

Chapter One

.....A ruined farmhouse looms in the mist. Two soldiers crouch on the floor, inside. One takes a steel-grey pigeon from a basket, the other fixes a message to the bird's leg. They move towards the broken window, to release the bird, But, wait.... clump, clump, clump go the sound of enemy boots on the road.

Fear gleams in the eye of the bird. The pigeon struggles to break free. They cannot hold it. They cannot hold it! It shoots skyward, twisting and turning. Gun fire explodes....

Andrew Hughes woke with a gasp. He gripped the armrests of his chair, and sat still as a stone for a few lingering seconds. Anxiously, he scanned the darkening room until his grip relaxed. He saw the dogs sprawled by the cooker. Cups gleamed on the table, ready for tea. This was his kitchen, and there were no soldiers here.

It was that awful dream, again. Always those men in the broken-down farmhouse. Hiding, with the pigeon their only hope.... The man shook his head, and rose stiffly from the armchair. Lifting the curtain, he peered

into the back garden. Rain whipped the trees, and a shed door banged in the wind, once, twice.

“God help anyone at sea this night,” he muttered.

Mr. Hughes and his wife Annie lived in a bungalow, on the edge of a fishing village called Carnlough, on the Northern shores of Co. Antrim. Their house overlooked the sea, and Mr. Hughes had seen many a storm in his time. Bitter experience told him this was a bad one.

He pulled on his wellington boots. They felt warm and soft from the heat of the Aga cooker. “Are ye coming, Patch?” he called, taking his coat. The two brown pointers slept on but Patch, a brave little terrier, rose and stretched. Man and dog left the cozy kitchen. Heads bent into the rain, they hurried to the feed shed.

Mr. Hughes scooped clean corn into a bucket while Patch dashed to the corner, barking and sneezing. “*Out. Out!*” he yapped, in a message for any rat who dared show his face on this – or any other – evening. Patch was a small dog, with big notions. The pointers were lazy, and spent all day dozing when they weren’t out hunting with Mr. Hughes. Patch couldn’t relax if he tried.

Mr. Hughes climbed the step ladder into the pigeon loft, wheezing loudly. Forty pigeons blinked as he

switched on the bare, cob-webbed bulb. The man poured feed into little troughs, and fresh water into drinking bowls. Pigeons fluttered down softly, starting to coo-coo and do twirls and dances on the floor.

“Beauty. Beauu-ty,” the man called. High in a nest-box, a silver pigeon heard the voice, but stayed on her eggs. Darkness closed in again, as Mr. Hughes wheezed his way back down the ladder.

“Late, always late,” one pigeon grumbled.

“Ah, don’t be fussin’,” said another.

The other birds just gobbled their food, stabbing the trough with their beaks as if they would never eat again. Beauty flew down for some corn. Her mate took his turn to mind their two creamy-white eggs in the nest bowl. After a while, she picked up some grains and flew back to feed him.

“Crunchy,” he said. Then, a look of alarm crossed his face. He felt a tap, tap from inside the first egg.

“Beauty!” he exclaimed.

“Your turn,” she said, feeding him more seeds.

“Hmm,” he sulked. The wind screamed against the loft roof, and the pigeons were glad to be inside.

Back in the kitchen, Annie Hughes bustled about. She brewed up a pot from old tea-leaves, and set out food.

Sugar, tea and other foodstuffs were rationed because of the war, but Annie made fine nutty-brown bread and her own blackberry jam. As they finished supper, a series of ‘pips’ on the radio demanded Mr. Hughes’s attention.

“Here is the news – and this is Frederick Allen reading it.

The Germans say they have evacuated Rzhev, their stronghold on the Moscow front for the past 16 months.

In both Central and Southern Tunisia Allied Forces are keeping up their pressure on the enemy.

Our home-based bombers attacked targets in Western Germany last night and laid mines in enemy waters. News has come out of Berlin showing how well our airmen did in their raid on Monday night.....”

‘Huh!’ blasted Mr. Hughes. This war wasn’t going half as well as those BBC reports made out. He was an ex-army man, a World War I Captain. He knew the score. March 1943, almost four years of war, and this

man Hitler was as strong as ever. He was half way into Russia, for God's sake. And the Japanese were with him. Mr. Hughes couldn't sleep at night thinking about it. All those young men fighting in Europe, thousands of them, some of them his own neighbour's sons. It made him angry.

"Houl' yer whisht," he roared at the radio.

"Andrew," his wife said, soothingly. "Don't be upsetting yourself."

"I tell you Annie. Our boys have their work cut out for them. I know the German soldiers. Didn't I fight them? Didn't I live in their country after the war? This man has them brain-washed. They'll fight to the last."

He took a deep breath, while Annie poured a fresh cup of tea. Patch was at the table now, looking for a crust. He nudged his master's hand with a moist nose.

"I wish I was out there, doing something. I'm just too old now..." her husband went on.

"There's always the pigeons," Annie reminded him.

"That's right. Amn't I a paid-up member of the National Pigeon Service?" he said, his face brightening. Patch barked.

"Sometimes I think that dog understands every word you say, Andrew," said Annie, laughing.

Mr. Hughes slipped Patch some bread. Rising to his feet, he walked up to the photos that lined their kitchen wall: a wedding portrait in a silver frame; Annie with a pet dog; his nephew Tommy in front of the loft, holding up Beauty. Mr. Hughes lingered over his pigeon 'permit' which he had pinned up next to the photos. It was starting to yellow and curl with age.

DEFENCE REGULATIONS, 1939

REGULATION 9.

PERMIT TO KEEP RACING OR HOMING PIGEONS

To All whom it may concern.

By Virtue of the Powers vested in me under the provisions of Regulation 9 of the Defence Regulations, 1939, I hereby grant permission to the Person named below to be in possession of Racing or Homing Pigeons, not exceeding

.....50.....in number, to be kept in (open loft) at ...Moyleen Lofts, Carnlough, Co. Antrim.

Surname.....

Christian names.....

Registered Postal Address.....

.....
Signature of Holder

Date.....April 1940

“There’s great pigeons out in that loft, Annie,” he said, sinking back into his chair by the cooker. “Great Putman* pigeons. They’ll do their bit.”