
1.

Bude—December 1943

CALEB HAD SEEN LITTLE SUNLIGHT since sailing from New York City. He peered out the train window as the Scottish countryside passed by under a wintry sky. Although gray, the sky was not as dark as it had been on the *Queen Elizabeth* as they crossed the Atlantic. The deeper hues of sea and sky had been almost indistinguishable except for the presence of whitecaps, which marked the horizon as the waves moved across the ocean to smash against the ship.

Two of his fellow Rangers were asleep in their seats across the aisle. The ocean voyage had been difficult for both of them. Wachowski, the big Pole from Milwaukee, had spent a good part of the journey leaning over the side rail. Ramirez, the very slight soldier from New Mexico, had

fares a little better but had still spent a large part of the trip leaning on his duffel bag with his knees pulled up and his head tucked against his crossed arms.

The time since they disembarked in Greenock had not allowed for sufficient recovery for his friends, who had left most of their food untouched at each mess call. They had not been in Scotland for long when the 2nd Battalion was ordered to board the train to take them to Bude in Cornwall. Now, as the train rushed along the tracks, Caleb wondered what lay ahead of them. The sergeant had said Bude was a small beachside resort town before the war. Caleb was certain they weren't going there for rest or relaxation.



When the locomotive finally came to a halt, the soldiers collected their gear and stepped down from the train. In winter it was difficult for Caleb to imagine the town as a summer resort for tourists. The narrow streets were lined with white brick houses that shared common walls and a roofline. Only the placement of chimneys seemed to mark where one residence ended and the next began. The uniform color and texture of the buildings was quite different from the more expansive log structures in

Wyoming, and the narrow cobblestone streets of Bude would never accommodate a turning wagon pulled by a team of horses. When they boarded the waiting trucks for the short ride to the military base, he noted a defensive concrete bunker along the beachfront—not a welcoming site for any seashore visitors.

They unloaded in front of a couple of large Quonset huts flanked by several rows of tents. An American officer stood on a platform in front of the buildings along with two counterparts from the British Commandos.

“Form two lines to enter the huts,” he said. “A through K on the right. L through Z on the left. Inside are tables where you will receive your housing assignments. There aren't enough tents or barracks to accommodate all personnel, so many of you will be housed in private homes made available by the residents of Bude. It goes without saying that at all times you will conduct yourselves in a dignified manner befitting members of the U.S. military.”



Caleb pulled the strap of his duffel bag against his shoulder. He was on the assigned street and just needed to find the correct house. The street was broader than most and the

homes set back enough so that each had a small front yard with enough room for hedges to separate each residence. He placed the slip of paper with the address marked on it into his pocket when he approached his assigned lodging. A slight, white-bearded old man in a black turtleneck opened the door after Caleb knocked.

“You must be our boarder;” the man greeted him. “I’m Joe Bennett, retired Merchant Marine. Live here with my wife and daughter. Got our spare room ready for you at the top of the stairs. It’s small, but you should be comfortable.”

“Corporal Huddleston, D Company, 2nd Ranger Battalion, U.S. Army,” Caleb introduced himself.

The old sailor ushered Caleb in. “First door to the right. Take your time to unpack and get settled. Wife’s putting on the kettle. Join us down here in the parlor if you like for a cup of tea. ‘Course, ya might want a spot of real Scotch whisky instead.”

2.

Elizabeth

THE YOUNG GIRL TUCKED IN her woolen scarf and buttoned her winter coat over it. She pushed her rickety bicycle out the front door and waited near the end of the hedge, shivering. It was too early for the morning sun, so the chill in the humid air would still penetrate her clothing.

She only waited for a few moments before the door of the adjacent row house opened and another bicycle appeared. It was pushed by a tall, middle-aged woman. A canvas bag of folded clothing rested in the basket on the handlebars along with a white nurse’s cap in a small hat box. The older woman, Elizabeth’s neighbor, had a stern appearance, but her chiseled facial features broke into a smile when she saw the girl.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” she said. “Once again you’re here early. Are you ready for our work today? I’m sure we will have much to do.”

“Yes ma’am. There’s so much to learn, but I still favor it so much more than doing factory work.”

“Good.” The older woman nodded. “We should try to make good time to Stratton. Our ride is only about two and a half kilometers, but if we don’t hurry this morning, we’ll feel frozen by the time we reach the hospital.”

“Yes ma’am,” answered Elizabeth.

“Very well then, let’s get started.”

The older woman pushed off onto her bike and Elizabeth followed just behind her. There never was much time for any morning conversation, but Elizabeth had nothing but respect for her older companion. She admired the nurse’s discipline. Every morning she made the journey to the hospital in Stratton with a clean uniform folded in the bag on the front of her bicycle. She traveled dressed for the weather without much concern for fashion. This morning she wore thick britches with an oversized British military sweater and wool scarf. A short wool coat and dark stocking cap like the local fishermen favored completed her attire.

Elizabeth knew all about her neighbor’s background even before she began accompanying Rosemary Pitcairn

to the hospital. Elizabeth’s mother had recounted how Rosemary had trained at a time when nurses were required to live in quarters on the hospital grounds. They were not allowed to have social lives or marry and, in fact, were called sisters not unlike nuns. In the 1930s there had been concerns of an influenza outbreak in and around Bude. In view of the experience with the pandemic in 1918, the hospital in Stratton decided to facilitate treatment and isolation by establishing a clinic in Bude. Rosemary had been handpicked to staff it and therefore was allowed to move from the nurses’ quarters in Stratton to be closer to the clinic. Somehow, after the threat of another epidemic had passed, she never moved back. Her seniority and expertise were such that no one pressed the issue, although maintaining her own home away from the hospital grounds probably cost her the chance of becoming matron in charge of all nursing.

Even though Sister Rosemary had sacrificed her chance for professional advancement, Elizabeth felt very fortunate that the friendship her mother shared with their neighbor had created her own opportunity. Having recently finished secondary school, Elizabeth was thrilled when she was offered the chance to accompany Rosemary to the hospital. Elizabeth worked hard at whatever task she was assigned

and learned quickly while observing hospital care. When the hospital became short-staffed by the war effort as the younger doctors and many of the nurses were called away for military service, she became even more valuable. Largely through Rosemary's efforts, Elizabeth was granted a small stipend and her responsibilities increased. She not only assisted with patient care but, on occasion, was even allowed to assist with procedures for Dr. Carveth, the nearly eighty-year-old physician who had come out of retirement to staff the hospital while his younger colleagues were away at war.



Elizabeth had begun her duties on the ward before Sister Rosemary emerged from the dressing room in her starched nursing uniform. Already she had refilled the patients' bedside water pitchers, emptied the bedpans, and collected the necessary dressings for their rounds with Dr. Carveth.

"Have you made your decision?" asked the nurse.

"I looked into the program offered by the Ministry of Health," Elizabeth responded. "They offer a generous salary of forty pounds a year while in training, but Father insists I not go to London while there is still danger of German bombing."

"There are schools outside of London. I think you would find the programs here in Cornwall quite satisfactory."

"I am looking into those as well."

Elizabeth didn't have the courage to tell her friend that as much as she loved caring for patients, she wasn't certain she could make the sacrifices Rosemary had made for her career. The young woman understood the commitment but longed to experience more of life's pleasures.



They had completed rounds and Elizabeth had been able to change the beds where needed before she met Dr. Carveth and Sister Rosemary in the outpatient examining room in midafternoon.

"I'm afraid it's pneumonia," the old practitioner informed the sickly young man seated at the edge of the exam table. "Listen here," he held his stethoscope against the man's lower chest and handed the earpieces to Elizabeth.

She had no difficulty in appreciating the harsh tones and crackles in contrast to the smooth sounds of inspiration and expiration she had heard in normal lungs.

"You'll have to stay and be started on sulfa," instructed Dr. Carveth. "We'll step out to let you dress and then one of the nurses will accompany you to the ward."

When they were out of earshot the old physician lamented, "Sulfa! Not as good as the new penicillin, but, like most supplies, the military is hoarding everything for the war effort."



Once the new patient had been assigned a bed and made comfortable Rosemary stated, "It's getting late and will be dark soon. You should go on ahead and get home. I am just going to check our stock of medications before I leave. I will see you early tomorrow."

"Thank you," replied Elizabeth. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Elizabeth rode her bike back to Bude quickly, not wanting to delay her parents' dinner hour. Once her bike was leaned against the wall in the entryway and she had hung her coat on the nearby hook, she followed the sound of voices into the living room where she found her father explaining the merits of Scotch whisky to a handsome American soldier.