

CONTENTS

ONE	1
TWO	7
THREE	11
FOUR	17
FIVE	23
SIX	29
SEVEN	33
EIGHT	39
NINE	47
TEN	55
ELEVEN	63
TWELVE	67
THIRTEEN	73
FOURTEEN	79
FIFTEEN	83
SIXTEEN	89
SEVENTEEN	97

EIGHTEEN	103
NINETEEN	111
TWENTY	117
TWENTY-ONE	125
TWENTY-TWO	131
AUTHOR'S NOTE	137

ONE

LANDSTUHL, GERMANY – 1944

Paula stared out the snow-flecked window at the back of a man disappearing around the corner of the shop across the street. He walked just like Papa.

Of course, it couldn't really be Papa. He was lost somewhere in Russia. Mama said he couldn't send any more letters now that the German army was so far away, but Paula had heard Grandpa telling Grandma that the troops were lost in Russia. He said *lost* the way an adult says it when they really mean *dead*, and Grandma hadn't contradicted him. Grandma almost always contradicted him.

Paula felt unexpectedly sad when a rush of snow slid off the shop roof and buried the man's footprints as if he had never been there at all.

She turned her attention back to the sixth-grade classroom: to Ingrid in front of her and Greta two seats up in the

War Bride

next aisle, to the teacher reminding the class to study their grammar for the test tomorrow. Then everyone was out of their seats in an excited rush of packing bookbags and putting on wraps. School was over for the day, and the snow outside looked mighty good for packing.

Greta scored the first hit. No fair—she had scraped snow off the railing as they made their quiet and orderly exit from the school. They were on the sidewalk now, and Paula would show the girls how to fight a real snowball war.

She shifted her bag so it wouldn't slip to the ground and scooped up enough snow for the perfect bomb. Before Greta could finish smoothing the ball she was making, Paula hit her smack in the chest and followed up with a solid hit with a second ball on Ingrid's right arm.

Paula's laugh was cut short by a snowball exploding in her face. She turned to see her little brother Ernst grinning over the top of the school steps. That stinker had been waiting in ambush for her hands to be empty. She laughed again.

The group turned to make their slow and playful way into the cleft between the hills where their homes lay.

A few enemy planes flew overhead as they turned onto Muehlstrasse. But the planes were too high and far off for the air-raid sirens to sound.

"You think we'll ever get bombed?" Ingrid asked in a sudden turn of mood.

"Nah," Ernst said, a little too quickly. "Those planes are headed for Hamburg or Bremerhaven. Besides, we're too close to the hills. Those Americans can't get low enough to hit any of our buildings."

“They could start out low and drop their bombs, then fly higher when they get to the hills,” Ingrid said.

Ernst shook his head. “Nah. A plane’s gotta be going fast to stay in the air. If it slows down to look for a target, it’ll fall out of the sky. And if it doesn’t slow down, it’ll crash into the side of the hill before it can get a good aim. Besides, there’s nothing here worth bombing. What are they gonna aim for, the church? the orphanage?”

Ingrid wasn’t convinced. “They might aim for the hospital. It’s on the top of the hill.”

“And hurt a bunch of sick people? What good would that do?”

Paula jumped in. “If we’re so safe, then why do we have to hide in the bunker every time the planes go over?”

“We didn’t have to go to the bunker this time,” Ernst said.

“We did last night.”

“That’s just to make the old grannies feel safe.” Ernst talked brave enough, but Paula saw the telltale twitch over his left eye. He was scared too.

“Have you heard anything about your father?” Greta asked.

Paula shook her head.

“You must be worried.”

“Aw, the mail’s just held up at the lines,” Ernst said.

Paula glared at him incredulously. “For three years?”

“They’ve been in Russia three years,” he said. “He hasn’t been missing all that time.”

“But you admit he’s missing.”

“That’s not what I meant.” His eyelid was twitching again.

Paula looked down at the snow on the sidewalk. Maybe Ernst was right. Maybe Papa was just too far over the lines

War Bride

to get a letter out. Then again—she remembered the way the man’s footprints had been swallowed up by the snow—maybe sometimes people disappeared and you never heard from them again.

The children continued up the street in silence. Greta said goodbye at her door, and Ingrid turned onto her street a few houses later. It was just Paula and Ernst now.

“Let’s take the shortcut through the woods,” he said.

“Mama likes us to come straight home.”

He tugged at her sleeve. “Come on. We can walk fast.”

Paula looked at his face, so young and expectant. He was only nine, after all. She smiled and let him turn her onto the trail. Then she took off running. “Race you to the top of the ridge.”

She tore up the trail with Ernst not five meters behind. Paula could still beat him, but not by much.

They reached the top of the ridge behind their street in record time and stopped to lean against the big rock at the first fork in the trail. Both were panting and smiling from the pure joy of racing in the snow.

Ernst looked up suddenly, craning his neck as if to see around the hill behind them.

“What?” Paula asked.

“Another plane. Sounds low. We better head down.”

She heard the plane suddenly, as if it had crept up the far side of the hill to catch them unaware; now it roared from behind.

“Run!” Ernst shouted, and they took off down the trail.

The plane was louder now. Paula could almost feel it behind her. Just above the trees.

Then everything exploded at once. Ernst yelling, “He’s dropping his bombs!” Herself slowing, just a bit, to stare up. And her foot slipping on the snow as she caught a glimpse of the plane hulking above her and saw, as if in slow motion, the bomb separating from its massive belly to plunge through the trees.

She lost sight of the plane and the bomb as she slid, then tumbled, down the bank.

Ernst was still on the trail when the bomb hit. They both tucked their heads into their arms as best they could, but the sound of the blast still stung their ears.

And then it was over. The plane was gone. Ernst ran over to the spot where Paula had first begun her slide down the hill, calling, “You okay?” Then he stopped and stared at the ground where she had stood only seconds before. “Oh, Paula. You gotta see this!”

She was shaking all over, but she didn’t think she was hurt anywhere. “What?”

“You’re not gonna believe it.”

Paula grabbed hold of the tree beside her and pulled herself up to stand on the steep slope. “What?”

“It’s too hot to pick up. It hit right where you were standing—the very spot.”



Mama, Ernst, and Paula, circa 1939

War Bride

“What?” she asked again, slightly miffed at his nonanswers. Holding onto tree trunks, she climbed to the top of the bank.

Then she saw what had so amazed her brother. Sizzling in the snow, searing into the trunk of the very tree she had lost hold of just seconds before, was a piece of red-hot shrapnel longer than her arm.

Ernst shook his head. “It’s a good thing you fell when you did.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, God must have really been looking out for you.”

“Yeah.”

His look of relieved awe was joined by lines of worry as he added, “Mama’s gonna have a fit.”

Paula felt surprisingly at peace as they made their way down the trail to their home on the edge of town. Mama’s punishments weren’t really so bad, and when she heard how God had saved her two children—in a real live bombing—she was sure to go easy on them.

“You still think Landstuhl’s not worth bombing?” Paula asked, as they stepped out of the woods onto the terrace behind their house.

“I said *the town’s* not worth bombing. That guy didn’t hit anything but trees.”

“Uh huh. You might want to remember that the next time you take a walk in the woods.”

Ernst, for once, had nothing to say.

TWO

LANDSTUHL, GERMANY – 1945

Paula tested the temperature of the dishwater (perfect) and set about washing the breakfast dishes. It was a pleasant task, and it gave her time to think.

All the talk was that the Americans were winning and the war would be over any day now. Mama wasn't sure she liked the idea of Americans in Germany, but even she agreed that the war couldn't end a day too soon. Who really cared who won anyway? As long as the men came home and life could get back to normal.

Well, most families could get back to normal. Those that were still getting mail, that is. Papa hadn't been heard from in years. Deep in her heart Paula knew what Mama couldn't admit. Papa wasn't just lost; he was gone. He was never coming home.

Ernst burst into the kitchen as she set the last dish to dry and was hanging the dishrag on the towel rack. "The Americans are here!" he shouted. "Hurry!"

War Bride

Mama came into the kitchen. “What’s all this about Americans?” she asked.

“They’re here! A big line of them. They’ve got tanks and everything.”

Mama looked worried. “Are they shooting?”

“Of course not,” Ernst said in tones of long-suffering incredulity. “They’re waving and handing out candy.”

“It’s probably poisoned,” Mama said.

Ernst ignored her. “Everyone’s cheering. You’ve got to come!”

The entire family, Grandpa and Grandma included, hurried down Muehlstrasse to watch the column of tanks rolling into town. The guns were indeed silent, and smiling soldiers waved and cheered from the open hatches.

Some of the soldiers walking beside the tanks were tossing candy to the children gathered on the sidewalks. And the people of Landstuhl were waving back. Most of them, anyway. Mama held her hands stiffly at her side. But Grandpa spared a smile or two for the advancing troops.

Paula could hardly take in what was happening. Germany had been at war for half her life, almost as long as she could remember. In all that time the Allies, and more specifically, the Americans, had been the enemy. And now, apparently, they were the *liberators*?

From what exactly were they being liberated? From their own country?

What if Mama was right and the candy was poisoned? Could this be a final trick to conquer the German people once and for all?

Even as she was trying to sort it all out, she saw a soldier smiling at her. He was the most amazing thing Paula had ever seen: a man whose face was blacker than the night, with a smile so white his face seemed to shine.

She had heard of black men, even seen pictures in one of the encyclopedias at school. But here was a real live man, the color of espresso, smiling down at her from an American tank like he was greeting a lady in the park on a Sunday afternoon. Would wonders never cease?

One thing she knew: that was no prisoner's smile on the man's face. It was the smile of a hero. The Americans, whatever their skin looked like, were here to help them. And she was glad.

It didn't take long to learn she had judged the Americans correctly. Within a few days they were distributing food, rebuilding walls, even returning a few of the townsmen who had come under their keeping as they advanced into the Rhineland. Papa was not among them.

As the days and weeks passed, and men returned in a steady flow, life did indeed regain some of its normalcy. Though having American soldiers in charge of the town was, admittedly, a bit abnormal.

Still, it was better than the alternative. Ingrid said she had an uncle east of Berlin, where the Russian army was in charge. Things weren't as nice there. Apparently the Russians had a different definition of *liberation*.

Paula could only thank God that He had seen fit to have them fall into American hands.



War Bride

As the years passed the Americans became a normal part of the town, even returning control to the local government as they continued to help rebuild the country. The hospital on the hill, for instance—the United States had expanded it into a full Air Force base and used it as a central location for treating all kinds of soldiers on European soil.

By the time Paula finished high school and graduated to a job at the sewing factory on the far side of town, the visiting Americans had become a vital, if slightly exotic, part of the community.