

## December, 1942

A sturdy desk with an Underwood typewriter waits patiently for me. After three hours of work in this roasting temperature, I need a break. So I slump in the hard wooden chair, stretch my legs out in front of me, and let my head drop back. A single, naked light bulb hangs from the center of the ceiling. My tired eyes close, refusing to let me be the creased-to-perfection soldier. I wait for anything that could remotely be considered a breeze to relieve the heat in this sweltering, military supply office.

The mud-plastered, bamboo walls of this hut they call a basha let the midday heat seep through, and, like a bubble, trap the scorching air in the room. My flesh feels like an added layer of clothing. It's so hot that even the katydids take a nap.

Since early this afternoon I typed pages and pages of requisitions: Spam for the Americans, rice and taro root for the Chinese, and curried lentils for the local Indians. The hay on the list could be for a horse or a mule, but it ends up being for the elephants every time. The other Service of Supplies—or SOS—men received an emergency shipment late last night, so they'll start their shift after dinner. That means I'm alone with nothing to keep me awake but the sorry-looking Underwood. Dying of boredom seems to be the biggest danger in Ledo, India. My mind wanders back home.

"No End in Sight for Marines at Guadalcanal" had been the headline that day in September when I received my official letter. Rain pounded on the metal roof of Tillie's Diner, where I waited in the back booth for Ruthie to get off work. Like usual, my knees bounced with nervous energy.

Ruthie works in an ammunition factory where they recycle scrap metal to make bullets for the boys overseas. A blue cotton blouse, dungarees, and bandanna have replaced the pink, well-fitted suit she wore when I first saw her. Even so, all I see is my Ruthie: a princess dressed as a factory worker.

"It's so cold, I wouldn't be surprised if this rain turns to snow!" she shivers as she slips into the other side of the booth and pulls off her rain bonnet. Then she stops abruptly. "What is it?" she asks.

My rigid posture and clasped hands resting heavy on the table must have alarmed her. "I got my orders today. I'm shipping off in three days," I say, staring at the rivulets of water coursing down the blurred window pane.

She puts her hand over mine and says, "We knew that was going to happen." Then she leans closer and demands, "There's something you're not telling me."

"It's not about me," I say, and pause to study the checkered table cloth, then momentarily let myself become distracted by a rip in the booth's leather upholstery. "Joseph Graf was killed," I finally tell her. "And he didn't even have to go; he volunteered." I chuckle humorlessly at the horrible reality. "We always called him helium hand. Damn him. No one was supposed to die."

She holds my hands for a few moments, then asks, "What will you do when your life is on the line?"

It's not as if I hadn't already asked myself that question. I pull one hand away and fumble in my pocket for a smoke, but pull out an empty pack. Squashing it, then tossing it on the table, I say, "I'd either want to cry or wake up from a bad dream." I wrap both my

hands around hers.

Then I whisper, "I feel like a coward because I want to live."

Instead of scowling in disappointment, she smiles. "Sounds smart to me." She caresses my cheek with the back of her hand, then says, "Do me a favor; don't come home to me in a box."