



C H A P T E R O N E

HERBE STOOD in the doorway of the bedroom, his big blue eyes wide with astonishment. His fingers clutched the cap in his one hand. Hesitatingly, he advanced two steps, speechless, mouth gaping. Behind him followed his equally astounded brother, Willie.

“Mamma!” cried Herbe. “Why, Mamma!” His louder cry was drenched with alarm. A cloud of bewilderment enveloped him. He took two more cautious steps into the room. Surprise became a live, unpleasant something quivering in the pit of his little stomach. “Mamma! Emeline!” he exploded.

On the bed were two suitcases open, but filled. His mother and sister were both crying convulsively. Crying out loud.

Herbe had seen his mother actually cry only once before, and it had frightened and distressed him at that time. He recalled it easily, definitely, clearly, because it happened on his fifth birthday, November 30.

Since the last day of November, Grete Engelhardt had been trying desperately to hide the terrible blow from the two boys. She had pretty well succeeded until now. When they came

upstairs unexpectedly and caught her and Emeline off guard, pent-up emotion shattered the little control she had left. It was like the breaking of a great dam which had been cracking underneath for five torturous months. She gave way completely.

"What's wrong?" Herbe demanded frantically. He stepped close to his mother. He grabbed her hand. Willie followed, whimpering and dumfounded.

"Oh, Herbe, my darling! My baby!" sobbed his mother. She clasped the astonished child in her arms. She pressed him tight. She tilted back his face. She kissed him twice, three times.

"And Willie, my dear boy," sobbed the mother brokenly. Claspng the older boy in her arms, she kissed him again and again. "How—" she cried, "how can I—how can I give you up?" she cried hysterically.

All the while Emeline was bending over one of the suitcases crying, too, as though her heart was breaking. The two baffled boys, dazed and horrified, stood frozen.

"Papa's coming," choked Emeline at length, between sobs.

More confused than ever, the boys stood staring, wide-eyed and fearful. Papa coming? Why were Mamma and Emeline crying about that? They had all been talking and dreaming and waiting for his coming for months and months. Papa coming at last? That was the wonderful day they were all living for. It was the one and only thing they needed to make Mamma and everyone in the family supremely happy!

Tears coursed unhindered down the mother's face. "Tell them," she sobbed, wringing her hands fitfully. "Emeline, I—I—can't do it." And she sank onto the bed and buried her face in the clothes in the one suitcase. Her whole body shook with sobs.

Emeline could not speak at once. It took her several long moments to bring her emotions under control. "I know you boys can't understand." Her lips quivered. "Mamma and I can't either. But—" she faltered. Fresh tears flowed. She bit the ends of her

fingers nervously. "When Papa comes he's taking both of you with him." She gave way again to loud crying.

"When?" asked Herbe excitedly. "When's Papa coming?"

"Today." Emeline put her head on the dresser top and covered her face with both hands.

Herbe pulled frantically at her sleeve. "Where is he going to take us?"

"W-w-w-where?" stammered Willie nervously, eyes shimmering with tears. He went over and pulled on his mother's arm. "M-m-m-mamma," he whined pitifully. "M-m-m-mamma!"

"We don't know," cried the mother. She drew Willie close to herself. She kissed his hand. She moaned. She kissed his hand again.

"All we know," explained Emeline feebly, between sobs, "is that Papa wrote to Mamma and said he'd be coming about the first of May and she was to have you and all your clothes and all of his things ready to go. He's somewhere in town now." Tears dropped from her bent head straight to the floor. "He called a while ago and—and—said he'd be here in an hour."

Herbe strained to hear the last words. A confused expression of mixed anticipation and awful dread crossed Herbe's young, tender face. A tear hung trembling in each startled blue eye. He clung frantically to Emeline's arm. "But aren't you and Mamma going along too?" He jerked her arm for an answer.

Emeline shook her head.

"No," answered the mother. She got up and walked to the window. Herbe followed her.

"Mamma," he cried sadly, "I don't understand. How long will we be gone?"

His mother only shook her head.

"Please, Mamma," begged Herbe, half crying, half screaming. "Please," he repeated, pulling at her dress, "don't cry like this. We'll come back. Won't we, Willie?"

Willie nodded, whimpering louder. He was shaking now and his pale eyes were filled with confusion.

"Emeline," the mother struggled to speak. "You take them downstairs and wash their hands and faces. I just can't do it this time." She clutched at her throat as if to press away the terrible, choking feeling. "Then bring them back so we can pack what they have on."

"What are we going to wear?" Herbe's face was a picture of utterly confused distress. His voice mirrored his perplexity. He had never seen his mother, nor Emeline, cry like this.

"Your best clothes," whispered Emeline, and she led the dazed boys out of the room.

While the three were downstairs, the mother unpacked and repacked the two suitcases, lingering over and fondling tenderly each separate piece of clothing. Some she held against her heart, her cheek, her lips. On tiptoe she slipped downstairs to her own bedroom and hunted through the top dresser drawer until she found what she wanted. In fresh, half-blinding tears she hurried, stumbling, mumbling, back to the boys' room directly over hers. Carefully she tucked something inside an undershirt in each suitcase.



"Emeline," Herbe exclaimed. Grabbing hold of the towel, he looked up into his sister's face with bewildered, pleading eyes, "where is Papa taking us?"

"He didn't tell us, Herbe." Her voice was dull.

"Well, why aren't you and Mamma going along?" the child insisted.

"You will have to ask Papa that, Herbe dear." Two tears fell on Emeline's dress front. She wiped her eyes with the towel. "Now you go on up and let Mamma change your clothes." She glanced uneasily at the wall clock. "I'll do Willie."

At five minutes before eleven the two closed suitcases and a large cardboard box were in the hallway, just inside the front door. On top lay a brown paper sack containing four sandwiches, two apples, and raisin-filled cookies. The boys had on their topcoats, caps in hand, and stood tense, frightened, speechless.

"Come. Watch here at the front window," Grete told the boys. Her face was drawn and haggard, her bloodshot eyes tearless now, but burning with inexpressible grief. "When you see him coming, you go to the door, Herbe. I will tell you good-by in here. I cannot see you leave."

Little Herbe's eyes shifted uneasily. Everything was mixed up. Horribly mixed. For months he had imagined how it would be when his brave soldier papa came home from the war. He and Willie would run to meet him—to be sure, he'd beat Willie and give the first kiss. He could run faster than Willie.

And Mamma and Emeline would take turns hugging and kissing Papa. Mamma first, of course. Then he and Willie would crawl all over him and mess up his hair and pull his ears and squeal and laugh like they did the last time he was home on a short visit.

They'd have special things to eat, and Mamma and Papa and Emeline would sip a little wine like they did only on extra-special occasions. After an evening of fun and play and laughter, Papa and Mamma would both go along upstairs and watch him and Willie get ready for bed. And after saying a lot of nice things to them and to each other, they'd kiss them good night. And Papa was going to show them how to make a wonderful kite. And he was going to make them a marble-rolling rack and a new tongue for their wagon.

And now. Now this sudden, strange, mysterious, unhappy turn! Herbe stood motionless at the window, transfixed by compelling, unexplainable, tormenting thoughts. Why must he and Willie leave Mamma and Emeline and go off to an unknown somewhere with a papa who had been away so long? He scarcely