

Christmas in Bavaria

By E.V. Sparrow

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The cuckoo clock's tiny bird chirped six times, as Hannah pulled a wool sweater over her head with her long braid. She entered the kitchenette to double-check the 1981 Picturesque Castle's wall calendar she'd purchased in Munich. She traced the week to December 24. *I was right*, 7:00 am. *Enough time to walk to work.* She spread apart the lace curtain panels covering the frosty apartment window and studied the cloudy sky veiling the crest of the Alps. "Not snowing—for now."

Her landlady, Mrs. Byers, would still be asleep, so she couldn't ask to use the phone to call for a ride to work. Hannah tugged on snow boots and seized the army-brown, down parka, and wool scarf from the peg by her door. Maybe the shop had repaired Josh's car, and he'd pick her up? She'd best hurry to their usual meeting place at the church across the lane. She tiptoed through the boarding house, past the other lodgers' doors, down three floors of carpeted stairs, and out the front door.

Hannah's breath froze in the air, and she pulled the scarf over her nose.

A snowplow turned the corner, past Hannah's apartment, and headed down the cobblestone street in front of the church. It sprayed snow in an arch next to the sidewalk, almost reaching the base of the tiny balcony off the kitchenette. This amount of snow was so mind-boggling that her family and friends in the States might not believe her.

She shielded her eyes against the glaring sun that cut between scattering clouds, adjusted her wool cap, and squinted upward to find the snowbank's crest. *There's the marker.* "Almost thirty feet of snow? Good Lord."

"Talking to yourself again?" Her friend, Josh, trekked toward her up the icy sidewalk sprinkled with sand. His hazel eyes crinkled above his scarf.

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Hannah uncovered her face. “A sign of a brilliant imagination. I can’t believe how much snow *Garmisch* has—I see you’re without your car, which means I walk to work.”

Josh chuckled. “Be thankful you’re able to walk. Mainly because they’ve cleared the roads. That’s what makes me thankful. German efficiency. You can take a bus.” He planted a kiss on top of her head. “Good news … My car is ready. I pick it up from the shop this afternoon.”

“Finally. Since you have the only car among our friends. You know the buses don’t run this early. But now, we won’t need public transportation anymore—we can depend on you.”

“Dependable me.” He patted his chest. “Plus, we can go out for that Christmas Eve dinner I promised.”

“*Danke.*” Hannah bobbed a curtsy and stomped her feet to keep her circulation going. “Did the police find out who stole parts from your car or trashed it with beer and stuff?”

“Nope, but thieves sell stolen parts on the black market.” Josh squeezed her shoulder. “So, I’ll pick you up at 6:00 tonight, after I get Mike and Meg. It should still be light enough for you to see the frozen *Eibsee* with no sailboats on it.” He wiggled his brows.

“The stunning lake without boats, *or* tourists for once. And a feast at the *Färnhaus*… can’t wait to write about my first Christmas in Bavaria.”

He waved as he turned away. “*Auf Wiedersehen.*”

She rearranged her scarf to cover her nose again before she trudged up the street to the ski rental shop. “All I’ve been doing is work, work, work in this winter wonderland.”

In the dim lobby of the *Färnhaus* restaurant, a Christmas tree flickered with lighted, tiny red candles nestled within gold holders clipped to the branches. “They’d never allow us to do

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this back home. Meg, isn't it the most beautiful tree you've ever seen? And there's the cranberry and popcorn garlands. Classic."

"Definitely. Once you've seen a German tree with real candles, it's disappointing to decorate one with light bulbs or anything fake."

The four friends feasted on roast pork loin, *spätzle*, and *blumenkohl* (cauliflower). They didn't order dessert, because Meg had baked and iced gingerbread men cookies waiting at Hannah's apartment.

Josh leaned toward Hannah. "By the joy in your eyes, I made an excellent choice for dinner here, right?"

She grinned. "Could be... now for the ice-covered lake. The rest of my gift."

Although the snowfall began again as they ate, Josh escorted the group of friends to the *Eibsee* in *Grainau*. He was right. There was enough twilight left to view the wide, dark, thoroughly frozen lake. Hannah imagined ice-skating on it as she had done once in Yosemite, but ice-skating wasn't yet available.

On the return trip, Josh turned down a road that appeared clear, but it was unplowed further on. The car got stuck against an object buried beneath the snow. He tried to reverse, and the chained tires spun out.

Everyone climbed out of the car, and in the deepening night, they searched for the flashlight in the trunk and underneath the car seats.

Josh rummaged through the glove compartment. "It was here. I bet the thugs stole it when they broke in... didn't notice it missing before."

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The group pushed and shoved the car repeatedly, in many directions, but it seemed stuck in a hole and wouldn't budge.

Mike said, "Can anyone see any houses? I think we're isolated."

"It's too dark to make out anything." Hannah listened for any noises of humanity, but there was only the gentle plop of snowflakes.

Meg, Josh, and Mike discussed what to do, how to get help, or if they would need to spend the night in the car. Blankets were in the trunk, but was there enough fuel to run the heater overnight? Should they attempt walking back to the main road in the dark?

Hannah's heart pounded. Stranded? In the middle of nowhere? What should they do? The moonless sky created a snowy landscape difficult to discern, except for the darker blueish shapes of the Alps, cedars, and contours of a narrow ravine. "There's no one around to help. It's getting creepy. So still... and silent."

Josh said, "Let's pray for wisdom on what to do here." The group held hands in a circle, then asked God for protection and a way of escape from their dilemma.

"Amen." Hannah lifted her head and studied the landscape once more. A golden glow appeared in the darkness across the ravine. "What's that?"

Warm light spilled down the far hillside from a small church's open door. The gothic stained-glass windows sparkled like a kaleidoscope, and pinpoints of light spread out in front of the church.

"There's people." Relief rushed through Hannah.

Several people lit candles and placed them in the snow near the gravestones. They created a scenic gold, teal, and midnight blue masterpiece.

"Stille Nacht, heilige nacht, (Silent Night, holy night)

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Alles schlaft; einsam wacht..." (All is calm; all is bright)

Goosebumps shivered up Hannah's arms. "That's beautiful."

Meg sang Silent Night along with them in her flawless Deutsch, while the others joined in on the words they knew.

"It's glorious and soothing A Capella... with their voices echoing around us." Hannah clapped her gloved hands. "Best gift ever. We would've missed out on this if the car hadn't gotten stuck here."

The friends huddled together and murmured about God's perfect timing for them to experience the blessing of this mesmerizing song in the dark of night and during their predicament.

"Yup, it was soothing, but we're still stuck," Josh said. "Got an idea." He opened the car door, activating the cab light, and switched the headlamps on. Josh and Mike cupped their hands around their mouths and bellowed across the ravine in Deutsch, "Help, we're stuck!" They waved their arms over their heads while spotlighted in the bright beams.

Hannah frowned. "Can they hear? Oh, we heard them. Let's yell together again on three."

Several little flames on the hillside bobbed together, then stilled. People yelled a request to identify their exact location so they could rescue them.

Josh replied with the turnoff he took.

The group of friends piled back into Josh's car, turned on the heater, and waited.

About fifteen minutes later, headlights blazed through the back window, and they turned around as three helpers climbed out of a truck. They tied a rope to Josh's rear bumper, and everyone pushed from the front as the truck tugged his car backwards down the way they drove in from Grainau.

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Hannah pondered the miraculous events while the truck towed them away from the vanishing, dreamlike scene. She turned to Josh. “Isn’t it breathtaking how God always does the unexpected? First the manger, then the crucifixion, and then Jesus’ resurrection. Nobody expected any of those.”

“True.” Josh nodded. “We also witnessed His masterful timing.”

“Amen. God answered our prayers for escape, plus gave us an unexpected Christmas experience we’ll never forget.”