

Painting Home

Erika Jolma

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2019

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0222-3

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0221-6

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my grandmother, Kerttu and her sister, my Great Aunt Soili, who shared their stories about growing up in Finland during the war.

1

April, 1940

Ylivieska, Finland

More boys. Just what she needed in her life.

They stood in the train station—four of them to be exact—ready to fill her house with muddy boot prints and raucous laughter.

Anna double-checked the hand-printed slip of paper to make sure she had the right name. She did. She had memorized the name on the slip of paper as soon as her father brought it home from the city offices last night.

R-A-N-T-A. Family of six. Arriving on the 4:20 train from Karelia.

Anna stared at the strangers across the crowded room and stifled disappointment. She had been hoping for a family with daughters—girls to share late-night giggles and afternoon jaunts through the wildflower fields behind their farmhouse. Girls to help with the endless laundry, cooking, and cleaning. Girls to teach her all of the things she didn't know because she had been blessed with six brothers.

But God evidently had a sense of humor—there was no mistaking the fact that their new houseguests were all of the male variety. Well, except for the

mother who stood next to their family's lone trunk, looking at her sons out of the corner of her eye with a frown that seemed to plead with them not to do anything to draw attention to themselves.

The boys failed miserably. Every one of them was tall and handsome, with mussed blond hair and gorgeous smiles that would make the girls in Kalajoki swoon.

Every girl except for her, of course. She had learned to resist the charms of the male species.

Anna peered through the crowd to assess the strangers who would now be like family. Mr. Ranta—tall, thin, and graying—stood in the corner of the tiled waiting room, one arm placed protectively around a woman who was his polar opposite in stature—short and plump, with a firmly set chin, and a no-nonsense smile. In his other hand, he carefully grasped the yellow placard that identified them as the Rantas.

Behind them stood the gangly teenage boys. She scanned one blond head after another, until her gaze settled on the oldest Ranta boy. He was probably eighteen or nineteen, twenty at most, yet he stood straight and proud in his navy wool Finnish Army Corps dress uniform.

A soldier.

Catching her breath, Anna forced herself not to sigh. Not only did she suddenly have four more boys to take care of, but one of them was one of Finland's finest. And he was staggeringly good-looking too—from the tips of his Army-issue boots to his crystal-blue eyes.

Anna stomped her boot down hard on her own foot, angry with herself for letting her mind wander. She had enough to deal with right now without adding

a handsome soldier to the mix. With her art and plans to immigrate, she simply could not be thinking of Soldier Boy as anything other than the charity case he was.

Raising her head, Anna made her way through the crowded room, doing her best not to stare at the rows of yellow signs, each printed with a name and a number, held by pairs of trembling hands and hovering below frightened eyes. She sighed loudly, allowing the images of tear-stained cheeks, dusty children, and travel-weary adults to sear into her memory.

Maybe someday she would paint this scene.

Show the world what the Russians had done.

But not today.

Today she would smile, laugh, and forget that her family was forced to give away half of their too-small farmhouse to people they'd never met.

Indefinitely.

Anna's footsteps echoed across the tiled floor of the train station. *Indefinitely*. This would put a damper on her life plans. How would she apply for a visa, move to the United States, and go to art school now that the Rantas would be living with them? She couldn't leave her mother alone with all these boys to feed.

Four steps, three steps, two... Anna wiped her moist palms on the sides of her dark green wool jacket and pasted on a smile. "Hello! I am Anna Ojala. We will be your host family."

"Good day, Miss Ojala," Mr. Ranta said, as Mrs. Ranta lunged to take Anna's hands into hers as if clinging to a lifeline.

"Welcome. I trust you had a pleasant journey?"

Mr. Ranta shrugged his shoulders. "As nice as it could be."

Soldier Boy nudged his father aside and held out a tentative hand. "I'm Matti."

Anna tried to smile back, but those blue eyes and perfect smile made it hard for her to concentrate. *Don't even think about it.* "My father has his flatbed wagon hitched up outside, so if we can find our way through this crowd, we'll load up your belongings. It's an hour's ride to our village." Anna stared at the Rantas' dusty trunk in an effort not to look at Matti.

Mrs. Ranta saved Anna from her own awkwardness. "Thank you. Boys, please bring the trunk."

"Yes, ma'am," four voices echoed in chorus.

Anna turned toward the door and waved for them to follow, a tiny part of her hoping that Matti watched as she walked away.

~*~

This was unexpected. Matti took a deep breath and tried to get a handle on his emotions. He had spent the last week despising the idea of Kalajoki, assuming he would hate everything about the tiny village where his family had been relocated.

He'd expected endless land and a backwoods farmhouse full of people who had no idea what was going on in the world. He'd predicted three weeks of boredom and restlessness stuck way up north. But he certainly hadn't anticipated the beautiful strawberry blonde.

He watched Anna out of the corner of his eye as

the wagon jerked and jostled down Main Street. She'd busied herself brushing straw off the wagon bed with the toe of her boot while idly chatting with his parents. She was making a valiant effort to be hospitable, but her fiery green eyes betrayed a raging storm of emotion. That would be hard to tame.

Oh, but he'd like to try. He grabbed a brown linen blanket out of a basket on the floor and handed it to his mother who already shivered in the wind. "It's very cold here."

"Yes, very." His mama's lip quivered as she spoke.

Matti helped her wrap her shoulders tightly before grabbing a blanket for himself. He leaned back against the side rail of the flatbed and tried to get comfortable. It might be cold, but this was a definite upgrade from the smoke-filled train car. At least he was in the fresh air. Matti turned his attention back to Anna.

Every few seconds, a wavy strand of silken hair fell into her eyes, and she reached up absentmindedly to brush it away, only to have it fall down a few seconds later.

Matti chuckled quietly as she struggled to tame the wayward strand.

Her gaze darted up.

He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out. He had to get hold of himself or he'd regret his total ineptness for a long time. "Where exactly is your farm, Miss Ojala?"

"We live in Kalajoki. It's about twenty kilometers from here."

"Oh...OK." *Way to make an impression, Matti, with the squeaky, shaky voice.*

"I didn't know you boys were already off duty after the Winter War."

"We aren't," Matti said. "They gave me a three-week pass to help my family relocate." He stared at her, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to think of something else to say. Was he entirely incapable of holding a decent conversation with this girl?

"And what do you do in the army, Mr. Ranta?"

"Matti's a sergeant, and a good one!" Mrs. Ranta chimed in.

Anna stared at him and heat rose to his cheeks.

"I was conscripted on my eighteenth birthday, and they put me in the infantry right next to all of the other boys who had no idea what they were doing with a rifle."

She smiled—just a little—her green eyes sparkling.

Much better. He could stare at those beautiful eyes all day, even if he was stuck up here in Kalajoki. "When I get back to Helsinki in a few weeks, I suspect I'll be doing glamorous things like pot scrubbing, barracks cleaning, and maybe even some trench digging."

"Well, we could use a glamorous pot scrubber around the farm." Anna said, a tiny glimmer of laughter twinkling across her face.

Matti held up his hand in mock salute and gave her a smile. "At your service."

Anna smiled weakly.

"So, Anna Ojala, what do you do with your time?" Matti asked.

"I'm an artist."

He grinned at her, doing his best to portray confidence.

She glared.

So the confidence would not impress her. Maybe he could try honesty? "In truth, I love art. I mean,

artists. I mean..."

She burst out laughing. So much for being smooth.

"You love artists? Any particular ones, or just those who like to do art in general?"

"I like artists in general, I think." He smiled widely, for the first time all week. What was it about this woman? She was beautiful, but it was more than that. She seemed kind and funny and smart. He could get used to this relocation. At the thought, Matti's face twisted into a scowl. No, he would never get used to this relocation. He frowned and turned to watch the passing scenery as the playful banter of the moment drifted away. For a moment, he'd almost forgotten Karelia was no longer Finnish. And his family was now homeless.

Anna's soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "I'm sorry, Matti. I'm sure this is not easy for you." Her lips clenched tightly.

Matti bit his lip, his heart softening. No, this wasn't what he had hoped for—but that wasn't Anna's fault. He couldn't blame her for the actions of corrupt politicians. He looked down and quickly brushed the rest of the straw off his jacket before returning his gaze to her. "It's not your fault, Anna."

Anna's soft smile quickly faded.

Matti pulled the blanket tighter around his neck and leaned back.

A cloud crossed over those green eyes. Could it be that this farmer's daughter from Kalajoki understood what so many others had missed? Could he finally have an ally in this entire mess? For the first time in weeks, things were looking...hopeful. Sure, his life was a mess and his country was at war, but maybe, just maybe, there was someone in the world who would

understand him and be willing to stand for what was right.

2

Kalajoki, Finland

Matti reached over and mussed his youngest brother's head as they walked down the dusty road in front of the Ojala farmhouse. "You hear that, Beni? Miss Ojala here has six brothers."

Beni looked expectantly at Anna.

"It's true," Anna said. "My brothers set up a makeshift soccer field over there in the middle of the cow pasture." She pointed out over a decrepit fence to a field of brown grass. "They even made goals out of old logs and fishing net. They will be glad to have more players." Anna looked at Matti to gauge if her babbling annoyed him.

He seemed almost interested. Anna pushed thoughts of him out of her mind. No man would be interested in her—not if he knew.

"And I'm sure you play captain of the winning team?" Matti smiled, the twinkle in his eye showing the serious conversation from before had been pushed aside.

Anna shook her head. "If you had ever seen me play, you would be asking me to stay as far from the field as possible."

"What? No soccer?" Matti raised his eyebrows.

"Let's just say that last time I tried to play, my brother Aabel had to fish the ball out of the creek over

there.”

“That bad?” Matti laughed.

The sound echoed through Anna’s mind and wiggled its way into her heart. His laugh sounded nice. She continued the tour of their farm. She turned her attention to the fields that surrounded them and willed herself to focus on the rows of plants, one after another—anything but Matti’s blue eyes and movie-star smile.

“What are all these crops?” Mr. Ranta joined the group.

For a moment, Anna shifted her attention from Matti. “Flax. The fields will be full of brilliant blue flowers in a few weeks.”

“Beautiful.” Matti turned his gaze toward her.

Anna closed her eyes. The tenor of his voice made her heart tremble. Was this really happening? She had just started to emerge from the pain of the last year, to start to hope again, to dream. She didn’t need to be distracted by this. “We grow flax and make linen, mostly for our own clothing and towels, but occasionally we sell some to old Mr. Niemi. He owns the mercantile in town.”

Should she ask the Rantas what they thought about the war? No, that felt too personal. Instead, she sighed and stared off at the fields. She wished she had a sketchbook with her so she could capture the moment. Or escape the moment. *What’s wrong with me, Lord? You gave me the role of helping these refugees—and all I can think about is getting away.*

Anna peeked through squinted eyes at Matti, who slid a piece of straw into his mouth and chewed pensively. With his cap propped on his knee, his blond hair blew every direction in the wind.

Anna's heartbeat picked up. She inhaled deeply, the chilly spring air filling her lungs with the fragrance of fresh pine mixed with the musky scent of cattle and sheep. Sweetness mixed with bitterness, like her true feelings about home.

She both loved and hated this place. She loved the comfort and warmth that came with being loved, cherished, and cared for, but she hated the stifling burden of wanting so much more than a simple farmhouse on a tiny plot of land in middle-of-nowhere Finland. She could never settle down here. Even this handsome and charming soldier wouldn't change her mind.

Especially after what had happened with Henrik.

Anna shuddered and swallowed a wave of emotion. It was best not to think about him right now. Or ever.

The group turned and walked down the long, narrow dirt road that led up to the Ojala farmhouse. Anna glanced up at the familiar scenery. What did their guests think of their new temporary home? The sides of the drive were lined with blackberry and blueberry bushes, each beginning to flower with the promise of summer fruit. Behind them stood her mother's famed garden, brown and derelict. Soon it would be bursting with fresh vegetables and greens.

Anna walked slowly, buying her parents a few last moments of peace before...well, before their house was overtaken.

"We decided that all of the boys—my brothers too—will sleep in the barn." She pointed to the wood-hewn barn that stood across the field from the farmhouse. "It should be nice and warm—we just rebuilt it a few weeks ago because the old roof

crumbled under the winter's heavy snow."

"That will be wonderful, won't it, boys?" Mrs. Ranta asked. "Just look how lovely it is."

A bit of pride swelled in her. Her brothers had spent weeks cutting down pines from the family's back fifty acres, carefully choosing trees perfect in size and color and creating a final look both functional and beautiful.

"Oh, and look, it has your family crest above the barn door." Mrs. Ranta pointed.

Anna had carefully painted the wooden sign that hung above the front door of the barn, using oil paints to inscribe the Ojala name before embellishing it with rows of leaves and flowers. She had given it to her parents as a parting gift of sorts. Back when she thought she would be leaving for America this summer. "Thank you. I made it myself."

"Anna is an artist," Matti chimed in with a crooked smile.

Anna looked away. If she was to survive the coming days with her heart intact, she'd have to stay as far away from Matti Ranta as possible. She stared at her shoes before looking up and pointing to the tiny, dilapidated building in front of them. "Over there is the outhouse and next to the barn is the sauna. It looks as if my mother lit the stove so you can have a sauna after supper if you'd like."

"That would be nice." Mrs. Ranta stared off into the windblown fields.

Anna averted her gaze toward her parents' tiny farmhouse. "I think it's about time for supper. Shall we head inside?" She shuddered, wrapped her coat tighter around her waist to fend off the chill in the air, and started to make her way inside. If she allowed herself

to think of what she had hoped this summer would bring, she would melt into a pool of despair. She had no choice but to put on a smile, do her chores, and smile at her guests. And make sure Matti never found out about Henrick.

3

Moscow, Russia

He wouldn't make it.

Dr. Alexandrov's words were optimistic, but Tanya could see the trepidation in his expression even as he reassured her that there was still a glimmer of hope.

Nicolai—her wonderful Nicolai—would not survive. The impact of the hard truth had wiggled its way down into her gut the instant their friend Alek had run into the house screaming there had been an accident.

She had raced out onto the street in front of their Moscow tenement to find her husband lying on the hard-packed dirt road. Blood gushed out of his mouth and pooled underneath his pale face, which had twisted into a grimace of pain. She vomited violently right there on the road, choking on her own tears as she screamed for someone to fetch the doctor.

The neighbors helped carry Nicolai up to their tenement. She laid him out on their cot before using her favorite purple wool sweater to try to ward off the bleeding, as if by giving up something that was precious to her, God would return the favor by allowing her to keep Nicolai.

Even then that was futile.

Tanya looked from Nicolai's grey-tinged lips to Dr. Alexandrov's pale face. Disbelief washed through her soul.

A crowd of friends and neighbors, now squeezed into her apartment, gaped as Dr. Alexandrov dug through his black leather satchel. He pulled out a pair of blunt scissors and carefully cut away Nicolai's shirt, exposing the focal point of his injuries.

Alek, Nicolai's best friend, gasped before vomiting onto the floor next to the bed. He steadied himself against Tanya's kitchen table.

"Go!" Tanya shouted to the nervous onlookers, waving them out the door. She wanted to be alone with Nicolai.

Her friends filed out, one by one, glancing back with pity-filled looks and tear-stained cheeks. Kneeling at the end of the cot, she ran her fingers over Nicolai's rough, unshaven face, tracing a line from his shaggy brown hair down to his quivering lips. Still beautiful to her. Dirty, bloodstained, but handsome as a man could ever be. And he was hers. He had been for eleven nearly perfect months.

Swallowing the lump in her throat and wiping desperate tears from her face, Tanya leaned down and kissed Nicolai's lips. She smoothed his hair out of his eyes, wishing he would open them, if only for a minute. But he didn't. She lay her head next to his, holding her breath to hear each and every heartbeat.

She kissed him on the temple, on the cheek, on his hands, and her salty tears dripped onto his skin before she gently wiped them away. Finally, she lay back on their shared pillow, closed her eyes, and hummed to drown out the sounds of Dr. Alexandrov working. She soaked up the scent of him, the feel of him next to her.

"I've...I've done all I can do." Dr. Alexandrov's words broke her silent vigil.

Tanya turned away, willing herself not to look into the doctor's eyes. She couldn't bear to see the dark shadows of concern. Of knowing.

"Will...he be all right?" Tanya looked at the floor. *Please God. Make the doctor's answer different than what I expect.*

Dr. Alexandrov pressed his lips together. "I don't think so, Mrs. Egerov. Can I call someone to come be with you?"

"There's no one to call."

"What about Mr. Pederov?"

Tanya shook her head slowly. "I just want to be alone with him."

"OK. I'll be back first thing in the morning to check on you. If he wakes up or there is any change, send someone to get me right away."

Tanya stayed where she was, stroking Nicolai's hair.

He slept, his breaths coming out as wheezy gasps. She stayed as his skin turned from pink to white to a death-tinged grey and his breaths grew further and further apart. Then one last desperate shudder echoed into silence. His body turned from warm to stiff to cold and lifeless.

Her tears pooled onto his still chest, and every fragment of her hope floated away on those blood-soaked sheets.

~*~

What did a woman do when her husband died in

her bed? What she was supposed to do now? "Why, Nicolai?" she yelled.

As if he could hear her.

Last night she had managed to be calm, steady even. But now that it was all over, she wavered between utter despair and relentless anger.

She was angry at the driver of the car that struck him. Angry at Dr. Alexandrov for not saving Nicolai. Angry at Nicolai for leaving her in a country where a poor, lonely widow had little hope for any kind of future.

She wasn't sure where to go or who to call. Should she fetch the doctor? He had said he'd come by first thing this morning to check on them, so he would probably be here any minute. Or maybe she should call the police? The morgue? She had no idea how to handle this sort of thing. But she couldn't bear to stay in that tiny apartment with Nicolai's body for much longer.

Tanya choked back a sob and flopped into one of the rickety chairs. She needed to get hold of someone to help with the body, obviously. And her neighbors—she wasn't really close to any of them, but they had all seen the accident and would most likely come knocking soon to check. She needed to plan a funeral. And clean up the sheets. And figure out how to pay the rent.

But she couldn't do any of that.

She wanted to run away and pretend none of this had happened. Surely his death was all one horrible nightmare and she would soon wake. The only man she'd ever love wasn't lying dead in the bed they had so happily shared.