

Sana stared out a rain-streaked window, watching long lines of men slowly file into the battleships loading for war. Fog hung low in sky and curled over the water as trucks crept through the rain, delivering loads of crates to the gray boats crowding the docks. Thousands of soldiers still stood in the drizzle outside, waiting their turn to board. The nurses had been allowed to wait inside a warehouse.

“Coffee, dear?” A gray-haired little British woman in a Wren uniform was handing out peanut butter sandwiches and black coffee in paper cups.

“Thank you very much, ma’am.” Sana was still unsure about whether or not to salute. The nurses had been finally given a lecture about rank and military protocol, but the Wren just smiled at her and moved on. Saluting seemed unnecessary. Sana turned back to the window, took a sip of bitter coffee, and grimaced. Out in the rain, more Wrens in raincoats and rubber boots handed out coffee and sandwiches to soldiers.

“Don’t those boats look awfully small?” Margie said. “I thought they’d be bigger. Look at all those poor men out there getting soaked to the skin.”

“Girls! Get your bags!” Adele called. Sana scooped up her two canvas musette bags and slung them over her shoulders, staggering a little as their group hiked off through the warehouse. She had stuffed her bags full of uniforms, shoes, underwear, and all the little things she thought might come in handy wherever she was going. One bag held her sewing kit and blue satin cosmetics bag, and the other held her blankets and extra coverall. If some emergency forced her to keep only one bag, she planned to keep one with the sewing kit and trust the Army to provide everything else.

Checky came up, stomping her feet to settle her oversized boots. “I’m wearing two pairs of socks and these things are still too big,” she said. A bit of pink-flowered fabric showed under the collar of her coverall. She and Sana were both wearing their pajamas underneath their uniforms, to keep warm and to make more room in the bags. “Do you have any room left? I’m trying to fit my purse in.” She was carrying a black patent leather purse along with her bulging bags. A bright blue yarn tassel poked out from one of her pants pockets.

Sana looked doubtful. “I’ll try.”

“I’ll take it,” said Obie, walking behind them.

“Oh, thank you. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I got lots of room.” Sana and Checky turned around to look at Obie’s bags. They were, indeed, half empty.

“Thank you so much,” Checky said. “I’d hug you but then I’d clobber you with all this stuff I’m carrying.”

“Did you ever decide about your necklace?” Sana asked her.

“I mailed it home to my mom. I’d just lose it somewhere if I took it. Hey, Mom sent me another letter, saying the Germans are bombing hospital units even if they have the Geneva red cross sign showing.”

“The radio said that too,” Obie said.

“So I wrote her back and said I would be careful and for her to be sure and get my insurance money if I don’t come home.” Checky laughed.

Margie, just ahead of them, turned around and walked backwards as she talked. “I wrote my mom and bet her a dollar that I’ll be married by the time I come home.”

Sana hitched her bags up on her shoulders and kept her eyes on the floor. There was no home waiting for her at the end of the war. She had written her aunt’s name on her own

insurance benefit form, trying to ignore the painful problem of having no one else to claim. But even the letter she had sent to Mary, telling her about the insurance, had not brought an answer. The old lonely feeling had come back after that, creeping over her heart like the gloomy gray fog outside. If she died in the war, her aunt and uncle would probably forget about her right after they cashed the check.

They walked through a door and straight into the weather. Whipping rain stung their faces and they all put up their hands against the wind.

“What idiot said to not bring raincoats?” Margie yelled. “Whew!”

“Over here,” Adele called, signaling them towards a truck.

Sana pulled her bags tighter and yanked up the collar of her coverall as high as she could. “Come on, run for it,” she called, and they broke into a jog and jostled into the nurses ahead of them.

“Move it!” Margie yelled. A male officer further up the line turned around and frowned.

“These people need to hurry,” Checky shouted, rain streaming down her face.

“Somebody tell them we’re drowning back here.”

“American women! Look at that!” Soldiers standing in line along the dock were gaping at them.

Sana swung around. That voice . . . her heart leaped at the sudden memory of fresh coffee and dill pickles, bakery and cigar smoke . . . she stared at the blue-eyed soldier looking straight at her. He was big and tall, like the Czechs in her uncle’s store, and his voice was so familiar . . . But just then it was her turn to scramble up into the truck, and when she turned around to look for him again the line of soldiers had moved and she couldn’t see him anymore.

“You know that guy?” Margie asked.

“He reminded me of someone.” Sana craned out the back of the truck, ignoring the calls and whistles, looking for that face from home again.

“He’s a cute medic. I bet we see him again.” Margie winked. Sana rolled her eyes.

Checky, still holding her purse, slipped on the truck’s wet bumper and fell back to the muddy dock. All her bags tumbled down and the men in line guffawed.

“Shut up! That’s a woman!” snapped another soldier. “Here, miss,” he said, giving Checky a hand up.

“A woman!” “A woman!” “What’s a woman doing here?” Men everywhere turned to look.

“We’re the nurses!” Margie called, waving. Sana didn’t look around. She was staring at the soldier. It was Joe Vesely.

Joe stared back at the dark-eyed woman in the truck. The thick soft tangle of her lashes, the beautiful eyes . . . it was the girl from the grocery store back home.

“Sana?” he called. His line of soldiers began to move away but he walked backwards, keeping her in sight.

“Joe? Joe?” Her truck was starting to move, too, and she leaned out to catch his answer.

“Yeah!” The truck roared forward and she waved at him as it turned and carried her out of sight. “Dang!”

Sedlak was laughing. “You beat all, Lieutenant. One American woman on this . . .” he started a curse and then cut it off when he caught Joe’s warning glance, “. . . uh, island . . . and you know her. Does she have a sister?”

“She’s from my hometown,” Joe said. “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe she’s here.” He shook his head in amazement. “Women going to the war.”

“Nurses,” Sedlak said, savoring the word. They both stared for a while at the place where the truck had turned.

The men slowly filed onto the boat and into their quarters, squeezing themselves and all their gear into narrow cots slung in stacks and rows. They waited for hours, swinging gently against each other as the boat rocked in the harbor, napping on and off until they felt the boat move out. When the room started to tilt and lurch they knew they were in the open sea, and after that men began to get sick. When the call finally came for mess, some of them got sick again.

Those who could walk and eat were allowed to go on deck afterwards. On the officers’ deck Joe walked around, stretching the kinks out of his arms and legs, gazing across the gray-green waves or up at the misty sky. He passed a group wearing white armbands with red crosses and heard someone call his name.

“Yes!” Wence Prazsky was running toward him, looking taller and brawnier than ever in his bulky army jacket. “Hey!”

“Praz!” Joe slapped Wence on the back. “Where’s my twenty, you crazy Czech?” Wence had borrowed twenty dollars on the day they were called up and they hadn’t seen each other since.

“I can’t believe it! Can’t believe it!” Wence pounded Joe’s back with his oversize fist. They stopped beating each other long enough to exchange stories.

“Three thousand miles away from home and here you are.” Wence shook his head. “I thought you’d be in some safe little state-side post drinking beer.”

“Naw, I joined the Rangers. What’s this?” Joe slapped Wence’s armband. “Dr. Praz?”

“I got medic training because I can carry a man by myself and I don’t mind changing crappy diapers. I felt about as dumb as a two-headed donkey in there with all those medical types.”

“I did training for explosives, demolitions stuff.”

“You can cover my butt in the field then. I’ll make sure your ugly behind gets covered up if you ever get hit and land in a hospital bed.”

“Don’t you get weapons?”

“Naw. We get this little booklet in German and if krauts shoot at us we’re supposed to read the Geneva conventions to ’em.”

“We all got these little medical kits,” Joe said. “Morphine, bandages, everything. The only thing I don’t have is a nurse. Did you see those nurses? One of them’s the girl from Tabcharani’s grocery store.”

“Skinny foreign girl? Yeah, I saw her.” Wence hawked and spat over the side, taking care to aim away from the wind. “I can’t believe they’re sending women. First they’ll get in the way, and then they’ll hurt themselves on something, and then everything will get all . . .”

“If you see her again before I do, tell her I said hi.”

Wence grinned.

“You’ll probably see her at the hospital or something.”

“Good thing for you I’m a married man,” Wence looked around. “This is a pretty big operation, huh?” Hundreds of warships dotted the Atlantic, all heading south.

“Over a hundred thousand men,” Joe said. “The 34th Infantry is practically all from Iowa, is what I heard.”

“You know where we’re going?”

“Nope.” Joe eyed the cloudy sky. “South.”

“I tried to sign up for the Rangers but they wouldn’t take me because I’m married,” Wence said. “What do you guys do that’s so dangerous?”

“Scouting, raids, blowing things up, stuff like that. Hey, you get any letters? What’s everybody doing back home?”

“Dad’s an Air Raid Warden. Keeping Iowa safe from the Nazis.” Wence grinned. “He goes around at night checking for blackouts, knocking on doors, raising holy hell any time he sees a light in a window.”

Joe laughed, picturing Wence’s bearlike father arguing with someone’s wife about her curtains.

“And the nuns sold war bonds to buy a jeep for the 34th. They got so much money they bought twelve.”

“Wow. That’s pretty good.”

“You haven’t heard the best part,” Wence went on. “The real killer’s my little sister. You will never, ever guess what Rose’s doing.” He paused, enjoying the drama. “Second shift at the packing plant.”

“Naw,” Joe protested. “Things can’t be that bad.”

“Oh, yes they are. Mom says she goes to work in overalls every day, just like a man. She even tried to talk Rachel into going with her.” Joe whistled and Wence rocked back on his heels, shaking his head. “I went nuts when I got that letter. They must’ve heard me clear back home because Rachel wrote and said not to worry, she’s doing some kind of Red Cross work at the church instead and she’s not going to do any war work at the factory. You hear from Uncle John?”

“He’s okay. Still at the factory.” Joe frowned. “Johnny signed up.”

“What’d he do, lie about his age?”

“He’s nineteen.” Joe shrugged. “I hope he stays out of trouble. What about Anton and Rudy?”

“Rudy’s in the Pacific. Anton’s supposed to be doing something in England, like working on a newspaper or attending some school or something like that. Uncle Vincent thinks he’s a spy.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. You know what else? So many guys went to war that the college closed down and there’s no baseball this year.”

Announcements blasted out above them, concluding with news of a prayer service on B deck for all who wanted to attend.

Wence made a face at him. “You going to go pray?”

Joe scoffed back. “I bet you pray before you go back home.”

Wence brightened. “Another twenty?”

They slapped each other’s backs and drifted on. Joe joined the group on the B deck, where everyone was standing around with their hands stuffed in pockets and chins tucked down against the wind. He saw Garcia and Taffington standing at the edge of the crowd, miserable in the blowing spray, and he walked over to stand with them. Robichaux showed up.

The chaplain read a psalm and called a prayer through the whipping wind. “Oh God of all mankind, whose command even the wind and oceans obey, we look to You now. Our lives are in your hands.” Men nodded. “Protect us from the dangers of the sea and the dangers of the enemy. Strengthen us in the day of battle. Give us courage to do what must be done. Watch over

us, keep us safe, and draw us together in one united will to serve you and fight against the evil that threatens us.”

“Amen,” they chorused. Garcia and Robichaux crossed themselves.

“Remember Psalm 91, the soldier’s psalm. The Lord is your refuge and your fortress, your God in whom you trust. Surely he shall deliver us from the snare, and we will not be afraid of the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flies by day; for he shall give his angels charge over us, to keep us in all our ways.”

“Amen,” they all said again.

Joe shoved his hands deeper in his pockets and felt his uncle’s latest letter crinkle under his fingers. *I hate this war*, John Mark had written, *but it’s a war we have got to win. Stand strong because we need soldiers who can keep their heads on straight and be good leaders over there. No matter where you go or what happens, remember that the Lord is there too, and no matter how bad things get He will be walking through the fire right along with you. Be strong in that. I pray for you and your men every day. Your Aunt Kate sends her love and these oatmeal cookies.*

He stood there for a while after the service ended, thinking about the letter and staring out at the hazy points of light from other ships around them. He was going to war. Would he ever see this ocean again? A stinging blast of salty rain buffeted over the deck and he turned to go, bumping into someone who looked too slight to be a soldier.

“Hi,” Sana Toledo said.

She was so close that he could smell the fragrance of her skin. “Hi.” He held out his hand and took hers. Her fingers were wet and freezing cold.

“You don’t have a coat?” he asked. She was wearing a helmet and clutching an Army-issue blanket around her shoulders. He pulled the blanket up higher around her neck and guided her to the shelter of a bulwark. “What are you doing here?”

She laughed and the two dimples flashed, just as he remembered. “I came on deck so I wouldn’t get seasick. What are *you* doing here?”

“I’m a Ranger. Second lieutenant.”

“Me too.” Her smile was a little reserved this time. “Nice to see you again, Lieutenant Vesely.”

He shook his head, moving his hand in a little deprecating gesture. “No, no . . .” They grinned at each other. “Come on, it’s Joe.”

“Sorry I had to leave so fast . . .” she began, and at the same time as he said “Hey, how come you left town so fast?” They both laughed.

“So how come you left?” Joe asked. “Without telling . . .” He wanted to say “me,” but he settled for “anybody?”

She looked away. Her fine-boned face looked more elegant than he remembered, even when framed by the harsh olive drab of her uniform. “Oh, my uncle wanted to marry me off to marry one of his horrid old friends and I didn’t want to, so I ran away.” Her voice still held that sweet cool trace of accent. She lifted her chin with a hint of defiance. “Now I’m a nurse and I can do whatever I want.”

Her life had come to this? Huddling in a wet blanket on a boat in the freezing Atlantic? Joe raised an eyebrow. “You want to live in an Army camp and get shot at?”

She laughed. “I’m a nurse. I don’t think that’s what I’ll be doing.”

He shook his head, disapproving. She should have told him about her trouble. He would have taken care of her. "You shouldn't be here. This is no place for a woman."

"And I'm happy to see you again too."

Joe blinked, suddenly warm in spite of the blowing spray. "I didn't mean . . . I'm happy to see you but . . ."

"Don't try to get out of it now." Dimples flashed again and her eyes sparkled. She looked so fascinating that Joe forgot what he was going to say.

"I am really happy to see you," she said. "Joe."

The sound of her voice saying his name shot a pleasant little thrill through him. Her nose was so lovely, even if it was a little red from the wind right now. She looked much too delicate to be going into battle and he wanted to put his arm around her, shield her from things that might harm her.

There were too many people around to do anything like that. "Be careful," was all he could think of to say.

"I will. You too."

"All below. All below," the loudspeaker announced. "All below deck." Soldiers passed by, not noticing them in the gloom.

"Are you married?" Sana asked. Joe looked at her, surprised. He held up his left hand to show that he didn't wear a ring.

"Some married men don't wear rings," she said.

"I would if I was." Somehow he knew that she was not married either. "You're not married."

It had not been a question. She looked embarrassed.

"All below. All below deck."

They stepped out of their little shelter into the line of soldiers heading back below. Joe thought of another question, but he couldn't just ask her if she was in love with anyone else, not right now in the middle of a crowd. Sana walked with her face tucked down into her collar, as if she did not want to be noticed. He touched her arm when they neared the stair where he would have to turn, and she looked up at him and nodded before they parted ways.

"You found him at the prayer meeting?" Margie asked. Six nurses were trying to sleep in a cabin meant for two navy officers. Four were in makeshift berths, two crowded together on the deck, and so far no one was sleeping. "What'd he say? Is he married?"

"No," Sana said from her place on the bunk above.

"You knew him from before?" another nurse asked.

"Uh-huh."

Margie chuckled. "I've been kissing all these frogs for years, waiting for my prince to show up, and now here comes Frenchie with this dreamboat. I saw him. Trust me, girls, I saw him."

"Don't be silly," Sana said, but she was glad the darkness hid her face.

"If there's another prayer meeting tomorrow I'm going with you. I'm going to pray to that a good-looking officer falls in love with me."

The hatch opened and yellow light spilled into the cabin. Adele, who was now officially their head nurse, looked in.

"Did you find out?" all the nurses asked at the same time.

"Arzew."

“Where’s that?”

“North Africa,” Adele said, and “Algeria!” Sana said at the same time. “That’s where I’m from, that’s my country! Oh my goodness!” She sat up and banged her head. “Ow!”

“Don’t get excited,” Adele rapped out, “because there’s still forty-eight hours until we land and there’s a lot to do. Tomorrow we meet with the whole surgical unit at oh-seven-hundred. Breakfast at oh-six-hundred. So get some sleep.” She began to close the door.

“Wait! What else do you know?” Margie called.

Adele paused and then came back in. “The fleet’s splitting up to attack in three different places along the coast. The soldiers go in about three in the morning and then the medical units.” She paused again. “I guess we just go in with the men.”

“How come we’re going to Africa?” Checky sounded puzzled.

“They say it’s where the Axis forces are the weakest. There’s mostly Italians and the colonel said they don’t fight very well, so our boys are going to land in the middle of the night and try to take the coastal forts before anybody knows what’s happening.”

“There’s French people in Algeria,” Sana declared. “They’ll help us. The French are Allies.”

Adele frowned. “No, they said not to count on that. They say no one knows for sure which way the French’ll go. There was something that happened, something about how the British blew up some French battleships to keep them out of German hands, so now the French are mad at the British, and they say they’re mad at the Americans too, because we’re on the British side. So the French might fight against us.” She leaned farther into the room. “They said FDR’s going on the radio, asking the French to support us.”

“Huh,” Obie said. “That’s different.”

“I’m still not exactly sure where we’re going,” Checky said.

“I’m excited,” Margie announced. “I’ll never get to sleep tonight.”

Adele laughed. “Enjoy your beds while you have them. See you tomorrow, dears.” She closed the door.

“What’s Algeria like?” came a question in the darkness.

“It’s warm,” Sana said, picturing her beautiful stucco home nestled in the hills of Constantine. “It’s beautiful. My mother grew roses there. And the food’s wonderful and the sun shines all the time.” *And I met Joe Vesely again today.* If he fell in love with her, why, then that changed everything, because someone cared if she lived or died. It was as good as having a home. And he was so incredibly handsome, even more than she remembered. She rolled over in the darkness and hugged herself for joy.