

Prologue

My name is Carl Kester. I am an ordinary person. I have no special talents save that I can fit into almost any situation. But I suspect that many people are able to do that.

The first time I met Petra Baird was near Narvik in northern Norway. It was in late winter or very early spring in that part of the world. The snow was still rather deep although during the daytime it had already begun to melt. Petra Baird was a nurse on the staff of Dr. Pershing, a field surgeon. Unfortunately I only knew her for about six weeks when our ways parted.

The next time I ran into her was on a ship. Again we became friends. This time we stayed together for several months. Yet once more fate pulled us apart. I had a difficult time accepting the separation as at the time it seemed to be permanent. Over the ensuing months and years, actually only about a year and a half, I often thought of what might have been.

And then one day, quite unexpectedly, we met once more. It was in a rather strange location, on an abandoned farm, quite far away from civilization as we normally understand the concept. We spent the next two years together. But let me tell you in greater detail what has come to pass.

Chapter 1

It was Saturday afternoon. I looked at the clock hanging on the wall above a picture of a mountain scene. Almost ten to three. There were a few things I needed from the Miracle Mart across the road. Might as well go over right now and stock up on cereal, bread and milk, I thought. I grabbed my wallet and the keys lying on the counter.

Looking through the kitchen window I peered at the wind driven sleet. It looked like the middle of January, not one bit as if spring was well under way. I could dimly make out five moving vans waiting their turn to unload their contents. They'll probably have two of the three elevators tied up, I thought.

It was the end of April, and like every month end, people were moving in and out of the building. Having two out of the three elevators on service was the only unpleasant aspect of living in an apartment building on the fifteenth floor. Well, you can't have everything, I told myself.

I slipped into my parka and put on my beret. On impulse I grabbed the umbrella hanging by the door. Then I stepped into the corridor, carefully locking the door behind me.

At precisely 2:50 I pushed button for the elevator in the hallway and prepared myself for a lengthy wait. I was greatly surprised when the elevator door opened before I had taken two steps towards the window from where on a clear day one could see busy Warden Avenue and the traffic light at the corner. I found it even more astonishing that the elevator was empty.

Naturally I expected it to stop at every floor, quickly filling up and then, despite having reached its capacity, still stopping at floor after floor until it arrived at the street level. To my utter surprise it did not halt once. It took precisely thirty seconds to descend the fifteen floors. At street level a number of people were waiting and pressed forward.

I pushed through the crowd and crossed the lobby. My apartment building had a vestibule like many modern apartment buildings have. It was quite large and had a couple of benches along one wall. Usually one could find several people lounging around there, studying the large alphabetical listing of tenants or waiting to meet somebody. On this particular afternoon the vestibule was deserted.

Through the glass of the front door I could barely see the flower beds and the two mountain ashes, only twenty meters away. The wind drove the sleet directly towards the entrance. It was a veritable blizzard.

And now, being at ground level, I could see the accumulation of fresh snow on the pavement. The moving vans were parked along the bend in the driveway and were not visible from here.

I pulled my parka tightly around me, making sure that all the buttons were closed. For an instant I was debating with myself whether I should go back upstairs and forget about going to the store. But having come this far I decided against it. I was thankful for having the beret on my head. It seemed to be too stormy outside for the umbrella. Putting on my gloves and turning up the collar of my parka I reached for the door. In the distance I could see a shadowy figure approaching through the swirling snow.

As I stretched out my arm to open the door to the outside I happened to glance at my watch. 2:50:59. I shall never forget the digital display. At precisely the instant when the time changed to 2:51:00 I stepped across the threshold of the door to the outside and ...

Chapter 2

A severe gust of wind pulled the door out of my hand and slammed it shut. As I looked up the view was suddenly changed. There were no flower beds beyond the driveway and there were no mountain ashes. A couple of scrubby looking dwarf birch trees grew a short distance away. I recognized them by their white trunks. Completely bewildered I took several steps forward and then halted.

The building behind me was not the twenty-two story tall apartment building nor was there a glass enclosed vestibule. The only things unchanged were the cold and the driving snow. I took a deep breath. I must not get myself agitated, I told myself. There is bound to be a rational explanation. Yet I was shocked into inaction.

The first thing to do was to look around and observe. I did that very quickly. The apartment building had changed into an ancient looking two story structure. The glass enclosed vestibule was now merely a shabby looking porch badly in need of paint. The driveway had mutated into a road and from where I had stopped I could see five vehicles parked along the bend. Only they were not moving vans. Three of them had tracks instead of wheels and were of a color somewhere between green and grey, and the other two also looked as if they might belong to the military.

The wind driven sleet was thinning out. The shadowy figure approaching was a young man, completely unknown to me. He wore a military uniform, light brown in color. In his right hand he held a Sten gun. I am not sure how I knew, never having seen any gun from close by. He stopped three meters away from me, took the gun in his left hand and came to attention.

“Any word, Sir?” he asked me.

Any word of what? Where was ? I slowly shook my head.

“I thought so,” the young soldier in front of me said. “They never tell you a damn thing.” He half turned and waved towards the five vehicles. With engines roaring four of them took off down the road towards the mountains. Mountains? I live - or lived - in a large eastern city. The closest mountains were thousands of kilometers away. And then the snow began to fall heavily again, blotting out the view of the surrounding area.

“We might as well get back, Captain,” the soldier said, “unless you want to ...”

“No, no,” I replied. “Let’s get back.” In desperation my mind clung to what I had been used to. Surely this was only a bad dream, a nightmare. In another second all this would resolve itself into the familiar parking lot in front of the apartment building and the lawns and the flower beds. But it did not.

For the first time I looked at myself. My feet were covered with sturdy boots, not the well worn shoes I had put on only a few minutes ago. I still wore my beret. But the parka was now of a light brown color and not the cleanest. When I had slipped into it upstairs in my apartment it had been dark blue. My trousers were of the same color as the parka, not the grey they had been when I left home. Suddenly it dawned on me. Like the soldier in front of me I also wore a uniform. And he had addressed me as captain. My eyes fell on the umbrella in my right hand. But it was no longer an umbrella. Somehow it had metamorphosed into a submachine gun. It must have happened as I stepped through the door of the apartment building, at the same time as all the other crazy things had taken place.

Only a second had gone by since I had talked to the soldier. He turned and as he did so I could see the sergeant’s stripes on his left sleeve.

I was going to ask him where I was, where we were, but changed my mind. Wherever it was it would be best to play along. After all, I told myself, it was only a dream.

Suddenly in the distance to the left of us a bright flash lit up the swirling snow. The sergeant halted, watching.

“They’re acting up again,” he said. “And it looks as if they’re getting closer.” He took his Sten gun in both his hands. The click I heard told me that he had flipped off the safety catch. He was ready to fire. I raised my submachine gun as well. It seemed to be an automatic gesture.

Far to the left I could make out another flash. And then came the explosion of the first shell some distance to our right.

“It’s a good thing that it’s snowing or we’d be goners now. The Jerries are getting better all the time,” the sergeant muttered just before the second shell hit the ground maybe fifty meters to our left. I felt something jerk at my left glove.

We had reached the car now, a Landrover, with the canvas top down. There was an accumulation of snow on the two seats. In the rear a machine gun was mounted, attended by a grubby looking character.

“Let’s go, Sergeant,” the character said, “before Jerry gets the range.”

The sergeant wiped the snow off his seat and jumped in, starting the vehicle. I copied him, but on my side the snow had red splotches in it.

“Are you hurt, Captain?” the sergeant asked when he noticed the red spots.

I did not say anything as I climbed into the car.

“We’d better get you over to the medics.” He gunned the engine.

We shot forward as he let out the clutch. We had gone perhaps thirty meters when there was an explosion behind us at just about the place where the car had been parked. The corporal at the machine gun ducked as did the sergeant. There was a loud bang at the right rear corner of our vehicle. The sergeant kept on going.

"You are the luckiest devil I know," he muttered now, briefly looking at me and grinning. "How is your hand?"

"All right, I guess," I answered. "It doesn't hurt yet."

It did feel strange, though, as if something was the matter with my left middle finger. But so far there was no blood dripping from it. It must be all right, I decided.

The sergeant drove as if the devil was after him. We bounced over holes in the road and went around corners far too fast for conditions. Most of the time we were on the left side of the road, on the wrong side, it seemed to me.

There was no letup in the blizzard. I had my hands full trying to stay in the seat. From time to time we would slide sideways towards the edge of the road. Or should I call it a track? It did not look much like a road.

We had bounced over the ground for perhaps five minutes. Gradually I began to feel a faint pain in the tip of my left middle finger. Something must indeed be the matter with it. I was about to take another look when we hit a giant pothole. I was thrown up and then came down hard. Grabbing the edge of the windshield I could barely manage to remain inside the vehicle. Then we began to slide sideways towards the precipice. In the driving snow the drop looked bottomless.

At the very last instant, as the wheels on the right side of the Landrover were about to leave the ground, the sergeant tramped on the gas pedal. At the same time we hit another deep hole in the road. Somehow we managed to avoid going over the edge.

Johnson, that was the sergeant's name, shifted down to second gear as we began to climb a steep stretch. Behind us I could still hear explosions from time to time as the enemy artillery lobbed a few rounds over towards our positions in an irregular pattern.

There was a last twist in the track and we were on a small level stretch on which several vehicles were parked close to one side, partially hidden by the scrubby birch trees. Opposite them was an old ramshackle building. It has a red cross over the entrance and a sign in large letters which read Medical Field Station No. 2. Underneath, much smaller, it said Narvik.

Johnson parked the Landrover next to the other vehicles.

"Let's see what the medics have to say," he said to me as he jumped to the ground. "Does it hurt yet?"

I grunted. By this time I felt a dull pain in the middle finger of my left hand. Something was certainly not right and should be looked after.

Without objecting I followed the sergeant.

There were four people inside the building. Two seemed to be doctors and the other two orderlies.

“What do we have here?” a middle-aged civilian asked. He, like the sergeant, spoke with a peculiarly English accent. “Sit down here, Captain.” He pulled me to a chair.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” Johnson said and then left again. On the wall next to the door through which we had entered hung a jacket and a parka. They had major’s insignia on them. The other doctor had the rank of captain. And then I realized that the civilian wore a partial uniform. His feet were covered with boots similar to mine and he wore regular army trousers.

“Don’t look,” the major said to me. “We don’t want you to be sick here. Williams just cleaned the floor.” He jerked his head towards one of the orderlies.

I could feel the doctor cutting away the glove. He had my arm lying on top of the table. He was humming an old tune as he worked away.

“Ah, yes, a clean cut. What did you do? Did you try to catch a shell? Ha, ha.” He seemed to have a strange sense of humour. “Williams,” he then called. “Give me a hand.”

Turning back to me he continued: “It’s nothing serious. You’ll live. They won’t even send you home for this. It could have been worse, much worse. You could have lost your hand.” He shook his head. “Trying to stop a splinter.”

I felt the pinprick of a needle and tried to jerk my arm away but the major had a firm grip on it. And then the orderly took hold of my arm. I felt the coolness of evaporating alcohol on my fingers. After a minute or so the dull pain lessened.

“Hm, a clean cut,” the doctor repeated. “Now brace yourself. This will hurt a little.”

The orderly’s grip felt like a vice. I heard a snip and a severe stab of pain shot up my arm and into the very core of me. I jerked my arm with all my strength but I could not move it.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it now?” The major had his back towards me and his voice sounded far off. Gradually the severe pain lessened.

“Once more, Captain. Grit your teeth. We are just about done.”

I heard the snip a second time and another stab of pain raced from my finger up my arm and deep into me, but it was less traumatic.

“We’ll have you out of here in no time flat. Ah,” the doctor sighed as I heard the snipping sound a third time, and by far the most intense pang of agony stabbed into me. It made me groan.

“See, that wasn’t bad at all,” the doctor said. “In a few weeks you’ll be as good as new. Are you left-handed?”

“No,” I replied.

The severe pain left me after a while. I could feel the doctor working

on my hand but whatever he did, it did not hurt. Even the orderly holding my arm relaxed his pressure a bit.

Once more there was the snip-snip of the scissors. This time I felt nothing. Then I heard a tearing sound as if some fabric was being ripped apart. Despite the numbness in my hand I could sense the pressure as the doctor applied the tape.

"You're all finished, Captain," he said. He reached into his bag while the orderly took the tray with the tools and went to the sink. "Take one pill at a time when you can't stand the pain any longer. This is all I can give you." He counted four tablets into my hand.

"Thanks, Doc," I said. "What was wrong with my hand, with my finger?"

"Oh, nothing serious enough to send you home. A stray splinter got you. Come back in a few days and we'll change the dressing and see how it is healing. You were lucky that we are in a lull and could look after you right away."

There was some commotion at the door.

"Give your name, number and unit to the secretary." The major nodded to the other orderly and then walked towards the door. I was dismissed.

"What do we have here?" he asked.

"A mine," somebody's gruff voice answered.

The other orderly motioned me into an adjoining room and closed the door behind me.

"We've got to have a record just in case you survive." He laughed.

"Thanks a lot. You make me feel good."

"There is a chance, you know, Captain." He sat down at a table. There were no entries on the big sheet yet. I could clearly read the top line. It said Saturday, 27 April, 1940. For a moment I felt light-headed.

"I hear that things are pretty tough down in Narvik," the orderly said. "I doubt whether we can hold on over the long run. Once the Germans have consolidated their hold and get a few airfields operational - well, your name, Captain." He looked up at me.

"Kester, Carl."

"Is Kester your last name?" Playing with the pencil he seemed to scrutinize me. He wore a smock of a grey-green color with no insignia of rank. "Major Pershing is very particular about records."

"Kester, first name Carl," I confirmed

He looked at me again. "Kester is spelled with a 'K'? And Carl with a 'C'?"

I nodded.

"Rank?"

"Captain."

"Ah, yes. Captain." And he carried on, repeating every answer I gave him.

A few minutes later I was back outside. Sergeant Johnson threw his cigarette to the ground and stepped on it. At the same time he came to attention.

The trip back to my unit took fifteen minutes. It was not something to calm my nerves. Twice Johnson missed plunging down into the Beisjord by literally a hair. And once a shell exploded no more than ten meters behind us. We all ducked. The concussion almost hurled us down a steep ravine.

Despite the cold I was perspiring when Johnson finally jammed on the brakes.

“There we are, Sir,” he said, grinning from ear to ear.