

Epilogue

March 14, 1953 - 44th Surgical Hospital Unit, Korea

"Attention all personnel. Incoming wounded! Repeat, incoming wounded! All O.R. personnel report on the double."

Kathy groaned and rolled off her bunk. The letter from Pete she had been reading when she fell asleep fluttered onto the ground. She snatched it up quickly and set it on her pillow before reaching to grab her coat. After eight weeks, she had adjusted to the chilly temperatures in her tent, but it was still near freezing outside and she would probably be out there for a while.

The camp was already in a frenzy as she left her tent and rushed toward the hospital. Her tentmates were already on duty, but orderlies, doctors and other nurses were all hurrying to prepare for the new wave of battle casualties coming in. Already she could hear helicopters approaching. It wouldn't be long before a stream of ambulances arrived from the front line, ten miles away.

But there were no casualties yet when she reached the receiving ward. Stretchers and equipment were laid out and ready, more organized than they had looked in days. She paused a brief instant and took in the sight, because she knew it

wouldn't last. Then she went back outside and approached a pair of enlisted men keeping watch on the road beyond.

"Who's on triage today?" she heard one of them ask.

"Bigelow, Bayliss... and the Ice Maiden," said the other.

Kathy smirked to herself. "That's *Lieutenant* Ice Maiden," she reminded them. She eyed them as they jumped to attention.

"Do we know what's coming?"

"Not really, uh, ma'am," said the first enlisted man. He looked even younger than she was.

"We heard something about an Australian company getting pinned down," said the second. "But that's only a rumor."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," said Kathy, and with that she moved on. She hadn't really wanted an answer as much as she'd wanted to shake them up a little. Being the youngest nurse in the camp and the newest arrival meant she had to assert herself at times. And she was never sure whether the nickname she'd been given helped or hurt.

Back during her first week in camp, the chief nurse had put her on triage duty when her first big wave of casualties came in. It was an initiation of sorts, a rite of passage to see if the rookie nurses could handle the realities of war. Camp legend had it that most nurses vomited their way through the experience, and a few had even fainted.

Kathy had made it through a double shift like a seasoned professional. Which, in a way, she was. No matter what condition the arriving men were in, she had already seen worse on Okinawa. Before long, her reputation for being cool and unflappable was turning into a camp legend of its own.

Now, after more wounded than she could count, the drill had become second nature. Checking the new arrivals over, quickly reading whatever information had come from the battalion aid station, cutting uniforms off when necessary, evaluating the wounds... and then applying the colored tags that let the doctors inside the operating room know how critical each patient was. Green for the walking wounded, yellow for those not in immediate danger, red for those in the most danger - and black for those who weren't going to make it.

The day went on like that, hour after hour. There were soon more wounded than the receiving ward would hold, which meant she had to go outside and examine patients lying on the cold ground or still in the ambulances. At some point, long after the sun had set, the stream of incoming wounded finally slowed down, and she could catch her breath between patients. She finished talking to a green-tagged sergeant with minor shrapnel wounds and stepped away to take a look around the ward. That was when she noticed a child, a boy about eleven or twelve years old, standing near the entrance. At first she thought he

was Korean, but then she noticed some subtle differences from the children she had seen around the camp. This boy looked more like Morten Fong had looked at that age.

"Did you guys bring a kid in with you?" she asked the sergeant she had just examined.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Kathy pointed toward the child. "There's a kid over there. Do you know him?"

The sergeant looked, but shook his head. "There's no one there, Lieutenant," he replied.

Kathy looked again, suddenly puzzled. The boy was still there, plain as day. Then realization caught up to her.

Oh, she thought. That's who he is.

"Maybe he ran back through the doors," she said to the sergeant. "Or I've been on duty too long."

"Well, looks like you're about out of customers here," said the sergeant. "Maybe you can get some shuteye."

"That'd be nice," Kathy said as she excused herself. She didn't want to look too hasty, but she didn't want the boy getting away, either.

Halfway to the doors, she crossed paths with Nurse Peggy Bigelow, who was in charge of the ward that day. Kathy gave a small wave to get her attention. "Did we have any prisoners come in today?" she asked.

"Yeah, a couple of hours ago," Nurse Bigelow replied. "I think one's in surgery now, but most of them... they didn't make it. Black tags."

Kathy nodded grimly. The answer wasn't a surprise - but it meant her encounter with the boy would be short and difficult. "Permission to take five?" she asked next. "I could use a break while we've got the chance."

Nurse Bigelow let her go, and she resumed her walk toward the boy. By the time she reached him, he had realized she could see him and was looking directly at her. She tried to give him a disarming smile. "Hello there," she said. "You're looking for someone, aren't you?"

The boy's face went pale, and his eyes went wide. "You... you speak Mandarin?" he asked.

"That's a little complicated," said Kathy. "We should go sit down someplace where I can tell you about it."

"I need to find my brother," said the boy. "I've been dreaming about him in the war, but today my dream brought me here instead."

"I think I can help you with that, too," Kathy told him. "But we should talk first."

The boy nodded tentatively. Kathy went to take her coat off its hook, and then opened the doors to lead him into the cold and the dark. She knew it would soon be darker for him,

and colder - and it was her job to take him there. Just as it would be his job to take someone else someday.

That doesn't mean we can't try to do better, she reminded herself. That was why she had gone through nursing school and volunteered to be where she was, so a few more families could be spared the pain hers had gone through. And maybe someday there would no more wars, and no more need for the long chain of dreams that had wrapped itself around her and Tomiko and Koichi and now this boy.

But that would be someday. This was today, and she had a job to do. She paused to look into the boy's eyes for a moment, and then set off into the night.