

Captive Dreams

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“Papa, who on earth are those men in the fields?”

Anna Goodman swiped her hair from inside her jacket collar as she stared out the window past her father hunched in his chair. While age sloped his shoulders, she hated the feeling the burden for the farm outside Holdrege, Nebraska, had transferred to her, a burden she never expected to bear at twenty-one. The men working the fields reclaimed her thoughts. She didn't like the hardness they bore. Nor did she like the idea that German soldiers were the only option. Her spine stiffened until she stood as rigid as a fencepost. No matter that the time had come to plant the corn and the fields around Holdrege hummed with activity. Surely, Papa hadn't hired prisoners of war.

Papa buried his head deeper behind the newspaper, huddled in his worn chair in front of the stone fireplace. Anna's heart tightened. She'd been gone only five days, yet he'd aged at least ten years.

“Papa. Look at me. Please.” Her words whined until she tightened her lips against more.

The paper rustled, and Anna longed to rip the shield from him. Force him to look at her. Instead, she sighed. His hair might look grayer where it peeked over the paper, but he remained as stubborn as Betsy, the mule he refused to give away.

“Have it your way. I'll find out what they're up to on my own.” Anna pulled her jacket tighter and stomped out of the kitchen.

Mama's red and white checked curtains didn't bring a smile to her face this time. They were the only cheery thing left in the house now that Mama danced in heaven after a short

battle against pneumonia two years earlier. Even her brother Brent couldn't fill Papa's silence with his off-the-wall jokes since the draft board called his number.

Anna stepped outside and wished for the freedom to leave Papa behind his impenetrable wall. He acted like he didn't need her. Reality shouted a different tune in her ears. The inside of the house could only be called a shambles, dirty dishes stacked all over the table and old papers strewn beside his chair where Papa dropped them. Her nose wrinkled at the smell of stale sausage and spoiled food. Papa hadn't even scraped it into the slop pan. The wind stung Anna's cheeks and sucked the air out of her lungs.

The house wasn't the only thing that needed attention. The closer she got to the fields, the more evident it became they needed care and attention. The rows angled across the field in erratic lines. Weeds sprouted everywhere, and if left unchecked would choke out the corn as it grew. If only the men in the field did not have Ps and Ws painted on their clothes. Even if Papa had requested the prisoners, she couldn't imagine the Prisoners of War working her land when she came home after a long week at the Kearney airfield.

Her land. Her steps slowed as the words ricocheted around her mind. It had never felt like her land. Indeed, most days it seemed more a ball and chain than blessing. Yet as the words rolled around, a steady peace filled her chest.

If it was her land, it was high time she treated it that way.

Time to take ownership of it.

If only Papa would.

As her thoughts returned to her papa hiding in the kitchen, she sucked air through her teeth in a whistle. A rush of emotions clamored into the spot peace had filled.

What are we going to do, Papa? I don't have the energy to shoulder this alone. And you don't have the will. Anna picked up speed and crossed the yard toward the barn. Beyond the barn a fence covered in peeling paint and missing boards protected fields of corn from something, though she'd never known what exactly. Deer could leap it with ease to nibble the developing corn plants. It would take weeks, but all too soon the stalks would grow until their tassels touched the sky. Then the hard work started. Anna's shoulders ached thinking about the hours and days she'd spend walking the rows separating the

tassels from the corn. That job made even her sedentary job packing parachutes at the Kearney airfield endurable.

Anna lifted her face to the sky and released a slow breath. The sun kissed her face with its warmth, and the weariness drained from her. Resolve cloaked her. Whatever the men were doing on the farm, she'd clear it up and get them on their way. She couldn't handle one more challenge at the moment.

She reached the fence and hesitated before climbing the bottom two wooden planks to get a better view of the action in the field. From her perch, eight men walked among the rows. Her brow crinkled. The actions of most were unchoreographed and confused. One man strode among the men pointing and giving instructions as he walked. He spoke to each man in turn and carried an air of assurance. By his uniform she could tell he was a guard sent with the men, probably a specialist. Yet he acted unlike the other guard who lounged against a truck.

A prisoner bent toward the ground and ran his fingers through the soil, crumbling it into smaller pieces. He lifted it to his face and inhaled. A smile parted his face from ear to ear, and then he patted the earth back into place and reached with energy for the seed resting at his feet. From her perch, Anna watched as seed corn flew through his grasp.

"No." She clenched her teeth as he seemed unable or unwilling to treat the precious seed with care. She'd worked long hours to pay for that corn. "Somebody stop him."

She jumped off the fence and marched toward the man that leaned against the Government Issue truck. His uniform hung on him in a rumpled mess. He didn't even glance her way, though he had to hear her. She splashed through leftover spring puddles yet he still ignored her.

"Hey. What are you doing in our fields? They don't know what they are doing. There's seed everywhere." Her anger pushed her voice up an octave, and she struggled to rein in her temper.

The man turned to her. His hat was shoved on top unruly brown hair that curled slightly around his collar. His shoulders were broad, and she almost stood nose to nose with him. She stewed as his gaze swept over her body. He leered at her and stood taller. "Calm down, dame."

“I’ll calm down when you get these men off my farm. Now.”