



THE PENPAL



PAULA SHEPARDS

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*For my angel grandchildren:
Angelo, Giuseppe, Patricia, and Serena, the joys of my life.*

CHAPTER I

Blood-soiled snow in the back of the house melted ever so slowly, unmercifully exposed by a glaring midday sun. There were no birds in the sky; no animal dared to venture far from the safety of the nearby woods. Black smoke rising from the farmhouse chimney whispered to cool morning breezes the scene it had witnessed by the light of the moon. Smoky fingers pointed to the wooden fence that had surrounded the farmhouse. Now, several slats lay on the snow, left to rot like just so many other broken and splintered bones.

“It was a miracle no one was killed,” it wrote, words spiraling upward. If Lazarus had heard it, he would have, no doubt, wished otherwise. Behind the farmhouse, in a scooped-out pit, a small fire was just finishing up its own dirty work. Mountains of glowing embers held back the melting snow long enough to destroy the last shred of bloodstained clothing that could corroborate the chimney’s story.

Inside, Lazarus sat alone at the head of a long wooden table. But for an occasional guttural moaning, the sound of an injured animal begging to be put out of its misery, he was silent. His religious training, passed down through decades from father to son, dictated restraint. He therefore defied anyone to confuse the act of wiping his eyes with a display of emotional weakness. He pulled at his dark gray beard over and over, thinking of the land he had worked day

and night, year after year, and couldn't, as a Jew, ever hope to own.

Golda couldn't remember how long she had been standing there, sweeping a spotless floor. Her mind functioned by rote, nothing more, nothing less. As her mother had, and her mother before her had done in times of crisis, she cleaned and scrubbed everything and anything in sight. Her eyes were red from crying, done in silence so as not to upset her husband any more than he already was. Her daughter's image appeared blurry through tear laden eyes. She realized then and there that nothing about their lives would ever be crystal clear again.

The child sat huddled on a three-legged stool in the corner, close to the hearth where a large fire-blackened kettle hung teasingly above and precariously close to the flames. She stared straight ahead, blue-gray eyes retreating behind a falling curtain of frightening memories. She sat very still, her hands clasped tightly, nails digging into her palms. She didn't feel the pain, so insignificant it was, or notice the little beads of blood where her skin had been pierced.

Golda stopped and looked over at the joy of her life, then resumed her incessant sweeping.

"Golda, I think it is best we make plans. I must tell my brothers what has happened," Lazarus said, looking over his shoulder at his wife. "Golda! Are you listening to me?"

Lazarus got up from his chair and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her gently. The broom fell against his chest. He dropped his arms and it clattered to the floor. In the corner, Rachel jumped.

"Golda, get hold of yourself," he ordered. "We can't afford to lose any more time. I have let the mind of a tired and beaten man trick me into sitting here feeling sorry for myself when I should be worrying about her ... and you. Too much time has passed without making plans. I'm going now. Don't wait up. I won't be back until tomorrow night."

Without waiting for any reply, he walked over to the child. He

started to bend down, then straightened up and reached instead for his heavy coat and cap. Rachel ignored her father's slight. Scuffing fur-lined boots across the floor, Lazarus' internal fury aided him in fighting back the winter winds. He opened the heavy door to let himself out, keeping what little warmth there was inside. Inside his pocket, his hand fingered the gun he had managed to take away from the general before fleeing for his life.

Golda walked over to the child. "Come, come with me. I will sit by you while you rest. Papa has gone to find the others. They will talk; they will decide what must be done. Perhaps we will leave. Someone will help us. You'll see."

She lifted the limp child up by her elbows and ushered her to an area in the back where she normally slept. Already, a wood stove was burning, warming the small space.

"Come, come. Try to put it out of your mind, Rachel. Cry. It is no good to keep your feelings locked inside. Please, I beg you to let go of it."

Golda hugged the child to her generous bosom. *God*, she thought, *if I ever see the face of that swine again, I swear I'll rip his heart out with my very own hands*, she vowed.

With a mother's desperate tenderness, she stroked Rachel's hair, trying to erase with love the soil and dirt no soap or water could ever wash away. "Sleep baby, sleep. You'll see. Papa will take care of everything."

He had to.

Time passed like the dripping of molasses on a cold day. Neither mother nor daughter could find the strength to get up and greet the day. There was an occasional stirring, a momentary reliving of the nightmare, but then the mind rebelled and blocked it all out. Sleep was the only place where they remained safe and undetected. At dusk, the sun surrendered and surreptitiously slipped down behind a hill. This way, it ignored, if only for a short time, the reality it was forced to survey during daylight.

Lazarus completed his mission and returned to the house with two large men in tow. They too had long beards, and when they removed their fur-lined hats, their yarmulkes were still firmly in place.

“Sit,” he said, and they obediently took their places around the table.

“I don’t have much time. Maybe you won’t have much time either. We all know what has been going on. It is only going to get worse. The Czar wishes we had never been born and the Bolsheviks want our hides. Just last week, fifty of our brothers and sisters and their children were massacred several villages away. Even though that bastard who attacked Rachel was alone, we can be sure his troops are not far behind.”

Heads nodded to one another around the table in total agreement with the oldest brother.

“Brother, what will we do? We do not have enough money to pay for freedom for us all,” Boris asked.

“Maybe we could sell everything we have, together, and send Rachel and her mother to America. It would be the best we could do, Lazarus.” Yuri looked intently at a burn mark on the table, tracing its circumference with his index finger over and over.

“I don’t know,” Lazarus said. “I’ll have to think about it. I can’t bear the thought of sending them alone on a trip like that. How would they live? How would they survive? Who would make the money? Golda only knows how to clean.” He smiled uneasily.

The men tried to smile back, understanding the comic relief. In the back, Golda and Rachel slept tightly in each other’s arms. Rachel stirred slightly, the sound of her father and uncle’s voices penetrating her surrealistic dream world.

From within her sleep, another voice spoke harshly. Rachel tossed and turned violently. “No! No! God, help me,” she yelled out, still asleep. Kicking legs and thrashing arms almost knocked Golda onto the floor.

“What? What is it?” Golda shook her daughter, trying to wake her up. “Rachel, wake up. It’s just a dream.” But it wasn’t.

Hysterical and sobbing, she clung tightly to her mother.

“Golda, what is it?” Lazarus yelled, hurrying over.

“What do you think it is?” she replied. “It’s that swine. Look at what he’s done to our Rachel. I swear I will find him and kill him myself if you don’t find him first!”

Lazarus turned away from her, his dark eyes even blacker.

“Don’t you worry,” he muttered to himself. “I’ll find him.”

The brothers talked throughout the rest of the day while Golda resumed her cleaning and cooking crusade. After all, everyone still had to eat.

Rachel stayed in bed wishing herself to be invisible, or better yet, dead.

After sunset, each brother left for his own home. For Jews, the safest time to travel was at night. Lazarus decided to accompany Boris part of the way, and several miles into the journey, they saw an orange glow in the distance.

“Come, let’s go see what’s happening,” Lazarus said.

“No, I’m not interested in what other village they are now burning to the ground.”

“But maybe they need help.”

“Too bad. No one helped Moishe when they burned his house down, when they took the children and cut their throats right in front of ...” Boris couldn’t continue.

“In front of Sarah,” Lazarus finished to himself. “In front of our dear sister Sarah, the light of our father’s eyes. Her death, the children’s deaths, then the death of our father ... all because of these swine.” He bit his lower lip until it bled. He licked it, the salt irritating the tip of his tongue.

Boris leaned over and kissed his brother on both cheeks, then rode off, away from all the commotion. They had all promised to meet in a week to decide their destinies. Lazarus waved to his

brother until he was safely out of sight. Then he rode straight into Hell.

He could smell the all too familiar stench of burning flesh several miles outside the village proper. Even though he knew there would probably be no survivors, he felt an inner compulsion to keep riding. Cries of agony mixed with shouts of victory from the Russian soldiers. Hands held high for all to see clung tightly to stolen treasure. Lazarus trembled with anger as he peeked out from behind a farmhouse. The memories of that night his sister died made him physically sick. The hand holding the gun inside his coat pocket was beginning to sweat.

“Help! Somebody help me!”

“Sarah? Is that you?”

He was transported back in time, watching his sister being carried off on the back of a soldier’s horse. He was running after her until he could no longer breathe, barely making it in time to watch as the soldier raped her and then slit her throat. Blood everywhere, everywhere. She died in a pool of her own blood, raped by a Russian pig.

“Let me go!”

But it wasn’t then; it was now. It wasn’t Sarah; it was someone else, maybe the same age, being carried off by yet another Russian swine. The scene was the same as back then, but Lazarus wasn’t the same ... not since the night before.

“I’ve got to do something. I owe it to Rachel,” Lazarus said. “I owe it more to Sarah.”

He was too far away to use the gun. He looked around for something to use. All he could find was a worn horseshoe. *It will have to do*, he said to himself.

With as much agility as his bulky garments would allow, he pulled back his arm and hurled the horseshoe on a direct course for the attacker’s head. It missed by a hair but it served its purpose in distracting him from his sordid task. The soldier looked around,

worried that a bullet might whiz by next.

The girl, taking advantage of his distraction, bit him and broke his hold on her. She jumped down from the horse and ran for cover as fast as her naked and bloodstained legs would take her. The guardian of the night, weaving its magic, plucked her right out of the clutches of disaster and hid her under a cloak of blackness, at least this time.

Meanwhile, the soldier dismounted, only inches away from Lazarus. This time, Lazarus thanked God for a second chance to make it right. He didn't feel the same fear that had rooted him to the spot turning him into a coward.

His hand tightened around the pistol's butt. Now he waited calmly to do what he should have done many years ago, to pay them back for what had almost happened a second time. True, this would not bring Sarah back, but maybe, when he thought of this night many years from now, it might, just might, help to ease the guilt he would always carry in his broken heart.

"So, Jew, you say nothing, yet you do not run like the others? Good. It is just as well." He looked behind him, in the direction of the girl's escape. He chuckled, a corner of his upper lip twitching nervously. "She was not the first tonight to know such ecstasy, you know. It's true what they say about work and pleasure not mixing ... sex is such a lot of work with these sluts that there is hardly any pleasure at all." He laughed at his own joke.

Lazarus didn't flinch, but his muscles tightened, pushing against his coat. He knew he could rip this disgusting piece of flesh apart without ever experiencing even a tenth of the guilt he lived with day in and day out for his sister. But this would be too fast, too easy. Then he noticed the strange, familiar scar on the Russian's face.

"Well, Jew, have you lost your tongue? Perhaps you don't know how to use it, eh? Maybe one of these little Jew girls could show you, like I have taught them to do for me," he said, grabbing his bulging crotch and giving it a small squeeze. "You want I should get

you one?” Again he looked over his shoulder. “She was only virgin anyway. The married ones are better, don’t you agree?” He lit a cigarette with his right hand and inhaled deeply.

Lazarus was close to exploding. His hand gripped the butt of the gun in his pocket.

“You know, you look just the tiniest bit familiar to me. Have we met before?” he asked, and then smiled sarcastically. “Perhaps at one of our magnificent social events ... a dance ... a dinner party for the Czar?”

Lazarus suddenly realized this pig did look familiar. Where *had* he seen that scar before? His own skin tingled in anticipation. Was it because killing this bastard would be as exciting as having sex, in a sick sort of way? He was becoming as demented as them.

Those eyes. What was it about those damn eyes? Then the curtain lifted. He had been close enough that fateful night, close enough to have seen a younger version of those same steel blue eyes, that blond hair, that disgusting look of contempt after his sister had been violated and discarded. The deep flesh valley glistened in the glare of the full moon that night, etching itself into a part of Lazarus’ mind that he had thought had died along with Sarah. His finger fidgeted nervously and he pressed the gun up against his own crotch, mentally plotting the bullet’s path. Quicker than the Russian could blink his calculating eye, Lazarus whipped the pistol out of his pocket and aimed it straight at his head. The officer turned pale. *Fate had a strange way of repaying her debts.*

“Yes, you are right,” he said, his arm trembling but his aim precise. “We have most definitely met before. Thank you for being so kind as to remind me where and when. Without your help, I might not have remembered it myself so quickly. I must tell you, though, it was hardly at any ball or other such festivity, but it was certainly an event that neither I, nor any of my brothers, will ever forget.”

“You will forgive me. All this work tonight has clouded my memory. Do refresh it for me,” he said, trying to suppress the chill

down his spine.

“I will be happy to do that, you filthy piece of dung. You are not good enough to shit on, but I will tell you where we met. I will draw you a mental picture of that night, a night very much like tonight, in fact. You were younger then; so was I. Only I have aged an entire lifetime since that night. You led your men in a raid on a poor *shtetl*. After you shot a certain young man, you dragged his wife outside and, after raping her you cut her throat and let her drown in her own blood. Still not enough, you cut their children’s throats in front of their dying mother and her father.”

He paused, looking the Russian square in the eye. The flames of the many fires off in the distance reflected in Lazarus’ eyes, transforming them into the yellow eyes of Satan himself. “She was my sister ... the old man was my father. Is your memory better now?” he hissed through his clenched teeth, grasping the gun even tighter.

The officer’s face was ashen, even in the dark. He coughed, almost choking on his own saliva. “Surely there is a mistake.” His voice was slightly high pitched and his dignity fading. He knew he was in serious trouble. If he didn’t get away in the next few minutes, there might not be a getaway, even.

The hot metal of the gun made Lazarus’ palm itch. He remembered the daydream he’d been having. It was almost erotic. Somehow, it was happening just as he imagined.

The Russian could no longer look the Jew in the face. His stomach rumbled and he was beginning to feel the need for a bush behind which he could squat ... and quickly.

“Something wrong, sir? You look pale. Something you ate? Or was it some Jewess you raped without batting an eye? Well, I’m happy to tell you that this poor old Jew can fix your problem for you. Yes, I, the dirt under your noble Russian feet, have the solution right here in my hand.”

This was it. He surveyed the situation, figuring he could take the older man easily. He needed to get control, but how? “Listen, before

you use this wonderful solution of yours, would you deny a man about to die the right to take a leak?"

Without waiting for a "yes," he opened his coat, being careful not to expose the small pistol he kept for just such an emergency. With his left hand, he awkwardly unbuttoned his fly. With his right hand, he maneuvered the pistol into the palm of his hand.

Lazarus noticed his awkwardness. Lazarus didn't wait until the pale yellow flow halted just inches away.

Bang.

It was as simple as that. It was definitely direct. And a permanent solution to the threat of any more rapes. The Russian's balls flew off in opposite directions, leaving a trail of dark red droplets hanging in midair. A piece of flesh torn from its roots landed at Lazarus' feet.

"Argh! What have you done!" he screamed and fell to the ground, his hands pressing against the gaping hole between his legs, trying to stem the gushing blood soiling the virgin snow.

Lazarus bent down and picked up the small piece of flesh, putting the unsightly trophy in his pocket. Then he threw up his guts right in the Russian's face. He picked up a wad of snow and sucked on it to take away the bad taste in his mouth.

"Ugh! Will I ever get rid of this foul taste?" Lazarus said, spitting the snow mixed with bile-laden saliva at the dying man.

"You son of a bitch," whispered the dying soldier. He moaned one last time and then his hands fell, allowing the rest of his blood to drain out of a body surely damned to burn in hell.

The fire was almost out when he arrived back home. All he wanted to do was sleep. He was still shaking from what he had done. It was snowing when the brothers came back. Each carried a small package, which they put in the corner. A bottle of homemade vodka was already sitting on the table, with glasses surrounding it. It was the way they closed any important decision. Golda and Rachel were nowhere in sight.

"Lazarus," Boris asked, "what happened to you after I left? Did

you go to the village?”

Lazarus had hoped his brother wouldn't ask. “Yes, I did.” He was getting sick to his stomach.

“Well, tell us what you saw, what you did.”

“I will show you what I did,” he replied, reaching deep into his pocket and extracting the shriveled organ. He threw it onto the middle of the table.

“My God,” shrieked Yuri. “Is that what I think it is?” He reached for the vodka and quickly downed a shot.

“Give me the bottle, fast,” Boris said. “I can't believe you did that, Lazarus. Whatever could have made you kill even one of them? Why?”

“Ah, my brothers, you would have fought me for the honor yourself.”

“I cannot believe I'm hearing you right. Not from my brother, who could not even bear to kill a rabbit for a holiday, no matter what. How could you ever kill another human being?”

“First of all, my little brother, you said kill another human being. This was no human being. This was a filthy Russian swine,” Lazarus explained.

“But still, to take another life ...”

“This was NOT another life. This was a pig, the pig who killed Sarah!” Lazarus cried.

“Sarah?” they mumbled through numbing lips, the realization of what their older brother was trying to tell them finally sinking in.

“How can that be?” asked Boris. “How can you be sure it was him?”

“He told me so himself, that's how! He told me he recognized me from somewhere. He was even stupider than I thought possible. If he hadn't said that, I would never have given his face a second thought. After all, I was young then, and in shock. I pushed those memories into a corner of my mind I thought I would never use again. But he made a mistake and I started to remember. Then, I

saw the scar. After I realized who he was, I could not help myself. I could see like yesterday the orange flames shooting up into the black sky, their reflection bouncing off his ... white ass." Lazarus gritted his teeth. "Now all that will be left of those he raped and left behind," he said, pointing to the center of the table, "is a dried up piece of meat."

Wrinkled and stiff, it lay there, naked and defenseless. Just like Sarah had lain in the snow, her sweet and innocent body lifeless.

They say history repeats itself, but he had saved his Rachel from a similar fate. If he ever found that bastard, he would enjoy the same fate as his compatriot.

"Well, what have you decided?" Lazarus asked.

He looked each one in the face. How stern they were. Still, he wished that this family gathering could have been one of joy, although God knew that present times had robbed them of that hope too.

"We have talked on the way here," Boris said. "We were not sure what to do, although we each brought the few rubles we had with us. After what you have just told us, and how you have brought back honor to our sister's name so that her soul may now rest in peace, I think it is clear what we must do."

"So what is this great decision?" Lazarus asked, looking around the table.

"It is clear to both of us that you have no choice but to leave here as soon as you can ... all three of you. Your life is already worth nothing, and if you don't leave before they find you, they will get Golda and Rachel, too. This time, you won't be able to save them."

Just the thought of what might happen to his wife and child was enough to bring back that queasy feeling in his stomach. His brothers were right. Maybe he had gotten his revenge for Sarah, but he had made sure that they couldn't stay there anymore.

A week later, he had secured passage for the three of them on a cargo ship to America. The brothers accompanied them to Odessa

for what they all hoped would be the start of a new life in America. It wouldn't be a luxury trip, but at least it meant the rebirth of hope in three hearts that had seen their share of tragedy.

A severe storm delayed their arrival in New York by several days. Weak and tired, Lazarus, Golda, and Rachel hung over the rail just like all the others, waiting to see the great lady who had inspired and helped so many find freedom in a new home.

“Yes,” thought Lazarus, “We have paid a dear price for our freedom. Now it is up to God.”

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