face to face, ugly-mug to exquisite perfection.

Her hand stretched out to brush the hair off his perspiring forehead. Without a flinch, he took her ministrations though they scalded him. "I don't know whether to take you to bed or walk away."

"My tin man why would you walk away?"

She didn't say no to going to bed, and that more than anything decided his course. "You live with another man, Natalya, but I cannot walk, or even limp away."

"He wouldn't let me go. I'm trapped here, in this mansion, on display but no more than a prisoner. I couldn't even write to you, but I thought of you every day."

Tin straightened, gripped her hand, and pulled her into his embrace. "What do you mean, a prisoner? Did he hurt you? I'll kill the bastard."

He'd never meant anything more. He'd never felt such rage, not even when he'd cursed the heavens for a war that left his left leg scarred and crippled.

"He hasn't touched me." She wrapped her arms around him and leaned into him. Her cool skin like silk. "Not that he didn't try to seduce me, but what I meant was that he hampered my movements, controlled my every appearance and even my dance practices in exchange for the tour funding. He treated me like a doll."

"Why?"

"Why put up with it? I was hurt when you left. I thought this would be a way to get ahead in my career, to put you behind me, but I missed you."

He crushed her to him, kissed the top of her head, and spoke into her silky hair. "I missed you, too."

How to tell her of the long hours of duty when he dare not think of her or go insane? How to tell her of the weeks of recovery when he wanted her more than he wanted to walk again? How to tell her how his heart turned to tin, empty, when he heard she'd moved in with another man?

"Shh." She gripped his uniform, rose onto her toes, and rubbed her nose against his. "Don't cry, my steadfast tin soldier."

He shuddered and sucked in a long breath. "Am I?"

She didn't answer but kissed his cheek. The wetness from his tears grew warm beneath her lips. Over and over, she placed petal soft caresses along his chin, his nose, the edge of his jaw. He shivered and a trembling set in as the tears came. He hadn't cried when the roadside bomb had burned his leg. He hadn't broken down when the doctors told him his knee was shattered. He hadn't whimpered once during rehab.

"Come with me." She kissed him then. Her lips pressed to his, parted, and her tongue ran across the seam of his mouth. He suckled. Took her gift and fed upon it, eager, hungry, ravenous. He'd starved for her for nearly a year and the floodgates had opened. He didn't care to shut them, but he had to delay the deluge long enough to get her to a bed.

"I want to take you right here, on the ground if I have to, but I'm afraid I need a bed." The gravelly demand belied the plea beneath.

"Your knee." If she'd sounded pitying, he might've backed off. Maybe. But she didn't.

They went around to the dark side of the mansion. Natalya motioned him to be quiet as she pushed open a sliding glass patio door. He followed, taking pains not to shuffle his leg and careful not to clack the floor with his cane.

She led them through a room that looked like a study and into a small side bedroom, probably a guest room because even in the dark, the generic flavor of the décor couldn't belong to Natalya who surrounded herself with lush fabrics and carefully chosen antiques. He'd never understood why she'd become his, the elegant dancer with dreams and the ROTC boy who had none beyond fulfilling his duty.

"This is a guest room."

She stood there, wringing her hands in front of her tulle tutu. "It has a bed."

"Yes." The answer was barely more than a breath.

Cane thrown to the side, he reached her in one sure stride. He ran a finger over her shoulder, along the seam of her dress, and down to the teasing valley still glittering in the dim light. She trembled. "You were to perform tonight?"

"Yes." The answer tingled against his ear as he leaned to trace the path after his finger with his tongue. "You should get out of that wet uniform. You're cold."

"I'm not cold." He murmured against her skin and little bumps that shivered across her flesh bolstered him. "You make me burn."

"We'll burn together, then."

She worked on his buttons and pushed his uniform off his shoulders. When she helped him remove his pants, she carefully worked the material past his swollen knee.

"Your leg." She kissed him softly, like a butterfly brushing against his skin.

"Don't look at it. It's ugly."

"You could never be ugly." She kissed him again. The hardened scars taking away most of the sensation and leaving only the faintest tickling.

"You can't heal them that way." He broadened his stance to take her weight, lifted her off her feet, and clung to her, her paper thin dress against his naked, exposed self. "This is what I need."

He took her mouth again and careful to keep her from harm, he fell upon the bed. They landed, him on bottom, her skirt flouncing around them. His knee twinged, but he ignored it.

With a caress, he shoved her dress down from her shoulders to expose the breasts that taunted him from above. He captured her nipples, one with his mouth the other with his hand as he twisted and rolled it in the way he knew drove her crazy.

She groaned, but instead of leaning into him for more, as he expected, she rolled to the side. "Just a minute."

Within seconds, the frilly skirt flew through the air. The hard tension left his body. She hadn't meant to leave or spurn him, she was getting naked. Sweet, sweet heaven.

"Come here." He highlighted the gruff demand by reaching for her. She threaded her fingers through his and the weight of her hand removed all that was left of the burden he'd carried on his shoulders all the way from the Middle East to here, to her, to home.

The dim light shining off her pale skin, she crawled across the bed and threw her knee across his waist. She sat on across his middle, the heat between her legs sending him into overdrive.

She led and he followed.

Her soft skin glided over his rough calloused body, and without preamble, she reached between her legs to position him and slid down his tip.

"Oh." She moaned.

He gripped her breasts as she panted and worked herself down to fully seat herself. She started slowly. Rising up at a maddening drawn-out pace and sliding down, covering him, sheathing him with a teasing rhythm that put his teeth on edge. Tin smoothed his hands over her skin wherever he could reach, gave her all of this moment, and remained steadfast as she took her pleasure from him.

"I missed this. I waited for this." She tightened her thighs around him. "I missed you."

For a brief moment, he let the triumph take him to the edge, but he held, didn't fall over, with the pleasure her words brought him. She'd waited.

When he couldn't take it anymore, the bliss she gave him, he slid his hands down her sides to ride her hips. And with the sure knowledge of her responses, he caressed that point of pleasure at just the right time to send her over. She clenched hard around him and threw her head back, moving her hips wildly to ride him fast and hard.

The burning, the heat raced up his spine as he neared that place only she could take him.

In the back of his mind he heard the music blaring, the crowd cheering, but here, with her, he bucked his hips up and found his release. The flames of lust and love overtook him as he melted inside her.

Leaps of colors danced under his closed eyelids like fireworks.

She fell onto his chest and mumbled, "Let's go home."

He hugged her tight and ran his fingers through her silken hair. "I love you, with all my heart."

The fire rekindled between them, they escaped.

*

The next morning, as the firemen turned off their hoses, the mansion a pile of smoldering cinders, a local policeman filled out his report. "You should have gotten a permit for those fireworks. And you should've gotten a reputable company with a clean safety record."

Turzlan didn't respond as he followed the fire inspector through the house. The inspector he'd paid off so he could remain on scene. The man shook his head as he kicked through the rubble. "Everyone's accounted for except your girlfriend?"

"She wasn't my girlfriend." Turzlan ground his teeth. "And you know as well as I that everyone got out. No casualties found."

They moved through an area that used to be a guest room. Turzlan halted, his entire being stilled, even the air in his lungs.

There, on the ground, the tinsel rose lay. The rose he'd last seen on Natalya. The rose he'd given her.

Beside it, the heart-shaped medal of a soldier, tarnished with soot, caught the morning light.

The light glimmered, as if the heart winked at him.

About the Author

Ella Drake is a Dark Paranormal and Science Fiction Romance author who sometimes dabbles in Weird SF stories ([free read](#) on her website). To learn more about Ella or join her quarterly newsletter, visit her on her webpage at www.elladrake.com. Ella can also be found on [facebook](#) and [twitter](#).

"*Tin and Paper*" is a twisted fairytale based on "The Steadfast Tin Soldier". For more of Ella's retellings, try **The Forbidden Chamber**, a historical paranormal re-imagining of "Bluebeard".

Samhain author page: <http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/ella-drake>