

The Fords, with their bobble-eyed headlights, stood neatly in front of the factory gate, gazing past its bleached white walls, into the fields, and onto the unfortunate windmill still turning with the infrequent gust of wind. Inside the gate, the girls huddled, lighting their cigarettes and watching as puffs of smoke floated lightly into their eyes, tangling with their lashes. They were a fine breed, these women: strong, bold, seductive, quick with comebacks and of opinions you wouldn't think worth questioning. They were the kind of woman army men came home to, the ones fighting the war from a home front, or so the ads said. They were combat soldiers in jumpsuits and turbans, or at least they were to the service boys, the ones who'd danced the night away with them after a sappy war remark and a double shot of whiskey.

Just outside the gate, a wealthy woman named Carol Hayworth stepped out of her vehicle towards her first day on the job. She wore vivid red lipstick, a bold move considering that it matched the crimson shade of her costly, fitted skirt. It was just the kind that was all the rage in Europe and just the right style to make a woman like Carol look that much more regal. She had first seen the design in a summer trip to Paris, where she'd walked under the elegant starlight cast by the Eiffel tower. She considered it to be one of those requisite items you had to own, like the pearl necklaces that are that much more desirable when you know they're from exotic waters. The true tell of her wealth, however, lay in the back-seamed stockings, purely of silk, which traced a long line from her ankles all the way up to the skirt, where only a man's mind could fill in the cloth-covered blanks.

It was her clothes and the fact that the cordite had not yet touched her porcelain skin and tainted it yellow, the fact that her hands remained manicured and velvety smooth, that all the other girls knew to label her as different. These were working woman, skin as dry and dun-colored as a million desert dunes. Even their hair was bleached, which seemed advantageous to them, if just to get the attention of the soldiers who so evidently adored the blonds.

Carol could never understand this. She had been drawn to the munitions factory purely out of good will. She had been instantly captivated with the war from the moment it began, following headlines on Hitler's war tactics, hearing horror stories of concentration camps in Austria and Hungary, and mapping out in her mind Ally and Axis victories. She had been educated enough in history and geography to be welcomed into such conversations by the remaining men in her circle and to be considered adequately informed into what was going on in the world.

But for the first time in her life, she felt she could be apart of something bigger. She wanted to step out of her privileged social bubble just long enough to see what life was really like. She privately acknowledged to herself that she was a selfish girl, and longed to eradicate that quality from her personality. More than anything, for the first time in her life, Carol wanted to do something that scared her, because maybe, by conquering that fear, she'd end up doing something truly grand.

Carol dismissed her gallant chauffeur and trotted off. She made her way through the gate and past a cluster of girls, coyly giggling to themselves about the young factory boys who, with an immeasurable amount of self-assurance, smiled back. Another small group of ladies, more humble and likely the wives and mothers of soldiers, chatted among themselves through the warmth of one girl's burning Camel. They wore fitted cotton dresses, in baby blue or floral prints, with green coats huddled over their shoulders, and the clunky black shoes that were required inside the factory.

Carol mentally chose *them*. It was these women she was fighting for, really, the ones tear-staining their letters, and ruining the blossoms of their skin in hopes that their men's bombs could be the ones to save the Jews, release the victims from the camps. She approached them cautiously, determined to patch herself onto the meticulously sewn fabric of their friendship.

"Ready to show these boys how it's done, girls?" Carol's award-winning smile was plastered on her face, her teeth glistening like marble against the background of a dark-lipped floor. An arresting girl with brilliant blue eyes, blond hair and one arm in a sling spoke up first. She was the one who held the Camel in her free hand – the fire, the beacon that kept all the others crowding close.

"Please, princess, you wouldn't last a day."

"I beg your pardon?" Carol said.

Another girl, red hair cascading down her shoulders, spoke up next, her voice as crisp as birds. "After she hears of what happened yesterday, she'll never return."

"That or she'll be begging for the office position." This time it was a stout woman who interjected, clearly the eldest of the group.

The redhead continued, "If anyone deserves that position, it's Megara. Especially after yesterday." The redhead turned her eyes in signal towards the blond, who averted hers from the rest of the group. Megara seemed uncomfortable not just in the sling but in her body, just itching to climb out and escape from it. Just before Carol could ask any questions, the floor matron stepped out of the factory, signaling the end of break and calling out orders as the women filed in.

The ladies gathered in the locker room. Here, the floor matron addressed the previous days' occurrences. The accident that had occurred on the assembly line, a small explosion, brutally burned the face of an employee and threw her and the girl working next to her, the lovely blond named Megara, to the floor. The details painted themselves before Carol's eyes as vividly as dreams. She could see the smoke, the fire bubbling the poor girl's flesh like water in a melting pot. She could hear her screams, her cries of desperation so piercingly in her ear that it physically hurt her just to think about it.

It seemed silly, now that she thought about it: a girl of her stature working the assembly line at a munitions factory next to women who had homes to keep up and mouths to feed. Perhaps the factory girls were right about one thing. She would be better suited for a secretarial position. She'd sit in the office on the second floor in the factory, away from the explosives and potential harm. This seemed like the logical way for someone in her realm of society to defeat Hitler, or at least the best way to address her cowardice and fear.

She would have to admit that her father had been right as well. She would not be the woman to change the world. Regardless, the office position seemed ideal. She'd be doing *something*, at least the kind of thing she could do well. It appeared to be a job that could only be entrusted to her and she took it upon herself to speak to the floor matron.

Megara was already there, quietly speaking to the floor matron, who was leaning against the lockers. Carol didn't realize that the conversation was intended to be private. She burst forth, completely oblivious to the young girl who scrambled for words.

"Mrs. Fisher, I would like to speak to you about the secretarial position."

The matron, who had hired her the day before, looked her up and down, her eyes barely flickering in recognition. "Sorry, girlie, but I've already spoken to Megara. She'll be taking the position. With only one arm, I can't use her on the floor." She added, somewhat contemptuously, "But you, you're healthy enough."

Carol stared back at her, then at the other girls. She understood something that she hadn't when she first walked in, or even when she had toured the factory the day before when she'd been – reluctantly, she saw now – given a position. The factory floor, it was clear, was no place for a girl like her. These women were rough and what her father would call "mouthy." She would never be as bold as them. Nor did she want to be, if it meant lowering her personal standards. Neither did she care for the way the matron addressed her. She was used to a certain polite respect. After all, she wasn't even collecting a salary. The matron should be thankful that she wasn't taking money out of poor babies' mouths. But she certainly wasn't exhibiting any gratitude.

Carol straightened her already straight spine, adjusting the collar of her fashionable crepe blouse. All she knew now was that she could not and would not allow Megara to take the position, regardless of how scared or fragile she'd been the day before. Carol herself was perhaps more scared, more fragile. But she was determined to contribute to the war effort. One call to her father, the mayor, and the position would be hers. After all, winning a battle was all about using the right ammunition.