

“Are you writing to your gal again?” Scooter asked.

“You’d be sending letters to your girl, too,” Jake said, then added, “if you had one.”

The radioman threw an empty K ration can at Jake, but he’d expected it and ducked.

“She’s moved on,” Scooter said. “Betcha five bucks she’ll send you a Dear John letter before this is over.”

“No, not Mary. She’s wanted to marry me since sixth grade, I think. I’m sure since we were sixteen. She’s the first and only girl I’ve ever kissed.”

Scooter shook his head and remained mute. Jake was going down in flames. Over three years of writing and only two ever answered. He’d have to let up on the teasing. And he certainly wasn’t going to tell him that *no* woman ever waited. At least, none that he’d ever heard of. The boats, barracks, and bars were overflowing with stories of being spurned by ‘the most perfect woman’ who decided that the 4-F asthmatic accountant back home was worth more than sporadic letters from the 1-A soldier oversees, fighting with his life to keep his home and country safe.

February 23, 1945

“Don’t tell me you’re writing her another letter, Jake,” Scooter teased.

Jake looked up and saw his best – and most irritating – friend standing above him, one eye bandaged, his hand wrapped in a muddy rag. “Nope, just trying to get rid of a few parts of me I don’t need.”

Scooter hobbled down the ditch to sit beside him. “What are you doing? Speak English.”

Jake held up a pair of nail clippers. “Toenails. They’ve been killing me for ages. Finally found someone who had a pair I could borrow.”

“Hmm. When you’re done there, can I give them a swing? I might be able to.” Scooter held up his bandaged hand.

“You’d better get that looked at,” Jake said. “You don’t want to get it infected.”

“Oh, it’s bandaged nice and clean under this muddy cloth; it’s just the over-bandage to keep me from hitting it on stuff. Lost my pinkie. Small sacrifice, I say.”

Jake finished with the clippers then held them up for Scooter. When he reached for them with his bandaged hand, Jake pulled them back. “Nah, I’ll do it. What are friends for? I’m sure you’d do the same for me.”

“Let’s hope that’s the most you ever have to do for me. If the rumors are true, we’re in Tojo’s backyard now. Any day and we’ll be done over here and home again.” Scooter grinned. “And you can see Mary again.”

Jake’s gut clenched at the words. He’d known something was wrong for months now. Scooter’s good-natured teasing about Mary was over. His kind words meant he was trying to soften the blow. After three years, it was obvious. She’d moved on. So much for true love.

February 27th, 1945
92nd Hospital, Luzon, Philippines

“It’s just a scratch, Doc. I just want to get back to my unit.”

“Nah. You’re sticking around here until that fever goes down. The wound is fine. It’s the malaria I’m worried about.”

Jake leaned back in the bed, his weary body grateful for clean sheets and warm food. Even if the spirit was willing, he’d take the time to heal. Peace – and going home – were just weeks ahead.

“Jake Johnson?” the orderly called out.

He raised his hand and the teenage Filipino boy rushed over. “Jake Johnson with Second Battalion, Twenty-eighth?”

Jake nodded.

“Other man had these. He say he heard there was other Jake Johnson over here. These not his. He say he very sorry he read and keep them so long. He no get letters of his own.”

Jake sat up straight despite his fever and fatigue, reaching for the tied bundle. There had to be two dozen envelopes, at least. His initial elation burned into a hard and hot coal of rage at someone else reading his precious letters from Mary, then he relaxed. At least they were here, and he was alive to read them.

“Oh, and for you. Other Jake Johnson say he buy you a beer, but since he cannot get one, this maybe to do until next time.” The aide handed him a small bottle of Coca Cola. “Do you want me open for you?”

“No, not yet,” he said, thinking of his queasy stomach. “Thanks.”

“Oh, and he say many, many apologies. He told me say it until you get mad and tell me to leave.”

Jake grinned. “How about we leave off the get mad part and I just tell you that’s enough. *Bastanté.*”

“*Bastanté?* You speak Spanish?”

“Yup. Halfway around the world, we have a common language. The Spanish settled the area where I came from, too. See you around, *Tigré.*”

“Ah. *Adios, amigo.* *Adios* the young man said, leaving with a spring in his step as he punched the air, practicing his jabs like the Americans had shown him. “He thinks I a tiger. I like that name. World Champion Flyweight Tigré Macalino. I think I keep it.”

Jake lay on his side and fanned the letters out, checking the postmarks. The other Jake had already sorted them by date. All were sent from Bisbee except the last one. It was from Las Vegas. Resisting the urge to start at the beginning, he opened the one from Nevada. That’s all he’d need – to start reading and have a malarial attack before he found out why Mary was out of state.

Dear Jake,

I loved getting your letters, but they stopped. I didn’t know if you were hurt or dead. Your mother said she hadn’t received any notification, so we were hopeful. I don’t know if you’ll even get this. You never respond to any news I share or answered if you still care for me.

I never thought I’d be sending a Dear John letter, but I guess that’s what this is. I was having a hard time dealing with Papa’s death, trying to take care of Mama, and selling the house. Walter, the realtor from Douglas, was helping me. He helped me with all the packing, and once the house was sold, I didn’t really know what to do or where to go. Mama was moving in with her sister and their family, but they didn’t need me, too. Well, long story short, Walter asked me to marry him. He has asthma and had to move to somewhere that had cleaner air. The smelter smoke was too much for him. We married in a small simple ceremony just before Mama left and we’re now in Las Vegas. It’s going to be a big town someday, he says.

I hope you’re alive and not sad I got married. I also hope you find someone special.

Sincerely,

Mary Decker Hollingsworth

Tears were rolling down Jake’s cheeks as he read the letter, pausing only long enough to wipe them on the pillow. “You were right, Scooter. They never wait.”

Jake reached into the nightstand and took out his wallet, opening it to look at the slip of paper. ‘My wish is for us to be together forever. Love, Mary.’ He touched the edge of it, ready to take it out and crumple it and throw it in the trash. “Nope. It got me through a war. I’ll save it as a token of endurance. A paper star of hope, not a bronze star of valor.”

September 15, 1945

“Welcome home, soldiers!” the mayor announced. “We have a live band for your enjoyment tonight. We tried to get a big band, but Harry James was busy and couldn’t make it. I guess if I were married to Betty Grable, I wouldn’t want to go far from home, either.”

The men in the audience cheered and whistled, and the women groaned and smacked them playfully on the shoulder. When they settled down, he continued, “Rather than not have a dance, a few of us old fogeys got together and learned some of your favorite hits. On a serious note, thank you, men, for sacrificing so much of your time and energies, fighting our enemies, and keeping America safe. In appreciation, we put call outs in the newspaper and over the radio – and even beat the tumbleweeds – to entice all the young single women from Cochise County to attend our celebration. Now that we’re together, ladies and recently retired GI’s, let’s dance!”

“May I have this dance?”

Jake spun around, looking to see if someone had asked him. There, standing just out of his peripheral vision, was Theresa Oldman’s little sister, Ellen. He recognized those big brown eyes, but she was no longer the precocious tease who tossed walnuts at him when he came to help her mother in the yard.

“It’s me, Ellen,” she said. “They told us we could ask you to dance, that tonight it wasn’t improper.”

Jake shook his head, stunned. When she frowned and started to turn away, he realized it looked like he was saying no. “Wait,” he said, his hand out. “I’m sorry. It’s just you’ve changed so much. Yes, I’d love to dance with you.”

“So, you did recognize me?” she asked, accepting his hand. “Otherwise, how would you know if I’ve changed?”

“You look all grown up now,” he said, grinning, holding back the smart-aleck remarks he and his Marine buddies would have shared.

“It’s been almost four years since you left. I’m a grown woman. I even went to secretarial school. I’m going to get a job pretty soon. I don’t need to have a husband.”

“Whoa,” Jake said, his feet stilling. “What brought that on?”

Ellen took the lead in dancing, whispering, “Move. They’re staring at us.”

The two started up again to the sometimes out of sync strains of ‘Sentimental Journey.’ “What did you mean by that? I didn’t ask you to marry me,” Jake said softly, his arms tingling with the newfound attraction.

“Sorry. Everywhere I go now, there’s pressure to find a GI, get married, and make him grateful for the time and sacrifices he made. You know, thank him. Not me. When I marry, it’s going to be for love. In the meantime, I’ll get a job and earn my way in the world.”

“What about children?” Jake asked.

“Well, I’d have to be married first. And I won’t marry unless he’s the right man. My mom says I’m too independent for most men. Well, actually, she said ‘any man,’ but I’m sure the right guy will love me, even if I’m a bit too ambitious.”

Jake neared her ear and whispered, “There are some men who like that in a woman.”

This time it was Ellen who stopped dancing. She took half a step back and asked, “Someone like you?” ending her question with a squeak of shock.

“Come on. Move your feet. People are staring at us,” he said, winking. He pulled her closer. “Yes, people like me.”

One month later

“One last chance to back out,” her mother said. “I know how strong-willed you are. Jake’s a nice kid...”

“Mom, he’s a man. I love him, he loves me. He has a decent job and doesn’t mind me working so we can buy a house. What’s wrong? Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“It’s just this isn’t how I thought you’d wind up.”

“What, happy? Come on, Mom. Staying at home gardening, and canning tomatoes isn’t for everyone. The world’s changing. Mark my words, one of these days, women are going to be lawyers, even judges. Who knows? Maybe one day there’ll be a woman in the Supreme Court.”

“Pbbt! When pigs fly,” Mom said. “Dreaming again, are you?”

Ellen shrugged. “You have to have a dream before you can chase it.”

“Okay. So, my dream is for you to have at least two children: a boy and a girl. You can keep your job and I’ll be the babysitter. I can’t afford a nice gift, but that ought to be worth something. At least, if you do decide to have babies.”

“Mom, you know as well as I do, babies come when they’re ready. Until they figure out a miracle way to stop them.”

“Well, you can always...”

“And don’t say cross my legs. That joke was old when granny told it to you before we were born.”