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## War's End

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**Author Bio**

Hannah Sawyer loves being active, the outdoors, college basketball, pick-up soccer, traveling, interesting people, great stories, classic adventures and sketchy shenanigans, her home state of Maine, chocolate, her dog and her car. Her friends add flavor to her day and help her get home at night. Her parents and brother are simply her favorite people.

# *Hannah Sawyer*

## *War's End*

Her hands moved quickly from task to task. Brusquely, she fluffed the pillows behind his head and deftly changed the bandage on his left arm. She skimmed the charts, felt for his pulse, took his temperature, and refilled the glass of water next to his bed. Only when she rearranged the covers did Edith drop her professional facade, allowing her fingers to linger longer than a nurse's should around his legs, dragging them slowly across his body while she pulled the sheets up, and letting them come to rest lightly on his chest. John made no response; he seemed to take no notice of the touch. She made the pretense of picking an imaginary piece of lint off his shirt and then withdrew her hand. The anemic lighting in the hospital really didn't do justice to the large diamond on her ring finger; the cold practicality of surgical instruments implied that jewelry was frivolous in comparison.

"We've had a letter from your parents today," she told him, compensating with a light tone which masked her unsettled thoughts. "Would you like me to read it to you?"

She held out the envelope to him. Her engagement ring overwhelmed her delicate hand and stood out like ice against the snowy starkness of the paper. The band never seemed to sit straight on her finger anymore. War had made them all, even the nurses, a little thinner. It was hard to eat when they didn't know where their next meal was coming from, and Edith had lost some of the sumptuous curves that she had had when she first followed John to Europe. He turned the envelope over in his hands reflectively, and when he spoke, the coldness of his tone was biting.

"You already opened it?"

Contempt was John's constant bedfellow as he lay immobilized in the hospital wing, and it awoke during even the briefest of their conversations. Victory had been proclaimed in Europe weeks ago, and John's war had been over for much longer, ever since he had been shot on the Western front, but he continued to search for the enemy. Finding no army, he trained his scope on Edith.

"Yes, I opened it. I didn't know when you'd..."

"Who was the letter addressed to? Was it addressed to you or to

me?" John interrupted in a tone so low that his words crawled across the floor to Edith.

"You."

"Then why did you open it?"

"I just didn't know when you'd feel up to reading it," she said quietly.

"I got shot in the arm, not the god damn eyes Edith! I can still read a letter from my own parents." Silently she gave him the letter. She leaned back and closed her eyes, hiding the tears which threatened to break through her carefully constructed dam of self-restraint.

Europe. It was where she had come to offer her services as a nurse to the Allies, to fulfill her civil duty, and to defeat the Nazi killing machine that was steamrolling across the continent. At least that's why she told everyone she was going. It sounded so good that she had almost managed to convince herself, but really, she knew that she had come to keep an eye on John. As the daughter of an influential military man, Edith had pulled strings, transferring from hospital to hospital, following the movement and advances of his regiment, crossing country lines, military fronts, all the while blurring the constructs of her own motivation. Now she and the other nurses were just biding their time, waiting for John and the other patients to get well enough to be transferred home.

Were they an endearing story of devoted adoration? That's what most people seemed to think of it as, and their perception helped Edith get what she wanted. Even hardened generals thought it was romantic. The story of the young couple warmed their hearts in the desolate landscape of war, and they would readily grant her requests. Of course Edith did it for romance, or that was one of the reasons. She and John were in love. That's what everyone told them: how beautiful they looked together, how happy they were, how much in love they must be, and Edith believed they must be right.

But it was more than that; she followed John because it was what she had always done. She had grown up trailing behind him through the neighborhood, unsure of how to express her girlish feelings and settling on nicknames and swift kicks as sufficient ways to show her affection. Later, when they had started dating, she rode to his high school football games with his parents, and when she got in to Sarah Lawrence and he chose Dartmouth, she found a smaller women's college nearby, so that they wouldn't have to feel the pangs of separation. After all this time, she couldn't recognize herself without him; life without John was something she couldn't fathom because she had never experienced it.

"I'll have to find a jeweler to readjust this band," she murmured to herself, moments later. She got up from his bedside, leaving John to the letter, securing her mask of confidence once again.

How beautiful their story must appear, she thought to herself, as she drifted amongst the legions of hospital beds. A young woman follows her childhood sweetheart into the greatest military conflict the world has ever seen and, when he gets hit, spends her days nursing him back to health so that she can bring him home to his parents, a whole man. The tears it would bring when someone told it at their wedding as Edith blushed prettily and John took her hand under the table. Old couples would glance knowingly at each other and smile.

"How's John doing?" asked Nurse Kelly later that night. The matronly ward director was fond of telling people that she'd pretty much heard it all, but when it came to those two kids, well there wasn't another love story quite like theirs.

"Oh his arm seems to be coming along quite nicely. The infection looks to be going down, and I don't think there will be any need to operate. But what I'd like to know," Edith continued, "is if there's anyone around here that could resize my wedding band. It's really becoming quite loose."

"Ha!" Nurse Kelly barked. "Girl, this hospital is parked on an entire continent of war torn countries that have been blasted, shot at, burned and blown up for years and all you want to do is find the neighborhood jewelers? Do you know where we are? We're on the western front. Hell, the Germans were so poor even before the war started that most of them have never even seen a wedding band!"

Edith looked down at her lap and twisted the pretty ring around her finger.

"I'll tell you what sweetie," said Nurse Kelly, softening a little. "Pretty soon, you might be able to go to the jeweler that you bought it from and have them fix it."

She lowered her voice and leaned in conspiratorially, "Word is that we might not be waiting for everyone to get better. We might be clearing out of here soon, damn soon in fact. The brass wants to get everyone home and out of Europe. Apparently, if Japan doesn't fall soon, command is prepared to do some real big, real drastic, and if they can help it, they don't want no Americans in other countries when it happens. That's how damn big it's gonna be, so big they don't know how the foreigners are gonna react." For the first time in weeks, a genuine smile wove its way across Edith's face. Nurse Kelly's words came as a welcome surprise. Edith wasn't even sure what home meant anymore, except that it sounded too good to be true. She slipped her loose ring off her finger and tucked it into her pocket for safe keeping.

Nurse Kelly was right about the brass moving everyone out. A few days later, the staff was told they had less than a week to close up the hospital before they would be moved to different bases in Western Europe for processing, discharge, and shipment home. Relief was an



understatement. It was as if Edith was being set free after years of wrongful imprisonment. Nothing that could take her away fast enough from the lightless cell of her existence at the hospital. She had come to hate tending to the half-human husks of men that flooded the wards. It was more like some sort of sick form of torture than nursing or healing.

At first, it hadn't been so bad, there hadn't been that many of them, and she had enjoyed flirting with the young officers on the mend who told her not to worry, now that America had joined the war, it would be over soon. We'd show those Nazi bastards what they deserved. But as the war had dragged on, the men had become more and more grim. They came with psychological wounds that were as devastating as the physical wounds which had torn apart half their body. None of them reassured her or smiled anymore, they didn't even look at her. She might as well of been talking to a wall when she tried to awaken them from their blank, staring, stupor. One of her patients had been a prisoner of war. The only sounds he made were the screams that still woke Edith at night. He had died four days later without ever uttering an actual word. She wanted to bury those memories beneath her packing and zip them up in a suitcase she would never have to open again. It would be good for John to leave. All he needed was to be home to begin truly healing. That's when he'd become himself again, he wasn't like those other men in the ward, the ones who had never lost that hard, glassy look in their eyes. They would both move on.

She had thanked God when she had seen John carried in a few days after he'd been hit. She'd requested that they move him to her hospital. His arm was shattered and heavily bandaged, but his angelic face had been left untouched; his wound would heal into simply a noble reminder of his heroic acts against the Nazi's. In fact, Edith thought she might have been a little embarrassed if he had gone back completely intact. Now people wouldn't dare question his bravery, it would be displayed in the spider web of scars that would inevitably criss-cross his arm, or even in the empty pin tucked sleeve of his sharp officer's uniform. The doctors said they still didn't know if they'd be able to save his arm. Edith hoped they'd be able to, and she'd surely done her best to take care of him as she nursed him back to health. It would be hard for John to hold her while they danced if he only had one arm, and they had to dance. Everyone danced at their wedding. She finished packing her suitcase and zipped up John's bag, ready to begin the journey home.

"Where's your ring?" John asked later when they were packed into the back of the Taxi. They were the first words he had spoken to her all day and his tone spoke only of accusation.

"Oh, it's in my pocket," she replied. "It was loose, and I was worried it might fall off. I can put it back on."

"Don't bother," he mumbled, and turned to look out the window. Moments later, he couldn't hide the shudder which coursed electrically through him as they drove by a skeletally thin mother, sitting on the steps of the burned remnants of a collapsed shack, with a baby in her lap.

Edith watched his attempt to master himself again as she leaned her forehead against the cool glass of the taxi window, letting it seep in and slow the throbbing of her head. It was an action she would repeat many times as John reacted to other sights like that one which ran past the train and bus windows during their trip home. Once she tried to comfort him and he shoved her against a wall. He held her there with his face seemingly a centimeter away from hers, his fetid breath assaulting her nose, before releasing her and walking her away. Watching him go, Edith had noted his wild appearance, disheveled hair, crumpled shirt, and wondered when he had last taken a shower.

"Don't you think a fall ceremony would be nice?" She chatted as they got on the subway, nearly two months later. "I realize that it's late in the summer, but I think that we could pull something together by early October. Just something small, I really don't want to wait another year."

Coming back from Europe had taken longer than they had thought. Something had gotten mixed up with their passports or John's discharge papers, it was hard to remember which, and it didn't matter now. Her relationship with John was her sole concern. With every day that passed, he had become more and more unreachable. She could feel his mind becoming as desolate and barren as the frozen tundra. Edith was convinced that something as beautiful and normal as marriage was now the only thing that might melt the glacier threatening to engulf his heart.

John ignored her comments while they made their way to the subway, crowded with sweaty passengers. The people pressed against her and she felt like she might drown amidst the foreign mass. As their bodies engulfed her, she couldn't help but be reminded that this was more human contact that she had felt in months. John had avoided her touch like the plague ever since they had left the hospital. Edith's desire to get off the car and into her parents' house flooded her senses. In the cool comfort of their familiar living room, they would truly be home and she and John would be able to begin to put the pieces back together again. Once he was surrounded by reminders of their old lives, she was sure he'd let go of whatever evil had been growing in him and their old feelings for each other would resurface.

"This is our stop," he said, and began to gather their things.

Edith stood up and smoothed her skirt. The doors opened. "So what do you think?" she said.

The words formed in her mouth but never made it to John's ears. Her voice was lost in the din as they stepped out into a chaotic scene orchestrated by confusion. Shouts of joy dropped like bombs, breaking through Edith's quiet inner turmoil. For the first time in months, she was ripped from her own unpleasant reverie by the scenes of senseless happiness. Strangers rushed by her and the broad smiles on her face made her yearn to be a part of the celebration. She could feel the bubbling ecstasy of the moment catching her up in its tidal swell, and she was drawn to the feeling of the mob's euphoria like an addict long deprived of a drug.

"What's going on?" yelled Edith to a man sprinting by.

"It's over! Japan surrendered! The War's over!"

She turned to John with bliss in her eyes. It was over, they were released. The tension drained from her soul like water breaking through a dam. Arms outstretched, she was ready to embrace him, and to celebrate their new found freedom, but when she reached out to take his hand, the malice flashing in his eyes made her stop dead.

"Well thank God," he said. "Thank fucking God. Now we can await our day of judgment in comfort."

"John, what are you talking about?"

"You don't get it do you? I could only wish for your damn blissful ignorance. It will be a lot easier for you to ignore the fires of hell when they start to burn your feet." He spat on the ground in front of her and then grabbed her hands with an animalistic snarl.

"John you're hurting me."

"Don't think for one second that your hands aren't covered in their blood either. There's no such thing as innocence anymore. We slaughtered it in Europe."

"Let go of me," she yelled, the pitch of her voice beginning to rise to that of a scream, but John only tightened his grip.

"Every time I killed one of them, I ended more than one life. His friend who had to hold him while he bled out, his girl by the fire for him to come home, the child he never got a chance to have. Their lives were all over too when I pulled the trigger, when me and the rest of the world validated this insanity. Future? What future are they gonna have? The ones who got left on the fields are the lucky ones. They're not gonna be around to see the force of evil we set free wreck itself on our world. It would have been fucking humane of me to go around and put a bullet in their heads too. And you fuckers have the audacity to celebrate it. You're fuckin' right its over." With that he dropped her hand, and stared into her eyes. Edith searched for the man she knew in the two pools of oblique darkness. Before she could find him, John turned and walked away.

Edith stood there, her feet melting in to the pavement, keeping her there in agony while she watched a part of her identity head up



the steps and into oblivion. A moment later she broke free and rushed frantically up the steps. She could barely see his blond curly head bobbing like a buoy above the sea of faces. As long as she could keep track of him, she'd be able to catch up, to make him stop and talk this all out. The excitement of the moment, it had done something to him, unhinged him in some way. He was maybe a little more damaged than she originally thought but he wasn't broken. Her mind screamed that she could fix this, but she could feel the hollowness of her own words even as she thought them.

Edith started to break into a sprint when strong arms caught her from behind. Dipped over an arm in a disorienting wash of blue, she fought rabidly against the momentum, as the landscape seemed to invert itself. She struggled to keep sight of John's stony face, the only constant landmark left in her world, before she was kissed hard by salty, wet, unknown lips.

Somewhere deep in the back of her mind, she heard the whirl of a photographer's lens as it captured the moment, and she thought wildly, 'No! Not Now!' This wasn't how it was supposed to be! She was in her still in her white nurse's uniform, not the elegant wedding dress of her dreams. They weren't at an alter, surrounded by friends and family; they were in Times Square, pressed on all sides by screaming strangers and he wasn't John. He was just some giddy man in a navy sailor's suit, and his kiss was the death knell of her dreams. His mouth left hers, and he slowly let her go, beaming down at her. The absurdity of the situation racked her mind. She pushed past him violently, but John was nowhere in sight.

Dizzily she turned round and round but thousands of happy faces wet with tears of joy clouded her view like tear gas seeping from the trenches. Her eyes remained dry, protected by a wall of numbness. Confetti exploded above her head and rained down upon her like rubble. The brightly colored pieces taunted her with their uncanny resemblance to the torn up pieces of her once vibrant existence. Their end was already decided. They would be swept off the streets and dumped into the trash, but any future she had imagined was quickly being erased as if by the hands of God, or as definitively as the decimation of a tank. The black hole of uncertainty which was rapidly gathering up the threads of Edith's life was making waves of nausea wash over her.

Sprinting past a store front window, she caught sight of her own face. Staring in to the eyes of the enemy, her own reflection gazed back. Slowly, she began her death march towards that window; she was an army facing certain defeat. Happiness, love, and the warmth of life fled around her. She didn't even try to stop their retreat, knowing that this was only the beginning of the empty existence that was to come. She

had seen that dead stare before, it had been in the eyes of the men she treated, the living corpses that lay as evenly spaced as the cracks in a sidewalk in the hospital beds along the rows of her ward. The darkness had already reached the windows of her soul.

"How quickly it moves," she noted with a twisted calmness. Trapped in her ironic moment of clarity, she felt like she finally understood him, not only John, but the man whose screams had murdered the quiet of the hospital, and every soldier who had watched any hope for normalcy blasted to abeyance by the automated killing machines of war. It was over, and Edith was completely and utterly alone.

She turned away from the window in time to observe a photographer scurrying towards a payphone, clutching his pictorial gold. A haunting smile cut across her face, stopping far from her eyes. Edith let her body be swallowed up in the sea of celebration around her. As the crowds pushed her away, she yelled out to him with perverse laughter, "Call it War's End," before being swept away as she surrendered to the hollowness.