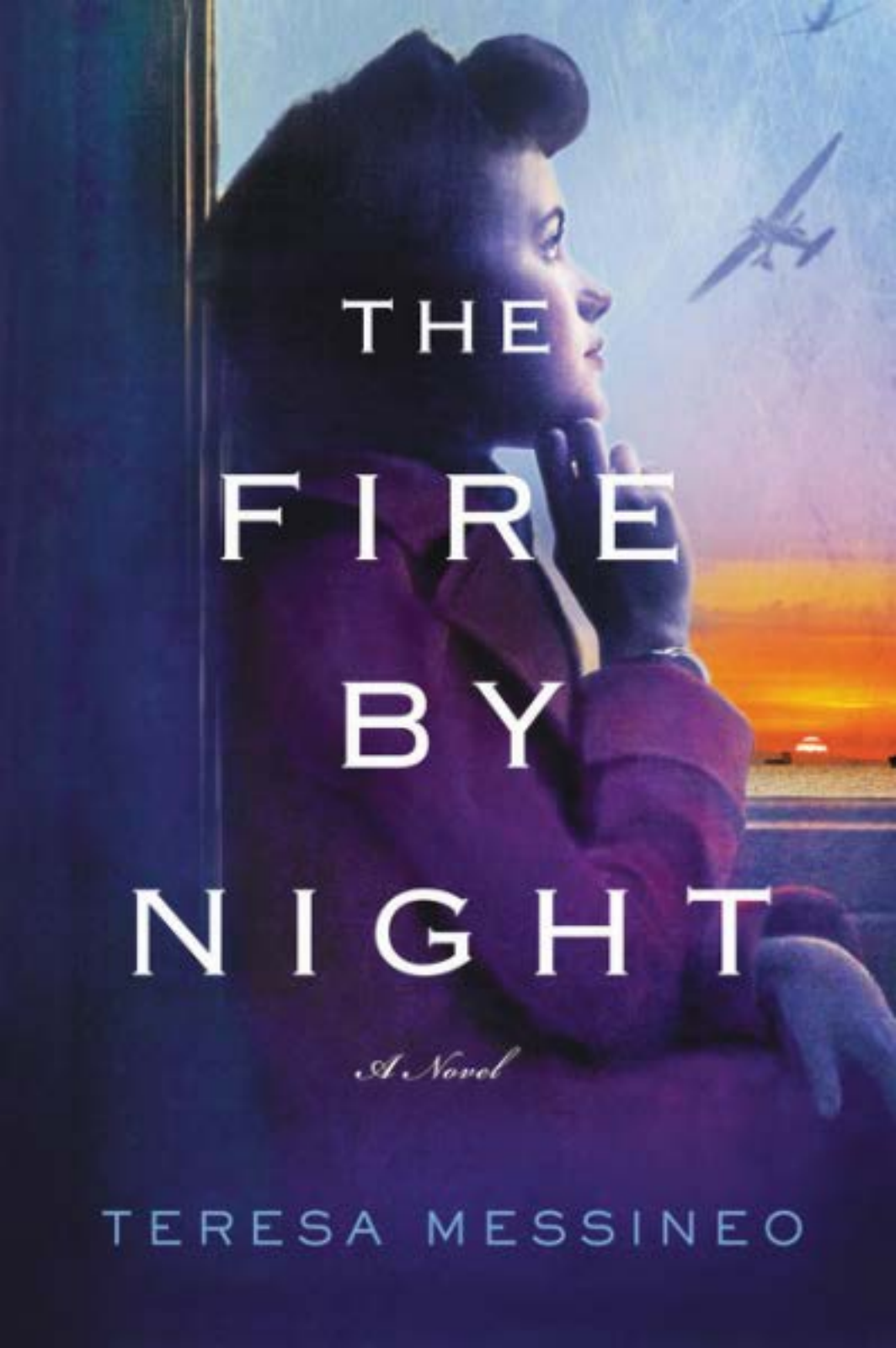
THE
FIRE
BY
NIGHT
A Novel
TERESA MESSINEO

1

Jo McMahon

Spring 1945, The Western Front

The main problem was her hands. They were raw and cracked and bleeding, and she couldn't get them to heal. A shell exploded outside the tent—somebody screamed and somebody laughed and someone else just said "fuck." Jo steadied the rickety supply rack in front of her, pressing her body against the shifting white boxes, pushing the brown glass bottles back into place with her thigh. The generator made a grinding noise as the lights flickered, went out, came back on. Her hands felt along the highest shelf, searching for a stray box of penicillin someone might have left behind in the initial rush to pack up, when the order to pull out had first come down. Her hands moved deftly, knowing exactly what they were searching for, by touch, and she found herself looking at them abstractedly, as if they were someone else's entirely, hands belonging to a brave and noble heroine in a novel or movie; a woman whose hands might be ugly, but whose face would be lit by an ethereal light; a person she could feel sorry for and admire at the same time; someone she could leave in the theater or shut up in a book and never have to think of again. She would have to do something about her hands.

It was the surgeries that did it, really. Washing up in the freezing water basin, the caustic soap eating into open fissures; the thick brown gloves ripping off what was left of her knuckles when she tore them off, hurriedly, in between patients. But there was nothing for it, no way around it that she could see; she just couldn't figure this one out. Her aching fingers closed upon the elusive box, and she wheeled around just as a second explosion went off, this time on her bad side, where her eardrum had been punctured when the *Newfoundland* went down. She lost her footing, hitting the cold ground of the tent hard. She stuffed the medicine into the pocket of her six-fly pants—men's pants, with their buttons on the wrong side—then stopped for a moment to tie her shoe, thinking boots would have been nice for the nurses, but still no match for the mud as this, the coldest European winter on record, slowly thawed into an increasingly impassable mess. Two more shells went off, not as close as the last, but still, she noted absently, much too close—closer even than Anzio, and there the shells had been right on top of them it seemed, the shrapnel flying through the ineffectual canvas of the medical tents, killing surgeons where they stood, the orderlies removing their warm bodies and popping helmets onto the heads of the remaining doctors and nurses who carried on where they had left off.

Here, on this frigid night, the lines would have changed again, too quickly; they would be right up against the fighting, the enemy pushing through the center unexpectedly, perhaps creating a new front, one they were near, or at, or even in front of. They were never supposed to be this close to the action, that's what they had been told during training—yet here they were, again. Jo remembered the time their truck had been commandeered and another promised to pick them up. And how the

nurses had waited patiently beside that little chicken coop in southern Italy, resting their tired backs against its sun-drenched, whitewashed warmth—until hours later, after the hens had reluctantly gone in to roost, the girls had seen the first U.S. scouts crawling cautiously toward them through the weeds. The men had asked what they were doing there: if they, the scouts, were the very front of the front line, what the hell were the nurses? Or again, that time they had been in Tunisia, waiting for a truck to move out the last of the wounded, watching the women and children run along the dirt road or perch precariously on their camels forced into an unwilling trot. The American MPs, bringing up the rear on their motorcycles, had yelled at the girls, demanding if they knew there were only ten miles between them and the German tanks and not a blessed thing in between. But they could not leave their men.

"How much we got left?" someone yelled outside in the rain, slamming the door of an idling truck. "How long can it last?" *Longer than I can last,* Jo thought wearily. *Longer than any of us can last.* The propaganda leaflets dropped by the Germans that the boys picked up showed exhausted American POWs, carefully carving tally marks into cell walls, keeping track of the date—1955. Another ten years. Jo smiled wryly at the Axis cartoonist's optimism. She'd be lucky to make it another ten months. She was just shy of her twenty-sixth birthday, and already her hair was streaked with iron gray and she had lost two teeth due to malnutrition. Queenie had told the captain she didn't mind when their molars fell out, but when her girls (Queenie always referred to the nurses in her charge as "her girls," and they were her girls, heart and soul) started losing front teeth too, well, then, even she had to say something about it. And they had gotten a few more C rations after that.

Outside, someone was yelling "retreat!" in a voice too high and too shrill for a man's; he sounded more like a terrified schoolgirl than a soldier. "Fall back, retreat!" he screamed again, as if anyone needed encouragement, as if everyone wasn't already running, already jostling, already scared. *Easy enough for you,* Jo thought listlessly, hearing the engines turning over and the men cursing at each other in their eagerness to pull out, their footsteps sounding loudly in the sucking mud. "Just turn around and run, kid." And as she said it aloud she suddenly felt incredibly seasoned and incredibly jaded and, above all else, incredibly tired. "I've got a whole hospital to move first."

It hadn't always been this way. She hadn't always been this way. There was a time when her hands had been lovely—when all of her had been lovely, all of her had been whole. She had been young then, and had had curves—never enough curves, she had thought then, but good God, compared to the hard angles and bones she was now, she'd been a regular Rita Hayworth. Her skin had been smooth, her flesh firm and full—her tightly coiled chestnut hair with a luster that betrayed her Irish father; a brown streak running through the blue of her left eye where her Italian mother always said she could see herself in her daughter. Giuseppina Fortunata "Jo" McMahon. What a conglomerate she had felt, growing up in Brooklyn, where people identified so fiercely with their ethnicities. To be not fully one or the other but, somehow, both. To pray to both Saint Patrick and Saint Gennaro. To eat both lasagna and corned beef and cabbage. But after nearly four years of field kitchens and alphabet rations, she couldn't think about real food. Not now. She couldn't bear it.

Jo walked into the last standing medical tent, the others having been arduously emptied and packed, dripping wet,

onto the trucks that had already left. After hours of loading, now only half a dozen patients remained, their stretchers laid atop sawhorses, waiting to be transported farther back. How she and the other young nurses had memorized the transport chain when they first volunteered for the Army Corps! Front line. Aid man. Collection station. Clearing station. Field hospital. Evacuation hospital. General hospital. Safety. "No female officers to serve closer to the front than field hospital, under any conditions." Jo remembered that this last clause had been underlined in their manuals, that the instructor had emphasized it, as if something like that was indecent, as if it could be guaranteed—as if war wasn't one step removed from chaos, as if she, serving in a field hospital, wasn't really at the front line right now. She emptied several tablets from the brown cardboard box into her hand, reading without reading for the thousandth time, PENICILLIN G, 250,000 UNITS, CHAS. PFIZER & CO. INC., N.Y., N.Y., remembering a time when she hadn't known the abbreviation for Charles and had wondered why some mother back home would have ever named her baby Chas. She lifted the head of one of the conscious patients—conscious, if delirious—some poor Scot, in a kilt no less, incongruous among all the GIs. "Here, try to swallow, soldier," she said, lifting her canteen to his mouth. He tried to fight her, waving his hands ineffectually and cursing at phantoms standing somewhere behind her in a language all his own. But the typhus was too far gone—not far enough advanced for the dreaded seizures, but far enough for the fever to have sapped him of his strength, of his will, of his right mind. She got the antibiotic down.

"Is there room on the truck for this one?" she asked the orderlies, who were dismantling the field X-ray machine in a

corner of the tent. One of the hinges was stuck, and as they put their weight to it the table collapsed suddenly under their combined efforts, breaking off one of its legs. None of them answered her.

"Not on this truck, sweetpea. But we'll get him on the next one for sure."

And there was Queenie.

When Queenie walked into the tent from the cold and the rain and the muck outside, rubbing her frozen hands together, she managed to bring summer and honeysuckle and the smell of home cooking along with her. She was tiny—*petite,* she always corrected—wearing the smallest men's regulation trousers, which she had taken in and taken in again and still had to wear cuffed. Her hair was, as usual, wrapped up in a clean white towel, under which one could imagine it still black and shiny as it once had been, instead of peppered with white. But Hollywood could have made a fortune casting Queenie as the original girl-next-door-buy-war-bonds-today-tie-a-yellow-ribbon-round-her sweetheart. Everyone loved Queenie—men and women alike—for her quick laugh, her moxie, her indomitable spirit. Queenie defied description. On the one hand, she could drink—really drink, which was amazing, given her size—and curse as well as the men, and gamble—she had laughed and laughed when she won a black silk negligee playing poker with some French officers in Algiers. (She had given the beautiful, useless thing to Jo, who, fresh to the war and still imbued with social mores herself, had been embarrassed and speechless and secretly delighted by it all.) But if Queenie had a worldly side, this same nurse had also stood with one doctor through seventy-two hours of surgery—seventy-two hours—when all other medical personnel had been injured or

killed. Two hundred litters had been lined up outside the tent, and they got to them all, no coffee break. They had both received the Silver Star, but Queenie always said afterwards that she didn't deserve it. No false modesty—she honestly didn't believe she had done anything special. She was, in her own words, "just doing my job." And that too was Regina Carroll, whose first name had been, by now, all but usurped by her regal moniker. To the boys, she was their kid sister, the girl next door, the first girl they had ever kissed, all rolled into one. The person they were fighting the war for. Even now, with hell raining down on them again, Jo looked at Queenie and knew the war hadn't touched her, not underneath, not really; it hadn't gotten to her like it had gotten to everybody else, like it had gotten to Jo. Queenie didn't have to put up a shell to protect herself, to survive. She was still what they once had been: love and hope for dying boys. What all the girls had set out to become, ages ago, when they had first crossed the Atlantic in those rolling titans, heading for the European theater of war, laughing and singing along the way as if it was going to be the best goddamned lawn party of all time.

One of the litters was half in, half out of an ambulance that had backed all the way up to the tent flap because of the rain. The orderlies paused to get their grip on the slippery wood of the handles just as the patient started flailing his arms, eyes wild, making a noise like a gagged hero in a gangster movie. In a second, Queenie was there, snatching up a wire-cutter that had been hooked to his stretcher just as vomit shot through the man's nostrils, his mouth still tightly shut. The man was choking now, and crying, and panicking; Jo could see the whites of his eyes from across the tent. And Queenie kept smiling and talking to him nonstop.

"Poor baby, hold on there now, soldier, just a minute, sweetheart," all the time deftly cutting the wires the surgeons had so recently clamped into place to set his broken jaw. "There you go now, you can breathe again, it's just the nasty anesthesia makes you so sick. I know, go ahead, baby, take a breath, they'll fix you up again at Evac. Now don't worry about a thing, you're all right now, honey, it won't hurt for more than a second." *God,* Jo thought, *not hurt?* What does it feel like to have your face shattered, then operated on, then "barbwired" shut? But Queenie was true to her word, pulling out a quarter-grain morphine syrette, ignoring its general warning, MAY BE HABIT-FORMING, as well as its less equivocal label, POISON. After injecting the soldier, she pinned the used needle to the man's bloodied collar; somewhere along the way, should he make it, someone would at least know what he had had.

And then she kissed him.

Just before they lifted him into the ambulance (the exhaust fumes were filling the tent, Jo felt sick), Queenie kissed him. The blood and the vomit, the stench of fear and death, and she kissed him.

And every person in that tent, who hadn't even known they were watching, stopped watching, envious of the dying man whose eyes were no longer scared, disgusted with themselves for what they had become, for how little they cared anymore, for how tired they were, for how much they hurt, for how cold and hungry and filthy they felt, inside and out, with a kind of filth no water could wash away. They knew they hadn't held a hand, let alone kissed someone, since they had stopped being humans themselves; their world was now one of survival, an animal world of biting and ripping and tearing and, occasionally, licking each other's wounds. Sure, they might patch

and bandage and send men farther back along the chain to be patched and bandaged again, but they, the healers, could no longer heal because they could not think and they could not feel and they could not remember when they had last thought or felt anything other than that they themselves were animals, hunted and trapped and cold.

And Queenie had kissed him.

WHEN THE COMMAND comes to fall back, it takes an infantryman less than ten seconds to simply turn around—and run. But not military nurses, whose only creed, whose one, unbreakable rule, is never to leave their patients. Never. So begins the long task of finishing the surgeries already in progress; stabilizing those just coming into the post-op tent; giving plasma, or whole blood when available; lifting the "heavy orthopedics" with their colossal casts, arms and legs immobilized by a hundred pounds of plaster. The shock patients with their thready pulses; the boys with "battle fatigue," whimpering and taking cover under their cots, thinking themselves still in the field; the deaf, the maimed, and the blind, their heads carefully wrapped and bandaged, their tentative fingers reaching out in front of them, seared and melted together from clawing their way out of burning tanks. All these men had to be moved into an endless convoy of trucks and ambulances that could only hold so many and only go so fast in the muddy ruts of what had once been a road. Jo remembered one time when they had been trying to move out, early on, before any of them knew anything, and she and a group of nurses had sewn together sheets to form an enormous cross to mark the field where the injured lay awaiting transport, smugly thinking the thin fabric would protect their men from strafing. The commanding officer himself had come

up to them, livid, screaming at the naive girls for putting up not a red but a *white* cross—the symbol for airfield, and a legitimate military target under the Geneva convention.

There were no more white sheets now.

The sound of the shells exploding outside mingled with thunder and it was all one cacophony of death. There had been a time when the girls would wince, or duck, or even jump into foxholes dug right into the dirt of the field hospital "floor." But there were no safe places left, not anymore, and they walked around numb, oblivious to death hovering above them, packing up the more critical of their supplies—the scalpels, the clamps, the enormous steam sterilizer that would make everything usable when they set up again somewhere. The ambulance was ready to leave, and the doctors already on board were calling for Queenie.

"You can ride up front with me, sweetheart."

"Yeah, on my lap."

"No thank you, doctors," Queenie replied, her voice saccharine. "I'll take my chances with the Germans first. I'll be fine in the back with my boys. Come on, Jo."

Jo grabbed her green canvas musette bag—how could everything she owned fit into something the size of a handbag? But it did. Book. Rosary. Some thumbed-through letters from the Pacific. One faded photograph. Curity diapers. A nightshirt. Graying underwear. An extra T-shirt. Two C rations. The absurd negligee. A pen. Jo put on her helmet, the chinstrap long since burned off from years of using the helmet to heat water in for washing. Queenie was already in the back of the truck, instinctively reaching out a comforting hand without even realizing it, when a grating voice near Jo's ear said, "Not so fast, miss."

It was Grandpa.

None of the girls remembered his real name anymore; if they had ever known it, it was just Grandpa now. The nickname originated when they found out he had served in the medical corps during the Great War; they joked, behind his back of course, that he was old enough to have been a doctor in the Civil War as well.

"You can stay with me, Miss McMahon. We'll get the next truck."

Jo sighed. She hadn't noticed she was the only nurse left in the tent. Of course, she would not—she could not, ever—leave before the last of her patients did, but she would have rather sat through the long wait for the return truck with any of the other surgeons, even the fatherly ones in their forties who bored her kindly with talk of tobacco and fly-fishing back home. Anyone but Grandpa, who rambled on about the Deep South, its nobility and "gracious amenities." *Maybe,* she thought, *he really does remember it from antebellum times after all.*

"I'll stay," Queenie began, but the truck had already shifted into gear, and besides, two patients were holding on to her, looking at her with such intensity that it seemed she was the only thing rooting them to reality, tethering them to a spinning world.

"She'll be perfectly fine where she is, Miss Carroll," Grandpa snapped irritably, her real name sounding like an insult as he grabbed a chart hanging crookedly off of one of the litters.

I'll be perfectly fine, Jo mouthed to Queenie, making a face. And Queenie laughed, her smile lighting up the interior of the cold ambulance already smelling of death, and Jo smiled too and made a little salute. And then the truck was pulling

away, Queenie bending over one of the men, her hand gently caressing his forehead; then she was lost to them.

Jo took stock of what was left behind, in terms of supplies yet to be loaded—not much really. The X-ray and all but one of the operating tables had finally been collapsed and carried away, most of the medicines and supplies were already gone, except for one or two surgery kits neatly packed into their boxes, propped up against the center tent pole. One generator, still running, remained, as well as one oil-burning stove, now off and cooling before the journey, some lamps used for surgery, and the less important detritus that always littered the tent floor—disinfectant, bedpans, buckets, soap. Grandpa walked over to a chest marked LINEN and proceeded to speak in his most officious voice.

"Miss McMahon, it is no secret to me that you and your fellow nurses refer to me"—here he spat out the word—"as 'Grandpa,' a term you use to convey my age and none of the honor one associates with that esteemed position. Well, such being the case—and denying any fatigue on my part—I will oblige you by acting out the part insofar as setting down for a spell."

And with that, he sat down stiffly. Jo noticed for the first time how pale and drawn the man looked, more so than he had in Italy, or Sicily, or North Africa before that. He had always seemed aged to the nurses, who were all just over twenty themselves. But this last push through France, closing in now on Germany itself, had been too much for him. Jo noted that his lips were too white, his brows too closely knit together. He looked like an old man who had just realized, suddenly, and with considerable annoyance, that he was in fact old.

"Yes, doctor," Jo murmured demurely, moving off to check on the remaining patients—and to give the doctor some space.

The tent flap suddenly opened, and a man with startlingly blue eyes pushed his way in.

"You still in here? You need to move out," he said, breathlessly, dripping wet.

"We're almost ready, Captain," Jo replied to the stranger, her eyes resting for a second on his shoulder—not one of their corps.

"Almost isn't good enough, bitch."

Jo felt as if she had been slapped in the face. Nearly four years of war and how many thousands of brutal deaths later, this breach of courtesy still managed to shock Jo, more than the concussions outside that were shaking the tent. Jo and her fellow nurses were used to working side by side with surgeons and doctors who considered them almost as colleagues, allowing them to make independent decisions and perform difficult procedures no nurse would ever be permitted to do stateside. (Jo had done her first spinal tap with shaking hands, but had done one earlier that day without thinking about it at all.) Even the Germans (to give the devil his due) were respectful, if confused, by the women officers, having no such counterparts in their own armies. (Their *Krankenschwesters* held no rank and, with their heavy, traditional dresses, were regarded by the men more as nuns than as nurses.) When American nurses were taken as prisoners of war, enemy officers would awkwardly ask the captured women for their word of honor that they would not attempt escape; then, in lieu of imprisonment, the Germans requested they wait out the rest of the war serving in orphanages or makeshift civilian hospitals.

And this man had just called her a bitch.

Grandpa struggled to his feet as quickly as his aging joints would allow, his mouth open in outrage.

"How—how dare you, sir," he stammered at last.

The captain stepped forward aggressively. "What the hell are these men still doing here? You were supposed to be moved out hours ago. I've only got a goddamned patrol to hold this area, and you're gumming up the works with your ambulances blocking the roads and drawing fire."

Jo recovered from her momentary shock, the thick shell she wove around herself adding yet another layer. She did not know this man, she would never see him again. Their paths were crossing for a second only, and that only by chance; soon she would be back with her medical corps, with the men—the hundreds of men—who needed her. This man, she made up her mind, needed no one. "We're waiting for our truck to return, and then we'll be out of your way, sir." She added the "sir" looking level into his eyes, eyes she noted as remarkably beautiful, almost turquoise in color, but cold and lifeless and blank, as if nothing, not even light, could penetrate them.

"Then you wait in the dark, sweetheart," he said, ripping out the generator cord. Everything went dark; Jo heard him fumbling for a second, and then the motor itself sputtered out, as if in protest. In a flash of lightning Jo could see the silhouette of the captain as he passed through the tent flap; then all was darkness. There was an explosion, but much farther away this time, to the south of them, maybe half a mile down the road, followed by two more, much quieter.

"Of all the, the—" Grandpa was still stuttering, incredulous. Then, in a lower voice, a voice Jo had never heard him use before, almost a whisper: "You all right?"

"Don't be silly, of course I'm all right," Jo replied glibly, too glibly, feeling her way in the darkness for the nearest stretcher. "Silly," she repeated again. But it hadn't been silly at all.

"I'm sorry, soldier," she addressed the blackness in front of her, still feeling for the stretcher in the dark. All the tent flaps had already been tightly shut to prevent light escaping; the ambulances would have been driving without headlights, as always; both precautions making the captain's behavior seem even more senseless and—*No, I won't think of him anymore, he's gone.* "But we seem to have to make shift in the dark here for a little while." She tried to force cheerfulness into her voice, as Queenie would have done, and failed. "Would you mind telling me which one you are?"

A cockney voice came through the darkness, its edges seeming to curl up in a sympathetic smile. "Jonesy, miss. I'm not as bad off as some of these here other ones. Just the bad leg, if you remember, miss."

Jo smiled. The English patient. A Montgomery, the boys always called them. Now she remembered, broken leg; a heavy cast would be dangling on a wire in front of her somewhere. Whether or not it was just habit, his repetition of "miss" had sounded almost reverential, as if he were trying to make up for what had just happened.

"Can you carry on for a little while here? I'm sorry, our lanterns and flashlights have already been packed up, so it's going to be catch-as-catch-can for a bit." Jo used the English expression for his sake; at least, she hoped it was English. She had read it once in a novel; certainly no one said that back home in Brooklyn.

"Not to worry, miss," came the grinning reply. "I'm not going anywhere."

Jo smiled automatically in the dark, moving now with more assurance from one cot to the next, better gauging the distance between them. The Scot was still cursing; at least he was con-

scious. There were two post-op patients next to him whose anesthesia hadn't worn off yet; she fumbled for their wrists, taking their vital signs as best she could, guessing without her watch—at least a stethoscope was still hanging around her neck. She bumped into Grandpa crossing the tent. "Excuse me, miss," he said gently, all traces of his usual brusqueness gone from his voice. She played blindman's bluff until she found the last two stretchers. One man was asleep, but breathing raspily and much too fast, his chest sounding like crackling tin foil when she listened to it. The last man was conscious, but groaning, his forehead hot and wet, he nearly screamed when she palpated his abdomen. So they had been right in their initial diagnosis: presenting appendicitis. *Good God, right now.* She reassured him as best she could, but he didn't seem to be listening; it was hard to tell in the inky blackness—his moans waxing and waning without a seeming connection to her words, bobbing, as he was, on a sea of pain. She made her way over to Grandpa, who was trying to take the pulse of one of the unconscious patients.

"This is a ludicrous situation, Miss McMahon," he began, pausing to count as he found another wrist in the dark, lost count, and gave up. "These patients, with the exception of that Scotsman, whom I don't like the look—I mean, the sound—of in the least, appear stable, if in various degrees of discomfort. Rather than knock our heads together walking around in the dark, may I suggest you stay by his bedside and I'll rotate between these two and that major over there—yes, he's a major, they were supposed to move him out first—with the overripe appendix."

It was a plan at least. Something to do until the truck came back, whenever that would be. Jo sidled over to her patient;

he was easy to find. She wondered vaguely if they were really Scottish curse words he was uttering, or the by-product of his fever, or a combination of both. She sat down next to him on the packed ground. And then she thought of Gianni.

She had tried to stop thinking of him; there had been a time when she had tried to forget him altogether, to banish him from her thoughts each time he struggled to resurface, his body disfigured and floating, the dark blood spreading from his open wounds in all directions in the cold water of her consciousness. But she had lost the power to fight her brother anymore. Sometimes, when the pace of war made her unable to function except by memory or rote, there would be a reprieve; he would still be there, but in the back of her mind, hiding in a dark corner of the tent, lying on the last stretcher in the ambulance. But during the few hours of sleep allotted her, or now, with an enforced period of inactivity thrust upon her, Gianni in all his horror, in all his glory, came flooding back. She loved him, and she hated him for haunting her, and wanted him to leave her alone, and felt she would die if he ever did.

"What were you thinking, Josie?"

She could see him now, looking down on her again, his dark olive skin, his even darker eyes, eyes that were so angry with her, eyes that would love her and pain her and punish her forever.

"What were you thinking?"

He had grabbed her arms rudely and held her in front of him, shaking her, shaking himself. He had to be brave now, and he couldn't be brave, not with her doing this terrible thing, not with her leaving too.

"I was drafted, that can't be helped. But Mama and Papa will be all alone when you leave. How could you sign up?" Again, that reproach: "What were you thinking?"

She had stammered something about the war and about duty; about how they were calling for nurses, thousands of nurses, an army of nurses to fill the ranks; how the other girls were going, how it was the right thing to do. In her dreams (waking and sleeping), her words changed, got mumbled, turned around, twisted. It didn't matter—Gianni hadn't heard them then, he didn't hear them now.

Then he was crying. She had never seen him cry, not ever, not even when he broke his wrist in the park—where they weren't supposed to be playing in the rich kids' neighborhood—and he had turned white from the pain and wanted to scream but hadn't because of his scared baby sister looking up at him with her wide, blue eyes, one streaked with brown.

"It's not just Mama and Papa," Gianni had begun, but couldn't finish. He had stopped shaking her now and was holding her close, sobbing, wracking sobs, worse than his anger had been; this was good-bye. They were, to each other, all they had ever had. Their parents (a loveless arranged marriage) had grown prematurely old from lives spent slaving away in navy yards and sweatshops; it had been the nuns at Saint Cecelia's who raised the two immigrant waifs. But for affection, for compassion, for protection in a strange new world, Gianni and "Josie" (his pet name for her—to everyone else she would be plain "Jo") had only ever had each other; two people, one mind, always in agreement, always together; now, suddenly, about to be torn apart.

In her dreams he dies then. He dies in her arms, their parents coming into the small apartment looking older than ever, glancing up tiredly, mumbling that they would like to come to the funeral but have to work in the morning, an extra shift, what can we do, if we don't, we'll lose our jobs. It is a night-

mare of course. But it is a dream too, because he dies there—not later, not on that carrier, not with the hundreds of other boys screaming and choking and slipping on the decks wet with blood and water and gasoline as the planes roar overhead and the explosions go off and they're hurled into the sea and he's dead before he hits the water; sinking, crushed by the incredible weight, his mouth filling with seawater, drowning out the last word he would never get to say, the last word he was saying to her now, the same word he always said to her.

"Josie."

JO STARTED AWAKE. Not that she had been asleep, but she hadn't been there, in that tent, sitting in the cold and the dark. The Scot was trying to get out of bed, asking for his shoes in English; then it was a jumble of words again, nonsense in any language. She got up and pushed him back onto the cot. "Pushed" is too strong a verb; he was so weak, she held two fingers in place on his chest; he moaned, delirious, and fell back.

Gianni was dead, and her parents now too—they had died while she was overseas. What did it matter anymore? Everywhere was death, and where it wasn't yet, it was coming. She noticed the bombing had stopped outside and switched to gunfire. The captain hadn't come back. He would have his work cut out for him, defending this useless patch of France—or was it Germany?—with only twenty to a platoon. The truck was taking forever too. Had it been an hour yet? Two? Time was uncertain for her—her reveries sometimes lasted mere seconds, and at other times an entire night's sleep would be sacrificed to watching Gianni die again and again. The truck might not be back for hours now, even if the roads weren't taken out, even if they did find a way around the lowlands and the mud and the

Germans. She tried looking at her wristwatch, angling it to pick up even the faintest glimmer of light, but it was useless; the darkness engulfed them completely. The tent was wrapped in its own envelope of blackness and rain, and there wasn't even lightning anymore to split the sky.

After a long while, it grew quiet. For some time the gunfire had come from farther and farther away, until Jo thought it had either stopped entirely or was continuing on in some ravine or valley too deep or far away for the sound to carry. The Scot seemed to be praying, just by the cadence of his speech alone. There was a petition of some kind, a labored pause for breath, a response. None of it made sense to Jo; maybe God could unravel it in heaven. It seemed important to him, though, whatever it was. She tried to imagine what it could be. A litany? A rosary? Something embedded and a part of this man, surely, for it to rise to the surface like this when all other senses had left him. As his voice rose and fell with the desperate intercessions, she felt for her musette bag, took out her rosary, and held the weathered beads in her hands, pressing them hard between her fingers until they hurt, the pain clearing her mind for a second. But no prayer rose to her lips—at least, not the Our Fathers and Hail Marys she had anticipated, the prayers she had used to plead with God when the telegram had first come, when she had learned Gianni was killed in action, when her own life had ended but, cruelly, her body had been forced to keep going through the motions of being alive. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* From evil. She was surrounded by evil, it was everywhere. There was evil in Germany just ahead of them, and there was evil in Japan, half a world away. There was evil in the bottom of the sea where dark things fed on

the bodies of the lost, and there was evil in the mountains around them where the traitors and the deserters and the lovers had fled.

But, now, there was evil, too, right among them; the captain tonight had seemed evil—but maybe she was still naive, for all her experience, maybe this was the real world now, the world they were fighting to save. Maybe this would be as good as it ever got, even if the Axis powers were ultimately defeated; maybe the Allies had become little better than the thing they had set out to destroy. After all, what had just happened in Dresden? Even with their mail and radio so closely censored, they knew something obscene had happened there, something wicked and wrong, something that was not them—or not them as they still imagined themselves to be. What had happened in Dresden was the kind of thing the "other side" did, not them, not the upholders of justice and freedom, not the liberators, not the good side.

But was she good anymore? Was anyone good? This was hell, with no chance of heaven. She saw herself again as a little girl, her voluptuous hair severely restrained by tight braids, her secondhand school uniform fitting too tightly under her arms. She was reciting her catechism answers for Sister Jonathan, the nun's parted white hair peeking out from under her wimple. "War is the punishment for sin, Sister," she had said from memory, along with a hundred other pat answers. Punishment for sin. What colossal sin had some fool committed for this to be its outcome? Or was this the fault of all of them collectively? Was this everyone's sin, everyone's hatefulness, all the small, petty, stupid crimes piled up, multiplied a million million times over—lust and envy and greed and betrayal, pressed down, running over? Was this the whole world crying

out, proclaiming its suicide creed of hate, vengeance, murder, power, death? And then their unholy prayer finally being answered with firebombs raining down from the sky.

The wind picked up outside, buffeting the tent. Jo was deathly cold; if the truck didn't come soon, she would have to start the oil stove again, and the orderlies would curse when they had to load it onto the truck, still hot. The Scot was crying, not like a man, but like an exhausted toddler put into his crib to cry himself out, pitiable and whimpering and small. The major shouted, but then cut off his yell midscream; he must have bitten his hand to stop himself. Grandpa was shushing his groggy patients, who were asking where they were, what had happened, where was Bobby, Joey, Ted. The rain was pelting the side of the tent, running in under the canvas and into Jo's shoes. It seemed like forever until they heard noises outside—a faint rustling over the wind at first, then the unmistakable sound of men surrounding the tent, coming closer. Jo tried and failed to make out whether their muted words were in English or German. She wondered what would happen to them all if they were taken prisoner this far into the war. The Geneva convention was still in place, on paper; she and Grandpa, as noncombatants, were protected. But food, the first and most powerful of man's weapons when withheld, was scarce; in a prison camp at the end of winter, there would be hardly anything left. Jo did not relish the thought of dying that way, separated from her work, from her dying countrymen, from her dying cause.

The tent flap shot open, revealing a figure as he entered, his rifle level with the flashlight he now switched on. For a moment, everyone was blinded as the piercing light shone on them. Just as quickly, it was shut off, and the figure darted

to the far end of the tent, opening the flap there. After what seemed like an eternity, they could feel the phantom relax and hear him walk back to the center of the tent, turning on a flashlight and standing it, end up, on the cool iron of the stovetop. It was the American captain.

He looked at Jo, the doctor, and the six men in turn, rubbing his stubbled chin in thought as if he were about to bid on them at auction. As her eyes adjusted to the light, Jo looked from litter to litter, noting instinctively where a line had to be removed, a cast adjusted. One of the post-op patients looked straight at the light with his dilated pupils, dazed yet unable to turn away. Still the captain was silent; he seemed uncertain how to begin.

"Here's the thing," he started, then fell silent again.

"Captain Clark," one of his men called hoarsely through the tent flap, walking up and hastily exchanging whispers with him. When the soldier left, the captain began again.

"Okay, well, there's nothing for it. Here goes. The fighting has moved off to the south of us for the time being. There's no telling how long that will last, and at any moment it could shift back this way. But for now, for the next couple of hours anyway, possibly days, you should be okay."

To Jo, the captain's manner seemed inconsistent with the (relatively) good news he was bringing them: he kept looking at the floor, then at the tent flap, but never at her or Grandpa directly. He turned almost angrily when one of the patients cried out in pain, lifted his hand as if to say something, shook his head hastily, and turned away.

"When might we be moving out?" Grandpa ventured, uncertain if the captain might again disappear into the night.

"What?" came the puzzled reply of a man thinking along

entirely different lines, jolted back into the here and now against his will. "Oh, move out. No, no. You're not. I mean, you can't. The road's blocked. Gone, really."

The captain started pacing back and forth, looking at the patients as if, by sheer willpower, he could somehow get them off of their stretchers, off of his hands.

"I can't have you stay here," he said, almost to himself. "Any one of these men calls out, in their sleep even, and the game's up. The Jerries could be anywhere, we could be surrounded right now and not know it."

He stopped pacing.

"But you said the road was blocked?" Grandpa asked. "For how long? I mean, how long until they clear it?"

"They? There—there is no 'they,' pops," the captain stammered. "I'm it. I mean, we're in a fucking big hole right now." He took off his helmet and ran his hand through his fair hair, his voice rising despite himself. "I mean, somehow they just fucking slammed right through the middle of our guys, I guess. I don't get it. Hell, I hope we're holding on to it somewhere, at the edges maybe, but not here—the line's completely gone. No one's supposed to be here, I mean, not us, not anymore. There will be no 'they' coming—unless it's the Germans. And if *they're* coming . . ." His voice trailed off as he replaced his helmet slowly.

Jo tried to think of what Queenie would do. She wouldn't have liked this rough soldier any more than Jo did, but Queenie could be so good at saying the right thing at the right time. Queenie could have bucked him up—bucked them all up—with some cock-and-bull about how she was sure the enemy would pass to their south completely, or if not, how she was confident they could manage nicely right where they were,

with her and the doctor taking care of the wounded while the brave, outmanned captain protected them all.

She looked at the captain, his eyes now covered with his free hand, lost in thought, his rifle pointing impotently toward the ground. She tried to feel inside like Queenie would have felt, tried to cue the glorious background music of her mind the way she used to be able to do. Jo could be indomitable too. She could whip herself up into becoming indomitable, precisely because people like Queenie existed and would always exist in the United States of America and anywhere else in the world she sent her citizens to defend freedom. She would prove that right was right—*despite Dresden, don't even think of Dresden, Dresden couldn't really have happened*—and justice would reign. Jo might not live to see it herself, but this war was almost ended. And in the end, goodness would prevail.

Although they ached, Jo drew back her tired shoulders and painfully straightened her spine, coming to attention, coming to life, for the first time in a long time. The captain shook himself all over like a terrier, as if he had just made up his mind about something, and turned toward the flap.

"Captain," Grandpa asked in passing, turning back toward one of the men on the cots. "What blocked the road?"

"Hmm?" The captain seemed genuinely confused for a moment, as if he had already explained a crucial point that had not been comprehended. "Oh, didn't I tell you? The medical convoy. They got strafed. We got there all right, in the end, but everyone was dead."

"The *men* were all dead," Jo corrected him, smiling nervously, walking toward him now, her stomach dropping, picturing the burning ambulances, upside down, piled up on the side of the obliterated road. But in her mind's eye, the nurses

were still racing from fallen soldier to fallen soldier like they always had, like they always would, Queenie at their lead, her face covered in soot, her towel come loose and her dark hair messy around her face in the whipping wind, looking wild and beautiful and radiant in the red of the fires burning about her, calling out for the girls to rally round her and smiling. "All the patients were lost. The drivers."

The captain looked at Jo as if she were a little girl, a very stupid and tiresome girl who asked senseless questions of a man in a hurry. In his vacant eyes was something that could have been mistaken for pity but was in fact a most profound sense of irritation. Only with great effort did he suppress the second word of his intended sentence; simply repeating, instead, the single word, "Everyone." Then he pushed aside the tent flap and stepped out into the night.