

HOLDING HER OWN: A NOVEL

A thesis presented to the faculty of the graduate school of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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ABSTRACT

HOLDING HER OWN

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This creative thesis comprises the first three chapters of *Holding Her Own* , a novel which explores the career of a young warrant officer who trains on the AH-64 Apache helicopter two years after the United States Army lifts the ban on women in combat aviation. Seventeen-year-old Jean Pennegarde leaves her hometown in the foothills of the Rocky mountains after the town gossip spots her outside Planned Parenthood where she is trying to obtain contraception for her younger sister, Rena. Saving her sister's reputation is the first in a series of heroic acts that do not earn Jean the inner satisfaction she craves, and even as she proves herself competent among an elite group of pilots, she finds that the better she gets at war, the further she drifts from peace. When Tripp Trombetta gets her pregnant on the flight out of Somalia, she faces a personal crisis that rivals any humanitarian disaster she has yet to encounter--caring for her infant daughter. With her estranged sister refusing to disappear into her past, a man she considers a sperm donor demanding to marry her, and an insatiable baby screaming at her all through the night, Jean is going to have to find that which is harder than strength--forgiveness. She will either learn to live with her mistakes and embrace her limitations or she will destroy the life and love she has created.

PREFACE

Other than journal entries filled with free-writing and poetry, my writing prior to entering Western Carolina University's English program had mainly consisted of meticulous term papers, copious emails and extravagant thank you notes. In Pamela Duncan's online fiction class in the summer of 2012, I was thrilled to learn that creative writing was more than the output of great stories by brilliant minds; it was a craft with a set of design guidelines that, if not totally replicable, was enough to at least get the rest of us started. *Holding Her Own* began as a writing exercise during that class.

The assignment was named "Fiction 55" and it prompted students to write a story that would fit on a 3" x 5" index card. I wrote a scene in which two consenting adults mistakenly conceive a child out of wedlock. As an adoptee, I fixated on the subject of unplanned pregnancy, and I found myself developing this couple, expanding their basic conflict in subsequent assignments until by the end of the class, I had a 5,000 word short story that my professor pointed out was trying very hard to be a novel.

During the drafting of the short story, which I called *A Moment of Weakness* , I added a secondary conflict about managing the effects of war trauma on family. My husband Kent spent three years in the US Army as an infantryman, and soon after our daughter was born, I realized that my experience as a parent was deeply affected by his volatile reactions to the increased stress of a baby in the house. I did not accept these difficulties gracefully and I struggled in vain to fix what I thought was broken. When our daughter started pre-school four years later, I tapped into my writing as an attempt to conjure empathy for both of us, and it worked better than any form of therapy. The short story enabled me to ask Kent specific questions about his military

experience without any real or implied judgment. I was simply looking for details and trying to figure out my story, but at the same time I was finding common ground in my marriage.

When I decided to expand the short story to a novel format, I expanded the scope of my research. A number of nonfiction books about military culture, combat, and helicopters were used to learn the language of Army aviation and to understand the issues faced by military women. *Undaunted: The Untold Story of America's Servicewomen in Today's Military* (Biank) followed the stories of four women in different branches of the military. Kayla Williams's memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army* gave me a great deal of insight into the dynamics between men and women during deployment. *Dressed to Kill* by Charlotte Madison was the true story of an Apache pilot in the British Air Force and provided an invaluable character study. *Chickenhawk* by Robert Mason, a memoir about a Huey pilot in Vietnam, helped me envision the rigors of flight school. *Chopper: First Hand Accounts of Helicopter Warfare from WWII to Iraq* by Robert Dorr provided the language of helicopters in action. *Barrel of a Gun: A War Correspondent's Misspent Moments in Combat* by Al J. Venter contained gruesome details on the conditions in Somalia. Additionally, I interviewed two Apache pilots (Culler, McIntosh) and one air traffic controller (Kelley). Their stories helped me understand the culture of aviation in a way that I never could have gleaned from reading books. All of these sources were treasure troves of insight and at times I felt guilty for how unabashedly I picked small details out of them and inserted them directly into my story.

The short fiction format is a popular choice for veteran writers and authors who addressed war in their stories. *They Know When the Men Are Gone*, by Siobhan Fallon, is a book of interconnected short stories focusing on living on a military base. Siobhan Fallon is a military spouse with an MFA from the New School in Manhattan. *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from*

the Long War (Gallagher), with a preface by Colum McCann, is an anthology written by veterans of “Operation Iraqi Freedom” and “Operation Enduring Freedom.” In *Selected Shorts: Wartime Lives* I found a story by Robert Olen Butler called “Mother in the Trenches” that brought me to tears, and Benjamin Percy’s “Refresh, Refresh” had that suspenseful undercurrent of violence that is found in Flannery O’Connor and Annie Proulx. “Tits Up in a Ditch” is a short story by Proulx that was recommended to us in Ron Rash’s fiction class. It focuses on the lives behind the front line and the circumstances that lead a couple into a military marriage ending in tragedy. Finally, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien lived up to its reputation as a preeminent example of Vietnam War literature. Over and over again, O’Brien amazed me with his mastery of story and language.

Looking for classic novels by and about veterans, I turned to *Farewell to Arms* by Hemmingway, *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain, *Learning to Stay* by Erin CeLello and *All That Is* by James Salter. *All That Is* influenced my novel the most because of its broad structure and smooth pacing. It opens with a ten-page chapter set on a destroyer during World War II. Besides this opening scene of war, the story is about the civilian life that follows as Bowman, a naval veteran, advances in his career and struggles through a series of amorous relationships. The ease and fluidity with which Salter moved through events provided great lessons for me as an author. Salter’s passage of time is seamless and he grounded the story in time and place with simple phrases that referred to current events. For example, when Bowman is a young man looking for his first civilian job, Salter writes, “In the mood of euphoria that was everywhere after the war it was still necessary to find a place for oneself” (19). After falling in love with a married woman, Bowman returns to a London office and notices the lights on later than usual in the surrounding buildings. Salter ends the

chapter with, "A frightening thing had happened. The president had been shot in Dallas" (129). He writes nothing more on the subject of JFK's assassination, but the reader now knows that approximately twenty years have passed since the opening of the book.

My writing hardly compares to Salter's level of sophistication, but reading him gave me the confidence to allow time to pass between scenes without explaining everything to the reader. For example, after basic combat training, "Jean decided on air traffic control for her MOS (military occupational specialty)." This simple sentence took some restraint on my part. Since military life is the sum of a complicated equation of constant relocation and detailed training, it was tempting to over-explain in order to convey realism. Salter's elegant prose reassured me that I could write about a person by carefully choosing scenes and summary while making simple transitional statements to keep the reader on track.

At the beginning of the course, Pam Duncan asked her students to type out the words to one of a couple dozen suggested short fiction pieces, and then analyze that story through a series of lenses. I chose "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," by Sherman Alexie, a story about a homeless man named Jackson Jackson who attempts to raise \$1,000 over the course of 24 hours to purchase his late grandmother's powwow regalia from a pawnshop. Alexie uses terse description and heavy amounts of dialogue in this piece, and I was immediately drawn to his thrifty style. Typing out the quotation marks and dialogue tags hundreds of times was tedious and appeared to have no immediate intellectual benefit until I went to write my own first scenes. Real scenes with imaginary people having fabricated conversations had intimidated me at first, but thanks to this exercise, my muscle memory recalled writing dialogue with ease and it quickly became my primary method for developing character and theme.

Here is an example of how Alexie shows the reader the complexity of his character's cultural identity in a few short lines of dialogue interspersed with two or three sentences of commentary. It is 8 A.M., and Jackson has been wandering for almost 24 hours now, and his journey is nearly ended. Alexie writes with a high level of sophistication distilled into seemingly simple prose:

“Do you guys know any songs?” I asked the Aleuts.

“I know all of Hank Williams,” the elder Aleut said.

“How about Indian songs?”

“Hank Williams is Indian.”

“How about sacred songs?”

“Hank Williams is sacred.”

“I’m talking about ceremonial songs. You know, religious ones. The songs you sing back home when you’re wishing and hoping.”

“What are you wishing and hoping for?”

“I’m wishing my grandmother was still alive.”

“Every song I know is about that.”

“Well, sing me as many as you can.”

The Aleuts sang their strange and beautiful songs. I listened. They sang about my grandmother and about their grandmothers. They were lonesome for the cold and the snow. I was lonesome for everything.

Here he is showing an intimate moment both internally and externally for Jackson. He depicts two different Native American tribes sharing commonplaces as well as boundaries with one another and with the reader, while also commenting on their estranged relationship to

mainstream white Americans. In this segment, the only image Alexie uses to set the scene is that of a wooden bench on the wharf, and the adjectives he uses are more on the ideational than the sensory level. They are abstract words--sacred, ceremonial, religious, lonesome, strange and beautiful--and had they been employed too early, the reader might have failed to register their significance, but used here at the end of the story, they lead to the culmination of the theme of cultural identity.

One of the more important scenes to the plot of *Holding Her Own* is when Jean meets Tripp for the first time on the flight out of Somalia. As an infantryman and an aviation warrant officer, these two characters are members of very different "tribes" within military culture. They share common goals as part of a larger organization, and their careers estrange them from the civilian world. Like Alexie, I try to give depth to their dialogue while keeping the language simple:

“Did you enjoy your stay in Somalia?”

“Charming country,” she replied. “Great food. Did you try the dog?”

“No, but I did some sightseeing downtown. They were a bit short of electricity. Oh, and water. No drinking water. But you can’t always get what you want.”

She laughed. “I got the bird’s eye view.” She pulled her hair back to show her rank. They belonged to the same brigade.

“Helicopter pilot,” he said. “Not exactly ‘flying the friendly skies,’ are you?”

“I should have been a stewardess. I know that’s what some of my PIs were thinking when I was going through flight school.”

“I didn’t even know women could fly for the Army,” he said.

“Most women can’t,” she said. “But I’m special.” She took a seat.

His teeming eyes opened even wider.

“What do you fly?”

“UH-60. Blackhawk. I’m a medevac pilot.”

“You pick up a lot of dead guys?” He covered his mouth with his hand in subtle but sincere horror, but Jean just laughed.

“My first priority is picking up the guys who are almost dead. Then the ones who are almost almost dead, then the walking wounded. Sad to say, but the KIAs are last on the list.”

“I guess there’s not much you can do for them, is there?”

I tried to imitate Alexie in loading the dialogue with clues about their cultural identity. One of the main shortcomings of my attempt is in its lack of description and commentary, and I will add those components in the next draft.

I struggled with the disjointed sense of place in the novel because it introduced logistical problems. The biggest challenge was how to connect the subplot of Jean’s sister Rena, who was back home in Idaho, with Jean’s story of constant change. In this version of the draft, I attempted to distill about 50 pages of text into letters, in an attempt to connect Rena with Jean without sending the protagonist back home. Amid the disjointed setting of the military, Bridey, Idaho is the one constant locale in the novel. The white patriarchal Christian culture of this small, rural town isolated in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains has gone largely uncontested, and the racial prejudices common in other parts of the country remain latent as a result of the town’s homogeneity. Native Americans are the only “other” in Bridey, and they live on the outskirts. Warren Pennegarde, Jean’s father, is the town’s greatest defender against city influences like

drugs and violent crimes. In some ways the history and culture of Bridey parallels that of the United States military, except that the US military has benefitted from the contributions of a diverse population of males while Bridey is lacking in diversity. And while Bridey has conventional gender expectations of females, it does not explicitly ban them from jobs in the way that the Army has excluded women from many of its most prestigious units.

Deciding how my female character could see combat in the late eighties and early nineties turned out to be a subject requiring a great deal of research, as military policy changes with every presidency. When I was tempted to get lost in research and historical accuracy, I tried to focus instead on relationships and character. One of the books that helped me think about this was *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, by Christopher Booker. With Booker's guidance, I began to think about my characters in terms of how they contributed to Jean Pennegarde's main conflict, as well as what archetypes they fulfilled in storytelling. Booker believes that our unconscious minds take satisfaction in perceiving a pattern of archetypes that mimic the family unit. In a happy ending, the "primal triad" (4773) of mother, father and child must be transformed through a growth process into a foursome wherein the new couple can replace the original. Booker casts several additional archetypes as "dark" or "light" and attributes to them specific positive and negative qualities of the self, explaining that each dark character poses a negative threat that the heroine must reflect and transform within herself. According to Booker, a female heroine would traditionally develop her light masculine qualities of protectiveness, strength, discipline and caring by confronting one of the main dark figures: dark mother, dark father, and dark other or dark rival.

I found all these categories very helpful in further defining my minor characters. The sister Rena started to take on a darker aspect as I recognized the need for Jean to confront

selfishness as part of her narrative arc. Jean exhibits intense personal sacrifice, but although her military career may seem selfless, she makes excessive demands on herself and others and she cannot abide imperfection. Although these qualities may work in her favor as a helicopter pilot, Jean is nonetheless self-absorbed and she must learn acceptance, forgiveness and humility in order to find a balanced state of self. By confronting her sister's selfishness, she will find her path to this enlightenment.

Looking for further inspiration for character and plot, I searched for female warriors in Greek mythology and discovered Atalanta, whose story informed several aspects of Jean and Tripp's relationship. Jean Pennegarde was not suckled by a she-bear and left out to die, but she was motherless, and her father's outright rejection of her led to her joining the Army. Atalanta promised Athena she would remain a virgin and resist marriage. I had already written Jean as a virgin, but the myth inspired me to give Jean's celibacy vocal expression which then added tension to the conception of the child and her refusing Tripp's marriage proposal. Furthermore, Atalanta and Melanion were turned into lions for having sex in Zeus' shrine, which parallels Jean's journey as well. Although she and Tripp were not turned into lions, they nonetheless experienced a radical change in identity as a result of their indecorous act. Conceiving a child while flying in an airplane is somewhat absurd, but reading about Atalanta gave me some reassurance to keep this plot point, and I will continue to work on expanding the reader's access to Jean's mental state as she moves from celibacy to sex in an airplane. Finally, Atalanta's participation in the Caledonian boar hunt ultimately led to the death of Meleager in an act of infanticide by his mother. Meleager was in love with Atalanta, and when his uncles on his mother's side stole her hunting trophy from her, Meleager killed them for it, and his mother decided to kill her son in revenge. After reading this, I decided to give Tripp's mother a central

role and to use the image of infanticide as the climax of Jean's post-traumatic stress. Jean does not kill her child, but she is unable to bond with her and in the final third of the novel she almost suffocates the child in her rage.

The challenges in putting together this manuscript have been numerous, and they are far from overcome. However, the challenges I met are different from the challenges I expected when I embarked on this project. I feared that I would not know how to depict the psychological damage that war inflicts on its warriors without sounding like a preacher. I found that once an author has developed a character's background and motives based on a realistic set of details, it takes relatively little effort for the emotion to come through. What was difficult for me was finding those details in a way that balanced meticulous research with the flow of imagination. In the future, I hope to leverage the knowledge that I have developed about the military so that I can trust my instincts and not constantly have to verify the credibility of every fabrication.

By now I have heard hundreds of different adages on writing and I knowingly disavowed three. First, you should write what you know. I knew almost nothing about the military, but the ability to connect with my husband provided an intrinsic motivation to learn. Second, one should not write on a theme but rather let the themes emerge. I knew going in that I would write about motherhood, military trauma and how the two combined. Three, writing based on pure emotion is a sure way to ruin a story. My story was fueled by the complex emotions I experienced when, as a new mother, the rage of a combat veteran issued forth into my home. With the help of great teachers, great writers, and a few marriage-and-family therapists, I was able to develop fictional characters around those emotions. *Holding Her Own* is my attempt to give those characters a story of courage and hope.

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CHAPTER ONE

Drill Sergeant Davis Williams was proud of his record for having the highest rate of attrition of any squad in basic combat training. He was also under the distinct impression that the louder he shouted, the faster they quit.

"Look at the two people standing on either side of you. I will personally guarantee that one of the five of you will get picked up by your mama and you'll be eating milk and cookies in your jammies before these 12 weeks are up."

Jean Pennegarde stared straight ahead in the stance she always used while she was getting yelled at.

"Can you follow orders, soldier?" Davis was leaning into her. She had never met a black man until now and she breathed him in with deep curiosity, trying to register the color of his skin with any sense other than sight.

"I guess you don't know your left from your right?" he said.

Jean realized he was waiting on a response from her. "My mother is dead, sir," she said.

The drill sergeant stepped back to better aim his glare. "I work for a living. Do not call me Sir."

"Yes, sir," Jean replied.

"What is wrong with you? Call me 'Drill Instructor.' Drop and give me twenty," he said.

Jean managed the first nine or ten pushups pretty well, but soon her arms started burning and then shaking.

"I did not ask you about your mother, soldier. I asked you to look at the people standing next to you. You failed to comply with your first order. Where do you think you are, summer camp? You think I'm up here yelling just to hear myself yell? This is the United States Army. I

train soldiers to follow orders, not to talk about their damn mothers.”

The insults coming from her instructor gave her no added strength. At number fifteen, she collapsed onto the ground and turned her head to the side, unable to lift herself.

“Do you hear me?” he asked.

“Yes. Drill Instructor.”

He pointed to one of the recruits, a pimply kid named Ritterhouse. “Help her finish up,” he said.

The young man stepped out of formation and stood beside her with his hand extended.

“I didn’t say help her up. I said help her finish. Stand with one leg on either side of her body,” Davis said.

The soldier turned red, dubious.

“Straddle her soldier, like you wanna play horsey.”

Ritterhouse stepped over her.

“Now when she starts her push ups, you hold her by the hips so that when her arms give out, you can keep her from falling on her pretty little face,” he said.

Jean put her arms back down without looking at the young man that made the looming shadow beyond her. She pushed her body up and without waiting for the touch of his hands, pumped out two more pushups before she heard Davis yelling again.

“Don’t be shy, boy. Grab her. You look like you never touched a woman before.”

She felt him lay his fingers down in the soft indent over the ridge of her hipbone. She had always been taught that nobody could touch her body in the places that were covered by a bathing suit, and he had crossed the line. She made it to twenty but she refused his outstretched hand and struggled up on her own.

“Show me you know your left from your right, woman,” Davis said, and Jean turned to the soldiers on either side of her. She had avoided looking at them until this moment, hoping she could prove herself in some way before she had to face the incongruity of her small body in this sea of young men. She felt all hope drain out of her as she took in the image of their silently laughing faces.

The Army loved words like unit cohesion and morale, but with only four or five hours of sleep a night, Jean was rarely in the mood to befriend anyone. She aimed to match the standards of the male recruits from the beginning. Even though she was given twenty minutes to run two miles, she ran them in fifteen. The guys thought she was a bitch, which was their standard opinion of women who didn't flirt, and the few females in her unit complained regularly about marching with blisters, running with menstrual cramps, and not wearing makeup. She was on her own, and it suited her fine.

Her least favorite spot on post was the mess hall. She was often the last to finish assembling her M-16 in class and so she was guaranteed to stand in line for 20 minutes for lunch. If she wanted to eat before everyone starting getting up to leave, she had to choose a table with a crew that took their time, which usually meant sitting with the assholes.

“Could you move over?” she asked one of the recruits. He was a short guy--not more than two inches taller than she was--with a crooked nose. His nametag said Bivens.

"As long as I have a face, there'll be a seat for you, private," he said quietly, scooting over and patting the empty bench beside him. The faces of the men at the table erupted with laughter, but they swallowed it down so as not to attract attention.

Jean sat down where he gestured for her and started shoveling food down.

"Wow, you sure can fit a lot in that mouth of yours," Bivens continued under his breath.

Jean finished eating in silence. When they stood up to go she turned and faced him, and then looked down at his feet and dropped a wad of saliva on his shoe. "I spit, I don't swallow. Use this to shine your combat boots," she muttered.

Her platoon sergeant's voice was soon bellowing in her ear. "You like to spit-shine, Private Pennegarde? Good. I'll allow you to polish all of our boots tonight. In the meantime, get outside and give me 20 pushups. Bivens, I want you to help her because we all know she can only get to 14."

He led the whole unit out to the grass and told them to line up, and Bivens hovered over Jean and held her hips again while making small grunting noises that only she could hear.

Jean received her first letter from her sister on the fifth day of basic.

November 1982

Dear Jean,

I should never have asked you to get me the pill. This whole situation is all Gordon's fault and I almost broke up with him on account of it. I'm sorry I didn't tell dad that our trip to Planned Parenthood was my idea but you know he would have arrested that boy for statutory rape, and we weren't even having sex, Jean, we were just *thinking* about it. You don't even know how lucky you are that you can have sex with your boyfriend without breaking the law. Not that it matters to you. You'll be a happy virgin until the day you marry Eddie.

Telling dad you were pregnant was like putting a loaded gun in his hand, and I don't even believe that it was true. You haven't even seen Eddie since he joined the Marines six months ago. There's no way you were cheating on him. It doesn't make sense. You said you wouldn't lie to

save my ass. So what were you thinking?

I didn't think it would come to this. Who kicks a pregnant teenager out on the street? Dad has never been much of a teddy bear, but even he knows he was grisly that night. Not that he's admitted it. He hasn't said a word. He just wanders around this empty house in silence and spends all his time on patrol.

I'm so lonely I could die. This is such a mess.

Please come home. I will fix it.

Love,
Rena

Jean stared at her sister's handwriting for a minute, and then put the letter in her trunk and washed up for bed.

Jean decided on air traffic control for her MOS (military occupational specialty). The recruiter she had met with in Banesboro, Idaho on the day after she left home had told her that she might have a chance of becoming a pilot if she could get herself a maintenance job in Army aviation. He had tried to persuade her to pick up a wrench and fix engines, but she preferred the challenge of directing flight traffic. Flying had been on her mind ever since she was a kid. She used to lie out on the lawn trimmed with lodge pole pines and wait for an airplane to drag her worries with it across the sky. Where might it be going? She understood so little about the world and planes had always seemed the pathway to knowledge.

They sent her to Fort Rucker in Alabama for her advanced individual training. The guys laughed when they heard she went through basic at Relaxin' Jackson, but those weeks had made her hard. When the 12 weeks of AIT were up, she was transferred to Lawson Airfield at Fort Benning to help train Rangers to jump out of helicopters. The first time she drove onto base, the

stark white columns and iron sculptures adorning them made her feel like she was finally becoming a part of something bigger than herself. Bigger than life in Bridey, Idaho where girls turned on you overnight and ruined your life, and where you couldn't even trust your own sister to do the right thing.

The first day she started at her Air Control Tower, Jean felt like she was in charge of the sky. She was mostly landing training aircrafts and she spent a whole bunch of time trying to stay busy enough not to fall asleep, but other days were so busy with young men dropping out of the bellies of helicopters every hour and massive planes floating in from training flights that she didn't have time to eat lunch.

Kelly Brink sat down beside her most mornings, checking weather patterns and dispatching planes. The first thing Jean noticed about Kelly was the frosted pink lipstick and powder blue eyeshadow that clashed with her ACUs (Army Combat Uniform). The second day it was bright red lipstick and copper eyeshadow, and the third day it had all turned purple. The nails, however, were always dripping the same shade of blood red. Kelly could make a uniform that was designed for a man look alluring, and even Jean could imagine how men would feel around her. They tried not to hover, but their bodies orbited around Kelly like flies around a garbage bin. Her cosmetic application, however, did not keep Kelly Brink from being the first one out on the tarmac for PT (physical therapy) every morning, and the first one done with her five miles.

Jean could not focus since she joined the military; her mind tracked back to worn out memories of the boy who had broken her heart the day she left home. After dating for two years and sacrificing herself on the altar of the in-crowd, Eddie Brooms had sent her a letter saying he did not want her to wait for him; he had found a new family in the Marines and he would not be

coming back to the foothills of the Rockies. She had not told anyone. Not jealous Missy Sellers who spread nasty rumors about Jean for stealing a boy who had never really wanted her, and not her selfish sister Rena whose perfect reputation she seemed destined to uphold--as if doing so would resuscitate her lost virtue. On that game day in late October she had been implicated by her sister in a failed attempt to obtain contraception, and knowing Rena would come out of a shit field smelling like sassafras, she decided against trying to redeem herself and faked early pregnancy instead. Within hours she had escaped her mountain prairie town and talked a recruiter into letting her take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Three days later she reported to Fort Jackson.

Thunder rumbled in the distance this morning but the soldiers showed no concern. Her legs picked up speed as if trying to outrun the storm and water ran into her mouth as she breathed. Focused on the heels of Kelly Brink, Jean's mind gave up vigilance as her will propelled her, and pride made her feet grab step after step of pavement, pushing off the blacktop and lengthening her stride. Her rhythm changed. Her posture straightened. She bounced rather than shuffled in defeat. Her Army t-shirt clung to her body, still small, but layered with increasing strength.

"What did you eat last night? You must have had seconds," said Kelly.

"I like the rain," she replied.

She looked at her stopwatch. Two minutes off her best time--a good start to the day. She stretched her calves behind her, leaning against a fence. Running helped, and it became their bonding ritual. Jean would tell Kelly when her shoulders were crunched up, and Kelly would push Jean to stretch better. When they were on duty together, they started making small talk about drama in the barracks--or the way the men worked without ever admitting the smallest mistake.

The night that Jean was promoted from private to specialist, Kelly took her out to a bar on Victory Boulevard that was such a dive that Jean couldn't breathe for the cigarette smoke. Not a window in the whole place, just a juke box, cigarette dispensers, a few booths against the wall and a huge bar with the usual formation of liquor bottles awaiting their duty.

"Let me buy you one," Kelly said.

Jean had never had a drink. Everybody else in the place knew the lingo of drinking but she had spent all of her time working and studying. Here was a subject she knew nothing about, so she feigned confidence.

"Martini," she said.

"What kind?" Kelly asked.

"I don't care. Whatever," she replied.

Some infantry guys were playing darts and smoking in the corner. A pilot came in wearing his uniform and sat down next to her and Kelly.

"You want an olive or a twist?" the bartender asked.

"An olive's fine," she said.

The bartender finished making the drink and set it before her. She lifted it up to her lips like she was trying not to spill cough syrup out of a tablespoon, but when she drank it she found it tasted even worse than cherry Dimetapp. She licked her lips to hide her grimace and put the glass carefully back on the counter.

"I'll be sure to get the next one, ma'am," the pilot said to the bartender, gesturing to Jean as if they were in for a night of it.

The heat of the vodka went immediately to Jean's head, and she felt the pilot's voice

mixing in with the buzz. The careful, gentle tones he spoke did not match a face that looked carved with experience.

"You sound familiar," she said.

"I'm John Potter. And you are?"

"I'm Jean Pennegarde," she replied. "I probably talk to you from the control tower."

"I recognize your voice, now that you mention it."

"And this is Kelly Brink. She's also in the tower. Aviation Specialist."

"What are you ladies doing here in this dive?" he asked.

"We could ask you the same thing," said Kelly. "We're here to celebrate Jean's promotion to Specialist."

"Congrats," Potter replied. "Sounds like a happy day."

"She's never really happy," said Kelly. "I don't think she'll be happy until she's flying her own helicopter."

"I love Air Traffic Control," Jean said. She turned to Potter. "Technically, I'm in charge of the pilots anyway. When you are in my airspace, my word is law."

The pilot laughed. "I'd be lost without you, it's true," he said.

"I had one the other day that seemed more interested in chatting me up than getting off the tarmac. He's got 40 men in 105-degree heat with parachutes strapped to their backs and I swear he's trying to get my phone number. Like we're the only two people listening," said Kelly.

"That sounds about right," Potter said. "Some of these guys lose all perspective with a little power."

"I'm not going to put up with any of that shit," Jean said. "I didn't join the Army to get laid. If I wanted to be barefoot and pregnant I would have finished high school in Idaho."

“Oh, a West Coast girl, are you?” Potter said. “I hear you’re wild and free out there in the Rockies.”

“My friends are probably married with kids by now,” she said.

Kelly laughed. “How much you want to bet some slick tough captain like Potter here knocks you off your feet before you make warrant officer?”

“I’d bet you my first-born child that is not going to happen,” Jean said.

Kelly pretended to choke on her drink. “That’s messed up.”

“I’m not having kids anyway, so it’s an easy wager,” Jean said.

Potter offered Jean a smoke. “See, you are wild and free.”

Jean didn’t smoke, but she let the pilot light one for her and she took one drag, doing her best to look professional. By now she had done away with the whole top inch of her martini, and she wandered over to a cluster of men by the dartboard. She sat alone, tracing the islands of electric white on her acid washed jeans with fingers that glowed tan in the black light.

The martini glass was empty so she went to the bathroom to see what she looked like drunk. The mirror displayed chestnut hair with bangs that stood straight up over her forehead. Her skin was turning red. She checked her teeth for food and dug a piece of gum out of her purse. Chewing it helped stabilize the expansive feeling and somewhat satisfied that nothing out of the ordinary would happen, she returned to the bar for another drink.

As Jean took her first conscious breath of the day, she sucked air with all the desperation of an abalone diver just up from the underside of an underwater cliff. She realized she was crying so hard that her tears were steaming back up from her pillow. She imagined them sizzling on cast iron like when her mama sprinkled a pan with water to test if the skillet was hot enough

to cook pancakes. The water either danced on the surface or the drops bubbled and stalled. Jean could hardly move the hand out from whatever was pinning it down next to her. Her body was a rough arrangement of brittleness and bruise in a strange bed. She ransacked her thoughts for information on where the pain was coming from. Last night. Martinis. She had lost count after the third.

Now her tongue tried to move but the velvety roof of her mouth held it captive. Finally she licked her lips. If this action had produced a sound, it would have been the sound of raking leaves. She had ceased crying but the mournfulness lingered, and she grieved for the woman she had been an unknown number of martinis before this moment. The arm she had tried to move was plastered over the right side of the bed while the left one hung down into the air, hovering over the ceramic tile of somebody's bedroom floor. She turned her head to look over at the numb limb. A ridge of comforter, cream with light purple paint brush strokes, appeared in front of her now, and the back of a head of black curly hair emerged at the end of the hump. Kelly. She didn't appear to be moving, but as Jean pulled her arm out from underneath the granite stone of body, it shifted and turned, and Kelly's brown eyes opened for a moment, and then closed again.

Jean pulled herself up onto the edge of the bed and scanned the room. Her Reeboks were on the floor with her moon-shaped Jordache purse and all of her clothes were still on. A bottle of Coors was on the floor next to her and the smell of it made her gag as she bent down to pull on her sneakers. She was shocked to smell cigarettes in the hair swinging down in front of her face. Somebody had taken her hair out of her bun. Jean slid off the bed and found Kelly's bathroom. As long as they'd been co-workers, she'd still never been to Kelly's dorm. In front of the bathroom mirror she stared at her face for signs of damage. She had mascara streaks but nothing looked out of place. She disinfected her mouth with some toothpaste and splashed water in her

crusty eyes, then she walked out into the shared living room. She hated the feeling of wandering into a day that was not connected to the night before. She had to check this room for clues as to last night's revelries, and the full ashtrays and empty beer bottles on the coffee table were evidence that they had been up later than she could recall. She went back into the bathroom and took a long shower, watching the water swirl down the drain. Then she stepped out onto the bathroom floor, lay a towel down beneath her, and went back to sleep.

When Jean woke up and looked at her Swatch it was 9:25 am. Her headache had dulled somewhat and her hunger increased. Kelly was cleaning up the living room when she walked in.

"Well, if it isn't Specialist Pennegarde," Kelly said. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"I'm more than likely going to throw up anything I eat," Jean replied.

"You're hungover?" Kelly asked.

Jean thought Kelly looked remarkably more cheerful than she had a right to be.

"I'm poisoned," she said. "What did I drink last night?"

"You had three martinis and two beers," Kelly said. "And you were funny."

"What do you mean I was funny?" Jean asked.

"You told every man who talked to you that you wouldn't have sex with him. It was the first thing out of your mouth. A couple infantry guys tried to make conversation, and you'd be like, 'Listen, I'm a virgin and I plan to keep it that way.' You must have said that fifteen times last night."

"Jesus Kelly, why didn't you get me out of there sooner?"

"It was fun. I enjoyed it. I think everybody enjoyed themselves."

Jean let herself be devoured by the couch. "Why would anybody in their right mind do this to themselves voluntarily?" she asked. "I want to die."

"I don't think anyone can die of a hangover," said Kelly.

"I feel a bit like my bones are all being pulverized. What else did I do?" she asked.

Kelly sat down next to her and folded her hands in her lap. "You ready for this?" she asked.

Jean nodded.

"You kissed me last night."

Jean felt a small panic rising up in her as if she had been caught by her daddy with a pack of cigarettes. "At the bar?" she asked.

"No, back at the house. When I climbed in bed next to you, you kissed me good night."

"What kind of a kiss was it?" Jean asked.

Kelly started twiddling her thumbs, but not in a head-to-head orbit, rather she pushed them up side to side, and began slowly stroking one against the other as if they were alternatively seducing one another.

"I'd say it was kind of a first," Kelly said.

Jean just stared at the woman next to her while the hot pitch in her stomach went cold and solid, as if the pavement had been poured and set and was now ready to be driven upon. She had thought Kelly was trashy at first, but over the years she had realized that the woman was not interested in men. She had run with her every morning for years, and seen her body naked more times than she could count, and always found her beautiful. But kissing her? She didn't think she had it in her.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Miss Pennegarde?" Kelly asked. She took a Newport out of the pack on the coffee table and reached across to the other side of the table for the lighter.

Jean felt her hairline tingle.

"I don't know what to say. I'm sorry?" she said.

Kelly took a drag and stared into Jean's blushing face, then turned and blew out the smoke in the other direction. A jolted hissing sound emerged from her and seemed to propel her lips to stretch wider and wider across her face until that smile took up most of her head. Then she tipped her head onto the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling while the laugh grew silent and travelled down to her belly.

"I'm just messin' with you," Kelly said to the ceiling.

Jean felt like she lost ten pounds in that instant. "Brink, you will pay for this, you crazy-ass bitch," she said.

Kelly took another drag and this time blew it out in her face, then crushed the cigarette out. "Come on, we're late for PT.

"You looked good this morning," Kelly said to Jean as she sat down at the dining table after their run.

"I don't know how you'd even see me, I was so far behind you," Jean replied.

"I noticed you on a few turns. I can sense when you're near me."

"Whatever," Jean replied. "We're just spending too much time together. You probably have delirium tremens when I'm out of arm's reach."

Jean suddenly knew that she was flirting. She hadn't felt it in a long time, and certainly never with a woman. It caught her off guard, but she didn't flinch. The guys all thought she was a lesbian anyway, so it might be considered a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"I am the one who tucked you in last night. But I was a perfect lady," Kelly teased.

Whatever it was Jean felt towards her, she seemed to be returning it in kind. "You don't have to worry about me getting all creepy on you."

Jean felt like she had lived an entire lifetime in the period between leaving work last night and getting ready to report for duty this morning. She finished her eggs and got up to bring her tray over to the dishwasher. "You know you didn't have to let me..." She stopped herself. "I mean I'm not blaming you or anything, but...Forget it. Thanks for keeping me from getting taken home by a ground pounder. "

"You seemed to know what you were doing. Even as shit-faced as you were, I think you would have dropped a guy before you got into a car with one."

"I suppose it could have been worse."

Jean checked the flight plans left for her from the previous shift and saw that a fixed-wing aircraft was scheduled to depart in five minutes.

"Lawson Tower, this is Two Six Niner, ready for takeoff," said a familiar voice.

"Two Six Niner cleared to Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. Maintain three thousand expect five thousand five minutes after departure. You copy?"

"Roger Lawson Tower. This is Captain Potter. Is that Pennegarde?"

"Affirmative," said Jean.

"Congratulations on your promotion," he said.

"Thank you, Sir. Over," said Jean.

"What cruising altitude did you reach last night?" said Potter.

"I was pretty high up there," said Jean. "Lucky Brink found me a parking spot. Over."

"Copy that. Two Six Niner out."

Jean watched Potter's departure in the C-120. The aircraft picked up speed down the runway and lifted effortlessly, in spite of its mammoth size. The C-120 was a village unto itself, and although it flew at as many knots as a commercial jet, it looked slow crossing overhead. It never seemed to be in any rush. Jean would have given anything to be leaving the face of the earth right now, but to pilot an airship like that would be like having a small kingdom to reign over, and Jean didn't want to command a crew and take responsibility for all of those lives. She wanted to fly something smaller.

"What was that all about?" asked her supervisor, Staff Sergeant Dewitt. He had been lurking around, sort of sniffing Jean out like a rat terrier. It wasn't really anything out of the ordinary. Men came in close contact with Kelly around.

"Oh, nothing. I met that pilot last night at a party. We were playing video games," she said. "I think he just wanted to know what level I got to."

Jean didn't have to lie. She wasn't breaking any rules or laws. She was 21 and could legally drink. But she couldn't arm any of her superiors with anything that they might hold against her.

"Sounds like he wanted to get to know you better," said Dewitt. "Would you like to date a pilot, Pennegarde?" he asked.

"I'm not interested in dating right now, Sergeant," she said.

"Oh come on. I heard you clean up nice when you want to. I bet you'd have a shot with Potter."

The nerves, the leftover booze, and the food weighing down her stomach all responded to the comment in uproar. "I'll be right back," Jean said, and went into the ladies room where she stuck her head in the toilet and dry heaved. She was glad to have her hair back in the bun.

The day was proceeding at an intolerable pace when some brass stopped by unannounced, observing new soldiers as part of a study the Army was doing on women. Jean once again wished she were fifteen thousand feet above the ground, but instead she was here in a room full of windows, a fish in the fish bowl. She kept following flights on the radar screen, but the colors were blurring and her eyes felt like they could just melt into their sockets. Waves of nausea kept coming over her, but if her training had taught her anything, it was how to suck it up. And so she sucked like she had sucked the air this morning when she burst out of sleep breathless and mangled.

Towards the end of her shift, Potter came back into her airspace. He was coming in late. He should have landed an hour ago. Kelly was giving her a "keep your shit tight" look.

"Lawson Tower this is Two Six Niner," he said. "Request precision approach to land."

Jean checked her radar and saw the aircraft must have inadvertently wandered up into the clouds. He was only five miles out and he should have been well below the clouds at this point in his descent.

"Roger Two Six Niner. This is Lawson Airfield. This will be a left hand pattern for PAR. Request your minimum."

Jean now had to provide the pilot with landing instructions that would keep him on course during the final approach. She read vectors to him every five seconds to provide the lateral and vertical guidance he needed for an instrument landing, since he had no visibility and his flight instructions no longer applied. She knew her body was steeped in alcohol.

"Two Six Niner to Lawson. If it's not too much trouble, we'd like to be on the ground in ten minutes, so we don't dip too far into our fuel reserves."

Lawson was not a busy airfield, but at the moment Kelly Brink was following two helicopters on their way back in from training flights and they were scheduled to land before Potter.

"Kelly, would you please delay those guys? Potter's low on fuel. I want to get him in first," Jean said.

Kelly got on the radio and sent the helicopter pilots on a couple of laps around the airport.

"Two Six Niner, cross intersection and maintain one-five thousand and two-five-zero knots," Jean said.

"Two Six Niner, we'll do it," said Potter.

He was sounding a bit too casual, and Jean wondered if her supervisors had noticed. She started bobbing her knee up and down. The altitude readout on her scope indicated 17,500 feet and the ground speed readout was well above 250 knots. Potter was not listening.

"Two Six Niner, you're too high and too fast," Jean said.

"Relax Jeannie," he replied.

One of the chopper pilots came in over a different frequency.

"Lawson this is Four Eight Four. You're not going to like this, but I'm looking at a flock of Canadian geese at three o'clock. Permission to ascend to one-five thousand feet."

Jean looked at Kelly. "Tell him no," she said.

"We can't let him fly through it. Let's clear him to land," Kelly said.

Jean picked up the radio. "Negative, Four Eight Four. Acknowledge."

Kelly gave her a "Really?" look and shook her head while staring down at the radar panel. She switched frequencies and took up the conversation with Potter.

"Two Six Niner. Begin descent now. Acknowledge descending," Jean said. It was

growing dark outside and she was looking forward to nightfall so as not to have to stare this day down anymore.

"That's me. I'm on my way," Potter said.

Jean slammed her fist down on the table. Why the hell was he talking to her like she was a girl at a party? They had put some songs on the jukebox last night and he had grabbed her hands and pulled her out on the dance floor. The last thing she remembered was putting her arms around him. The thought nagged at her that something else may have happened between those second and third martinis.

Then the helicopter came back over the radio. "Four Eight Four, we have engine vibration. Reducing thrust. Request landing instructions."

Kelly looked at Jean, lips pursed and head cocked. "Bird strike. You want to give Potter the bad news or you want me to do it?"

"I'll do it." Jean got on the radio and told Potter to break off his approach. She felt a subtle vibration of her fraying nerves awaiting his response.

"This is Two Six Niner. Say again."

"Two Six Niner break off this approach," she repeated. "How do you read?"

She needed Potter out of the way to clear the helicopter for landing but she didn't want a discussion, while being observed.

"Lawson we're black on fuel, over."

He was telling her shit she already knew. "Break off the approach, Two Six Niner. "

"Wilco," Potter said.

Will comply. Thank God. She started talking to the chopper. "Four Eight Four you are cleared for a straight-in approach to the north on row six. Follow your ground guides."

Then suddenly Jean could hear the low rumble of the C-120 in the distance. Potter shouldn't be that close. He must be taking his damn time. She picked the radio up again.

"Two Six Niner. Immediately. Avoiding action. Turn left heading east. Traffic one mile ahead. Acknowledge," she said.

"I'm running out of fuel here darling," Potter replied.

Jean bit her lip. First he gets himself stuck up in the clouds, then he talks to her like they're having a phone chat, and now he fails to comply with her orders in a timely manner. She could have him court marshaled. She wanted to ask Kelly if she was speaking in tongue, but she refused to draw attention to the fact that a pilot was ignoring her instructions.

Still, she didn't want to be the reason he ran out of fuel. "Crap Kelly. We need to clear him," she said. "Keep the chopper at 4,000 feet. I'll direct Potter back onto a glide path."

Finally, they got the boys down. Immediately after landing she heard Potter talking to the other pilot on a different frequency.

"I win," he said. "Have fun cleaning Big Bird off that windshield."

She was careful to keep her screams to herself on the way out the door.

Jean went home and immediately curled up in her bed, resuming the sobs that had woken her up this morning, wondering if it was the same sadness or a new one. What if the bird strike had disabled the chopper's engine? What if he had proceeded with the missed approach and run out of gas? So much better to be the one in the sky, holding the triggers and the controls, assuming the risk but not the responsibility. She wondered how Potter was feeling up there this morning, and suddenly remembered leaving him alone at the bar drinking scotch, with Kelly not really wanting to leave. It was Kelly who wanted Potter. He was showing off for her.

CHAPTER TWO

Over the past two years, Jean had written twenty letters to Eddie, and not one had been sent. They were evidence of a woman she did not want anyone in the Army to know, a liability to every mission but her own. She couldn't bring herself to burn them because when they were finally reunited, he would be so sorry for the years they had lost. These letters would give him a record of those years.

She put them in a large envelope and sent them to Rena. She sent along with it a note that read:

Dear Rena,

Please keep these letters for me until Eddie and I have both come home and I can give them to him myself. Don't open them or I'll kick your ass. I've gotten pretty tough.

Love, Jean

P.S. I'm at Fort Benning in Georgia.

Two weeks later she got a letter in return.

August 1984

Dear Jean,

Senior year is coming up and Gordon and I are still together. He still lives with his parents and helps out at Maney's tractor repair shop. He plays out with his band a lot too but they don't really make any money at it. Dad is obsessed with work. He thinks the drug dealers are coming to Bridey, and he takes it as his mission not to let anyone get away with anything. Everybody hates him because he breaks up every party. I don't know where he gets his

information. It's not from me--we don't hardly talk except to fight about what I ate for dinner.

I don't eat much anymore. I really don't put anything in my mouth except Diet Coke, dry Cheerios, sugar free gum, and occasionally, Gordon, but lately I've cut him off too. I know you can't get pregnant from blowjobs, but I'm paranoid. Anyway, the school nurse called to say that I was underweight and dad and I had to meet with Chuck Mauty, who tried to say that I had a mental problem, to which dad responded, "She's always had to be the center of attention." Then he asked dad whether I was getting enough attention at home and dad preached about how many children are in foster care because of crack. Do you have crack in the Army? It's coke that you smoke.

Chuck Mauty told dad he needed to reduce his workload because I was alone too much at home, and do you know what he said? Obviously you don't because you don't live here and you never write to me. Although you do seem to have time to write to a boyfriend who hasn't shown his face in town for over two years. By the way, I'll probably never be able to give Eddie those letters. But I'll hide them under the mattress for you.

Here's what he said: "You do your job, and I'll do my job. You make sure my daughter eats her lunch, and I'll make sure we don't have a crack epidemic in Bridey, Idaho." Then he walked out and that ended it.

Would you write me back already?

Love,

Rena

When her mom died, Jean had focused on comforting Rena, who was then at the age where her body still remembered being a young carefree child and took on the changes of

adolescence with resentment. Giggles could precede disgust by an instant--an emotional maelstrom swirled around her and pulled people into its vortex. Jean decided she had to stay above water for Rena's sake, and she found it easier to deal with her sister's drama than her own grief. She had continued that habit into her teenage years. It hadn't paid off then, and it wouldn't pay off now, so she put the letter back in its envelope and shoved it down in the bottom of her trunk.

As soon as she got her promotion to Specialist, Jean put together a packet for flight school. She talked Kelly into submitting one also. They had both done well in air traffic control, and their superiors wrote them letters of recommendation. They both took the AFAST (Alternate Flight Aptitude Selection Test) and did better than expected, and then took a physical that was designed for astronauts. It took over two months to get all the paperwork together, and about three weeks later Jean received a letter.

"Holy shit, it's a letter of acceptance," she said out loud, though she was alone in her room.

Her orders came to report to Fort Rucker in ten days, and it took all she had to get ready that fast. The Army sent a handler to escort her around base so she could cut in line and get her paperwork done. She was a rush job.

"We're not gonna let you go," the guys in her unit said.

"It's coming down from above. I don't think you have much say in the matter," Jean replied.

Kelly didn't make it in. She had found that she was in love with Potter, however, and this fact sort of made the loss worthwhile in her eyes.

"You joined the Army to meet your husband," Jean would later joke, when she made the

maid of honor toast at their wedding. "Surely, there must have been an easier way."

Kelly transferred to Fort Drum, New York with Potter and Jean spent a year in flight school where she soon realized she had come to rely on Kelly to be the pretty girl who drew the attention from the men, allowing her to stay under the radar. At first, she didn't think that she would even make it to the flight line. She recalled the days of basic training with wistful nostalgia and some amusement even, as she was being hassled more than ever, except that additionally her tactics sergeant assigned her to the unfortunate position of student company commander. Instead of trying to grin and bear her way through this preflight period as she had done in basic training, she would have to learn to lead her classmates or be thrown out. It was her responsibility to get everyone to class on time, looking perfect in the zip-up flight suits that belonged on auto mechanics, caps facing backwards like little boys to mark that they had not yet flown solo. Her pilot instructors willed her to fail, setting the older flight candidates screaming in her face whenever she tried to get her classmates to move. She knew how to read a man's outbursts and decipher the real from the ego, but still she could not see how this treatment assessed her leadership potential. She could not out-scream them, and they would not let up until, like grisly bears with full bellies playing fetch with salmon, they finally lost interest and let her commands get through.

The best she could do was to keep calm. Apparently it was enough, because she made it into Initial Entry Rotary Wing training, or IERW, and began learning how to fly. IERW was like a time machine. Jean learned to fly Vietnam-era Hueys, trained by guys who still seemed to be steaming with the heat of the jungle. In ground school she crammed her brain full of aerodynamics lessons, memorizing the names of the dashboard controls and how they affected the motors. She visualized these controls whenever she had a moment's peace. She lay in bed at

night, miming herself using the collective control stick to reduce the pitch of the helicopter while twisting the throttle to rev the engine. The cyclic control stick stuck up between her legs, and she learned to rotate her right hand in small circles to increase the pitch on the rotating wings. The language of flying was rife with bad puns; she received a stream of crude comments daily and eventually started putting in a few of her own. Her feet controlled the push of the helicopter by increasing or decreasing the tail rotor pitch and moving the nose of the aircraft left and right, and all of these motions had to be smoothly coordinated and continuously adjusted in order to fly. It was like patting your head with one hand and rubbing your stomach with the other while tying your shoes with your toes and walking backwards. In addition to the muscle memory drills, she learned about how to calculate the effect of altitude, temperature and humidity on air density, how much weight her machine could handle under various atmospheric conditions, how to perform basic maintenance on the aircraft, and what maneuvers the Huey was capable of. Her brain never shut up, and when she wasn't studying or simulating she was watching her classmates from the ground.

She struggled through dozens of dual flights in which she shared the controls with gritty men who thought their life expectancy grew in direct proportion to the number of criticisms they blurted at her over the intercom. When she came down from her first solo flight, they threw her into a pond and let her turn her little boy cap around. When she got back to her room to change clothes, she found a letter from home.

November 1985

Dear Jean,

Rena says you are becoming a pilot. This news comes as a big surprise, as I thought you had a child to take care of. I can't imagine why you would lie to me about something like that,

but it makes no sense that you would be in flight school with a 3-year-old child. I had thought you were with Eddie since nobody has heard from him since he left for San Diego, but apparently I was wrong. I just don't get it.

Your sister needs your help. Her boyfriend is a drug dealer. I haven't been able to gather any evidence against him, but he's bought himself a brand new Chevy Silverado and I know the pay ain't that good at the bank. He goes around town playing that rap music at full blast and your sister tries to tell me that it's not the music that causes the violence, it's the violence that causes the music, but I know better. That music is the anthem of crack.

Do you know about crack, Jean? It's coming soon to an Army base near you. Nobody is safe from it. The dealers figured out a way to combine cocaine with baking soda and cook it up into these little pebbles that people buy for \$5 or \$10 each. They smoke them in a pipe and lose their minds for about ten minutes, and when they come to they can think of nothing else but finding their next fix. I have been on very high alert for almost as long as you've been gone. I follow the local newspapers out of Los Angeles and Portland, trying to keep tabs on this problem before it breaches the gates of Bridey. We do have cocaine here, and I'm sure that Gordon Rollings uses. He is in some band that plays at the Dog House where all the misfits in town hang out, and his father sleeps with prostitutes. He just has that look about him that tells me he's on something.

You need to write to your sister. Tell her to get rid of that boy before he gets her addicted. She doesn't listen to me and she's no longer living under my rules. She left as soon as she turned 18 and they moved in together. She works at the Morning Glory still trying to pay the rent since Gordon never seems to have any money in spite of that fancy truck. She's as thin as a rail.

Are you ever coming back?

Dad

Jean crumpled the letter up and threw it away along with the pride she had felt five minutes earlier. In three years, her sister still had not told her father the truth. It was Rena's indiscretion that took them to Planned Parenthood that day, and if she would come clean then Warren Pennegarde would know that there wasn't a child. But Rena would never admit to anything that made her look bad. Their father aggravated this by how he had raised the two of them. Assuming that you had to weed out the seedier side of human nature early on, Warren had always checked up on Jean, and expected Jean to check up on Rena. He thought raising his girls was like training a pack of dogs and had made it clear that he considered Rena's problems to be Jean's problems from early on. Rena had somewhere along the line turned her older sister into her champion, her scapegoat and her bodyguard, and Jean had let it happen.

She tried to write back a letter, but found she had too much to say and couldn't get anything to come out right. She would write a few sentences that kept sounding like their mother and then she'd rip the letter up and start again. After four sheets of paper, she gave up and went back to studying, relieved to put her mind back where it belonged.

In aviation you need aptitude and attitude. Jean had found it easy enough to learn instrument panels, physics, vectors, weapons, and most importantly, how to apply her knowledge simultaneously to a number of given tasks, but proving herself as worthy of entering the boy's club was more difficult. She couldn't participate in the ball scratching but sometimes the men would turn to her for advice in their personal lives. One pilot that she got on well with, a marine who'd transferred into the Army, had a wife who had cheated on him during his first deployment. He asked Jean if he should give her a second chance. The wife had come to him in confession and begged for forgiveness, saying she just got so lonely and uptight having to take care of

everything and that the lover had been just stopping through visiting a friend, and that she hadn't even written down his phone number. Jean listened but did not give him an answer. She was decisive in her work life, but in personal matters she would not take sides. She suggested they go for marriage counseling. She couldn't give him the woman's perspective. She had no adult experience with men.

They wanted to know why she was single. She said she neither knew nor cared. What she didn't tell them, what she told not a soul, was that she had made a commitment to herself that she would die a virgin. She started dating Eddie when she was 17, and immediately his ex-girlfriend Missy Sellers had started plotting her demise. Eddie knew too much about Missy's pot habits and she didn't want him telling Jean's dad. But as soon as Eddie left for basic training, Missy waged a war of rumors that culminated in getting someone to fix the sign outside the Missionary Baptist Church with the words, "Jean Pennegarde wants you to know you can come any time. She'll let you in the back door." The choice to remain a virgin therefore was not a religious one. It was a matter of spiteful vindication. She hadn't stepped inside of a church since she left home, and although she talked to God often, and she heard him talk back, telling her about the virtues of celibacy and how she would be better off without men for now, maybe forever, it was her body she worshipped. She loved it even more as she shoved it inside a flight suit and shackled it with gear and pressed it to its limits with daily workouts. The long flights without bathroom breaks, without stretch breaks, where she grew numb and restless, were just more evidence of how she could do it all without complaint. This was not a body that was used to loving touch. Her body was part of her work, and her work was enough to keep it satisfied.

When flight school ended, Jean requested to be posted to Fort Drum to be near Kelly and Potter. But the Army sent her to Panama to join USSOUTHCOM. The base for Jean's unit, the

214th Med Evac, was built on a piece of paradise. The open bay barrack that she shared with far too many men had a red clay roof and white stucco walls, and looked out over an athletic field that would soon become a makeshift parking lot for helicopters, closed in by concertina wire and nick named “the Corral.” For the first couple years, lots of families were stationed on post and she often saw children taking swim lessons at the pool or playing at one of the playgrounds. Men in her unit went home at night to the sights and sounds of normal family life. But in February 1988, Manuel Noriega was indicted for assisting a Colombian drug cartel with the export of two tons of cocaine into Florida. For the next year, as President Bush campaigned against Reagan, the US tried various sanctions to remove Noriega but he proved himself a staunch survivor and a cruel dictator. Once elected, President Bush started scaling up security forces while at the same time trying to safeguard the families of soldiers by sending them home from Panama.

As the personnel ebbed and flowed around her in accordance with the campaigns and media coverage going on stateside, Jean moved barracks three times and she was annoyed with the cramped spaces and the men who reeked like they were pickled with booze. Most of the unit started drinking heavily, burdened with a sudden separation from their family combined with the stress of orchestrating a move abroad. Others were just sent back to the US with their families, leaving the unit understaffed, inexperienced and trying to get used to one another in the cockpit. More than half of the guys left were right out of flight school. Her comrades were dragging their hangovers around with them, doing the bare minimum of PT three times a week when it took four or five days to stay combat ready. She didn’t want to be the one who had to keep the boys motivated but she couldn’t stand watching them just sit around and play cards. It depressed and concerned her because she felt sure that they were losing focus on the mission essentials, and she felt equally sure that they would be called upon, now that there was a new chief in town.

One afternoon at the end of September she and her co-pilot along with a medical specialist and a doorgunner were on their way back to Howard Air Force Base on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal when the helicopter started to shake uncontrollably. Jean tried to stabilize the aircraft but it had begun to spin. She told her crew to brace for a water landing as they began plunging toward the Panama Bay at 40 miles per hour.

“Looks like we’ll be late for dinner,” she told air traffic control. “And we’re going to be wet.”

The sight of the water approaching her windshield was terrifying and she forced herself to remember she had trained for this type of landing. *It’s going to be just like the pool at Rucker*, she told herself, and when they made contact, she immediately hooked up her oxygen and unlatched her seatbelt. She swam to the surface and found her co-pilot and her doorgunner, but there was no sign of her EMT. With only a few minutes of oxygen in store, she dove back down and clambered her way into the dark fish tank, feeling around in the back of the aircraft until she found the unconscious body of the fourth crewmate. She pulled him out from his chair and through the door of the aircraft and he floated to the top with her. They got him up onto the raft to try to administer CPR, but he was non-responsive, and within minutes she knew that he was dead.

October 1989

Dear Jean,

I would apologize for not having written in so long, but since you have never written me back I start wondering whether I’m an idiot for writing you at all. It’s just that I can’t stand you being gone. I’ve written dozens of letters that I never end up sending. But this one had to go out.

Gordon and I have been living together for about four years. The other day I was doing

his laundry and I found a bag of white powder in his jeans pocket. It was more than he could snort in a night. I asked Missy Sellers about it because she does a lot of coke now, and she said that Gordon was selling it out of the window of the bank. I got him that bank teller job! He says he can't afford to marry me so I made him a resume, got him an interview, and even bought him a suit. Anyway, about a week after Missy said that, my car breaks down at work and I call Gordon at his dad's house for a ride. The phone is busy so I walk over and I get halfway up the steps and see him and his father measuring bags of cocaine on a scale at their kitchen table.

Burt Rollings is such a scumbag. The way he looks at me is enough to make me get up and leave the room, and I'd swear he has whispered into my ear for no good reason other than to get close enough to look down my shirt. I back up into the driveway scared as shit, trying to get out of there before anyone sees me, because all of a sudden I'm thinking Burt Rollings would probably cut out my tongue as soon as he'd let me go back to my daddy and tell him what I just seen. But then the dogs start barking and Gordon steps out on the porch and says, "What are you doing here?" and I tell him my car broke down. And then he says, "What are you doing just standing there?" and I say, "Did you not hear what I just said? That car is a piece of shit." My hands were trembling and I hid them in my bag as I dug around for a smoke. I squeezed my bic to steady myself and then pulled it out and lit the cigarette, took a deep drag and blew smoke to the treetops. I said, "Sorry but I don't really feel like chatting. Can I just get a ride home please?"

Gordon comes out to the truck and I think maybe they didn't see me, maybe they don't suspect anything. On the way home he stops at the river access point on Macktown Road. He says we're going swimming, and I tell him I'll freeze to death, and so he takes out his pipe and puts this little piece of candy in it and says, "You want something that'll warm you up? I promise you won't feel the cold if you take a hit of this."

I turn on the truck's interior. It was the tiniest little thing. I wondered how something so small could have had so feverish. "I don't think this is a good idea," I told him.

"They smoke it in all the cities," he said. "People out there would kill for this stuff."

"Yeah, well thanks for the offer, but I'd better pass. It's late, I'm tired, and I..."

He lit the pipe and smoked it. Then he put it in his pocket and walked down to the edge of the river and sat down. I just sat there, wondering if he would do anything crazy, hoping not to have to fish him out. He pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the ground, swaying back and forth like mothers sometimes do when they have a baby on their hip.

"Boy, you seem to be having a great time." I walked over to him. "I sure hope I'm not missing out on anything." His eyes lit up when I said this and he pulled the pipe back out of his pocket and put in another rock.

"Here's for you," he said with a smile that spread across his face slowly and then twitched as if he were unsure of it. "You'll like it. I don't know anyone who hasn't."

He looked so enthusiastic that I almost felt bad to disappoint him. Then I thought about all the babies that are in foster care on account of the stuff, and turned the pipe over and let the rock fall out onto the ground.

His face went blank. "Find it," he said, pointing to the ground where I had dumped it out. "Find it. I won't take you home unless you find it."

It was dark out by now and I went back into the truck and sat down. He followed me cursing, and then started digging through the back looking for a flashlight. When he found it, he went around and shoved it at me. "Find it god damn it!" he said, pushing the heavy end at me like he was wielding a weapon.

"Give me the keys," I said. "I don't want you driving me anywhere."

He went back over to the spot near the river and crouched down with his flashlight, picking through grass. He looked like a caveman, and I decided to help him if only so I didn't have to watch him in that pitiful state any longer.

"Give that to me," I said. "Go sit back down in the truck until you're better. I'll find it."

He went back to the truck and fired up the engine. He put it in drive and swung the truck in a big arch across the parking lot and pulled out on the dirt road and drove off down it, leaving me to listen to his radio fading. I walked five miles home through the forest in the dark wondering if the bears or the mountain lions were out and wishing I hadn't told him I didn't want a ride.

If I could get away with murder it would be Burt Rollings's neck I'd cut. Gordon would never be wrapped up in this stuff if it weren't for his father. I want to tell dad, but I can't see the use in putting my boyfriend in jail. It's a miracle he didn't turn out worse.

Love,

Rena

Jean's family had a telepathic ability to dump on her at the worst possible time. Here she was spending all her time and energy preparing for every conceivable evil while her sister mired herself deeper into a self-made mud puddle. She thought about sending the letter back to her father, but decided it wasn't worth getting involved. One war on drugs was all the fight she had, and she was saving it for the boys on the ground.

By the time December came around, it was clear that Noriega would have to be forcibly removed from power. The drawdown that Bush had orchestrated gave Jean an instant unpaid promotion from Second Lieutenant to First Lieutenant Platoon Commander, but she was not overly excited about the opportunity. Communication with her company commanders was

inconsistent as they were being dispatched from one company to another every few days. When Operation Just Cause began, her unit flew 72 missions in 72 hours. They had only five Blackhawks and she had med evac calls coming in from 25 different agencies--search and rescue operations, POW transport, and downed aircraft recovery. Bush had not managed to send every family home, in spite of his efforts, and Jean felt that those left on post were subjected to a unique form of hell. She wondered how those women felt watching the US news broadcasting the poor kids back home whose daddies were in Panama for Christmas, while her kids were wondering how Santa's sleigh would dodge all those helicopters that kept them up at night. Jean hated picking those daddies up off the ground, and hated even more fishing them out of the water. Those were the days she wished she had never left home.

CHAPTER THREE

When USSOUTHCOM reorganized and moved from Panama to Honduras, Jean applied and was accepted for reassignment to Fort Drum, New York. She got to be there when Kelly left the service and married Potter, and for a little while she enjoyed a honeymoon phase where she just flew around practicing aerial maneuvers. She would park her chopper in private airfields throughout New York State and screw around for a couple hours in whatever small town she happened to be closest to, then fly back to base thinking, "I get paid for this." The guys in her unit respected her because she was battle-rostered and she had shed her staff psychologist role for that of a legitimate platoon leader. But even though she was nearby, she missed Kelly. The friendship they had back in ATC had changed, and as hard as Jean tried to make time for her, it seemed Kelly never returned the effort. She was more interested in her life with Potter: picking out colors for officer's housing, building her civilian wardrobe and attending fundraisers and charitable functions.

In the summer of 1993, the 10th Mountain Division sent Jean to Somalia on a peacekeeping mission. About two months into the fracas, she stood outside the fuselage of an OH-58 Kiowa, smoking cigarettes and watching the mechanics check and double check various engine components.

"This place smells like shit," Dunne said.

Riggins agreed. "As close as we are to the ocean, you'd think we could smell something besides garbage and human excrement."

Jean longed to get outside the hangar and walk the quarter mile to the Indian Ocean. She longed to dive into its shimmering turquoise, but she couldn't leave the compound. She couldn't even change clothes. She had flown over the Indian Ocean dozens of times since Operation

Restore Hope began and every time she felt a low grade shiver like on that first crisp day of autumn when her body was not yet used to cold. On the east coast of Africa it was almost always hot but her body remembered its fear of that peaceful body of water lying blameless beneath her aircraft. It shook her up any time she hovered above it.

"It's a shithole, alright," she said.

Dunne spit on the ground but it seemed more like an act of punctuation than a release of phlegm. "What the hell are we doing here anyway?" he said. "It's been weeks since we brought any food in. These fuckers want to starve one another to death then who am I to stop them?" You could have tattooed a billboard onto his forehead had it not been so furrowed when he spoke. Dunne had a tendency to think about his purpose in the bigger picture, which didn't generally help matters.

"They're vicious, these Somalis. These warlords make Noriega seem like Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. Aidid's got women firing off RPGs outside the hospital. I guess the flyers aren't working. The rallies seem to be getting bigger."

US Psychological Operations had been dumping paper propaganda into the streets explaining how the warlord Aidid had used the United Nation's food aid to bribe competing warlords for their loyalty. The scattered papers were also used to warn the citizens to leave the area, and many of the people of Mogadishu had in fact left their huts empty and fled to the surrounding villages. The ones who stayed behind were the most dangerous, the most high on the intoxicant plant leaf known as Qat, or both. Some were already loyal to General Aidid before the United Nations forces arrived, and others had been convinced by Aidid that the wellmeaning visitors were trying to forcibly convert them to Christianity.

Suddenly laughter emerged from a group of rangers playing cards across the hangar. It

always seemed strange to Jean to hear laughter in Somalia but these boys tapped into it under the worst circumstances. It seemed to exist under the surface of everything they said. They craved it like they craved bursts of adrenaline, and they used each other as crude fodder for the cannon.

One of the Delta 160th SOAR (Special Operations Air Regiment) pilots, McFallon, had joined them from out of nowhere. Jean noticed the way his eyelashes curled up over his eyes, the only feminine detail in his square face. The SOAR pilots had a focus about them that was almost religious. It reminded Jean of the feeling she got watching certain men fishing. You simply didn't talk to them. They were only after one thing, and it was hidden, and you sure weren't going to be the one to give it to them. Anything you did or said only distracted them. Jean was unsure what he was doing here in her presence, but somehow she got the feeling he just needed to step out of his usual circle for a moment.

"I heard Delta got Atto today," Jean said to McFallon.

"You guys have to fly higher. Those RPGs are everywhere. Low and slow's gonna get somebody killed out there," he replied to her attempt at small talk.

Jean just nodded.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing here? My guys and I have all sort of been curious, and now that things are heating up a bit, we just want to know whose sharing airspace with us."

"I'm flying a Blackhawk," she said, affixing her blue eyes on him and extending her hand. "First Lieutenant Jean Pennegarde. "

McFallon held her gaze a while. He seemed to be awestruck, but not in a good way. As if every imperfection in Army Aviation, every challenge that they were facing off with in this war torn country were her fault. As if everyone else was out they're trying to get the job done, and

she had come in just to fuck it up.

"You've never met a female pilot, I take it?" She knew he did not care that she was female; the question was a buffer. SOAR pilots had doubts about anyone outside the Ranger Task Force, and they had been having a tough run of it lately with one of their choppers, Courage 53, going down on a reconnaissance mission just last week.

"Listen. 100 feet and 250 knots is gonna get you shot. You're going to have to get hot out there. I'm just telling it like I see it," he said.

Jean nodded towards him. "What else can you tell me?" she asked. "Are they getting any closer to Aidid?"

The sound of a C-130 circling the airfield interrupted their conversation. It was late, and Jean was ready to lie down, but she always longed for more information about what she might be doing the next day or the next few days. The hardest thing about being a soldier was never knowing what the next day might bring.

It turned out not to be a pretty one. Jean spent the morning doing admin work and routine maintenance, and about lunchtime she looked outside and saw one of the SOAR birds, #62 call sign Black Widow, making what looked like a controlled crash landing over at the Port. Hoping it was just a mechanical malfunction, she and her crew hurriedly took out their radios and heard that Black Widow had been shot and the doorgunner had his leg blown off. She could hear the kid screaming in pain in the background. Yet the pilot, who she knew was McFallon, had somehow kept the bird in the air until it could get out of the combat zone.

She stood there in shock, desperately waiting on orders, wanting to run to her helicopter and take off to the scene of the action, but no orders came.

An hour into the flight out of Mogadishu, Jean heard the captain's voice come over the

PA. "We are now out of Somalia." She leaned her head back on the seat and felt the hard nudge of her bun pressing into the base of her neck. She took out her hair tie, then combed her fingers along her scalp to catch a section of thick auburn hair, pulling her hand away from her head until the strands dropped down over her uniform, releasing grains of desert sand. She got up to stretch her legs, and she walked to the back of the plane.

She saw a young soldier in the back row next to the bathroom. He reminded her of Eddie, the way he sat with his legs spread wide apart and his forearms balanced across the top of his thighs, looking around him like he was fighting the urge to let his head drop, because if he did it might just fall down into an imagined abyss that beckoned his gaze. This thought made her smile, and her smile made his eyes focus in on hers and smile back, and then she flinched, but it appeared that she winked at him, and he sat up straight and closed his knees together and tried to look more neat and organized.

"You look like I feel," he said.

"Sorry to hear that," she replied.

"Have a seat," he said, motioning to the empty place next to him.

"I just need to use the bathroom," she said.

"It's probably the cleanest one you've seen in months," he laughed. "Did you enjoy your stay in Somalia?"

"Charming country," she replied. "Great food. Did you try the dog?"

"No, but I did some sightseeing downtown. The lighting was terrible. Oh, and no drinking water. But you can't always get what you want," he said.

She laughed. "I got the bird's eye view." She pulled her hair back to show her rank. They belonged to the same brigade.

“Helicopter pilot,” he said. “Not exactly ‘flying the friendly skies,’ are you?”

“I should have been a stewardess. I know that’s what some of my PIs were thinking when I was going through flight school.”

“I didn’t even know women could fly for the Army,” he said.

“Most women can’t,” she said. “But I’m special.” She took a seat.

His teeming eyes opened even wider. “What do you fly?”

“UH-60. Blackhawk. I’m a medevac pilot.”

“You pick up a lot of dead guys?” He covered his mouth with his hand in subtle but sincere horror, but Jean just laughed.

“My first priority is picking up the guys who are almost dead. Then the ones who are almost almost dead, then the walking wounded. Sad to say, but the KIAs are last on the list.”

“I guess there’s not much you can do for them, is there?”

“Just take them home.”

“Sammy needs a clean up crew of his own. You know, sand doesn’t work for burying corpses. I can’t tell you how many times a strong wind would uncover a bony hand. Sad fuckers those Somalis. Wish there had been something we could do.”

“We should have brought some Apaches to Somalia,” she said. “In Panama I saw one of those things put a missile through the window of a building from a mile away. Those guys are nice to have around. To tell you the truth, I’m getting a little sick of the Blackhawk. No fire suppression capabilities whatsoever. Unless you’re a SOAR pilot.”

“And even they got shot down on this trip,” Tripp said.

“Somalia was tough on the Blackhawks,” she said. “But I’d still rather be up there looking down than do what you have to do. I’m sitting inside a metal box, I’m not humping gear,

and I'm always within a few hours of re-fueling."

"No dodging bullets? How do you stay awake?"

"We did bring souvenirs home in Panama--holes in the floor, the windscreens, the tires. I had a map on the console that had a bullet hole in it, and one of the guys in Task Force Hawk had a bullet ricochet off the holster of his pistol. But I get to tag home base. Where you go there is no safe zone." She looked straight into his face, searching for a response. He had none. "I don't know how you do it. I picked up some tore up bang-bangs in Panama. Sometimes I knew their wife and kids."

"I'd never have kids while I'm in," Tripp said. "I could never put a woman through that kind of worry."

"You'd be married to the Army then?"

"For now anyway. The sex isn't very good."

Jean relaxed. In fact, she felt more relaxed than she could remember feeling in a very long time. "Women have a long history of marrying soldiers."

"A lot longer than they've been flying helicopters. How long you been in?"

"I was posted to Panama in 1986. Before that I was Air Traffic Control."

"That must have been good training."

"Yeah it was, but it's a fussy, thankless job. Especially during deployments. Always sitting around waiting for the boys to get home. I'm glad to be up in the action. Most of the time."

Tripp shook his head. Then he asked what she planned to do when she got back.

"I'm going straight for the scotch," she said.

"You going home to anyone?"

"I live alone," she said.

“How come? What are you waiting for?”

“I don't know how it would work with someone who's in, and civilian guys act weird around me.”

“What do you mean? They're intimidated?”

“They act like I have robbed them of something.”

Tripp turned in his seat toward her. “So what are you? Like a nun or something?”

“I've been focused on my career,” she said. “What about you?”

“Maybe when I'm out I'll find someone. But like I said, it's no way to start a marriage. Too hard on the woman.”

“Plenty of women gush over the chance to bear that hardship,” she replied.

“Not my kind of women, I guess,” he said.

“Not mine either,” she said.

Tripp wasn't sure what she meant by that, so he slid his hand over to her thigh to find out.

Jean bristled at being touched. “What, are we dating now?” she asked.

“Yeah, we're on a magic carpet ride. Just look out your window.” He left his hand where it was.

“I'm not much for intimacy, honestly,” she said, putting her fist down in his open palm.

“But surely you can appreciate a good stress release.”

Jean would later ask herself about this moment, about hearing those words and how easily she agreed with them. She would remember thinking how his deep tan and the look on his face befitted a lifeguard with a wide patch of blond bang over his forehead, a daring boy challenging her to a race along the beach, refereed by the surf, and she would remember how often during the course of the deployment she had longed to let the Indian Ocean absorb her

weight and remove the sticky grunge off her body, and how perhaps it was the desire for such coolness and buoyancy that led her to what happened next.

“It hasn’t been a very good vacation, has it?” she said. She leaned down and took off her boots, and her breasts brushed the back of his hand, sandwiched now between her legs and torso. He pulled it out with an almost graceful effort, letting his fingers trail behind him, and then he laid it on her shoulder and didn’t budge. It was a move that soldiers used in combat to get one another’s attention.

She sat back up and looked at him. “I’m leaving the door unlocked,” she said. She got up and entered the bathroom. Five minutes later, Trip entered the tiny closet and changed the latch from green to red. Her clothes were on the sink console and she was standing in front of them naked.

“How do you want to do this?” he asked.

“Take a seat, if you don’t mind,” she replied, as he unzipped his pants.

She ran her finger over his name tag. “Trombetta,” she said.

“It’s Italian for trumpet,” he said.

“Can I play your horn?” she said.

He kissed her. His tongue was sort of cold and his teeth were smooth and she thought he smelled like a backyard barbeque and tasted like cinnamon. They both had their hands and forearms plastered to the walls as the plane jostled. Then she moved her hands onto his shoulders, and pushed him down onto the seat. She settled down on top of him. He made a soft noise and crumbled beneath her.

“Sorry Ma’am. Equipment malfunction.” He was blushing, and the wave of boyish charm that had carried her thus far suddenly crashed hard into the sand. She couldn’t breathe.

She climbed off of him and felt the softness of him slip out of her leaving its wet remnants. She grabbed her clothes as he stood up and zipped up his pants. He was straddling the toilet seat and he laughed nervously as she motioned for him to pass her. He just stood there staring.

"You're beautiful," he said.

"And you are dismissed, private."

He still didn't budge.

"I would like some room to get dressed," she said.

He slowly got up, unable to hide the grin on his face. She locked the door behind him, pulled up her pants, buttoned up her shirt, and sat on the toilet seat for the next fifteen minutes wondering what everyone made such a fuss over sex for, and what the hell was wrong with her for not caring what happened next.

The small brown house squatted among a sea of strip malls in Watertown, New York. Jean had passed the house a hundred times before, but now she was sitting on the inside of the building, looking at the slate blue wallpaper with white flowery stripes. It reminded her of her bedroom growing up, where she and her mother had peeled off the girly pink and green flowers of childhood and replaced them with a more grounded earthy blue--a process that had required many hours of tedious effort, leaving her with the feeling that she had done something of permanence.

The midwife, a lovely African American woman with pictures of her children and grandchildren in small frames on every surface of the wood-paneled room, leaned back in her plush leather chair and said, "So you're going to have a baby."

"This pregnancy is a fucking disaster," Jean replied.

The woman crossed her arms in front of her and leaned across her desk as if she were a genie granting a wish. “You know, you are not the first woman to tell me that. We are here to help you through it.”

“I am a military pilot. I have been deployed to fight drug lords, warlords, and natural disasters. Anytime this country gets it in its head to fix some global crisis, I pack up and leave town.”

“You will need a support system then.”

“I will need an abortion.”

“That’s your decision, Ms. Pennegarde. We are here if you need us.”

Jean had booked an appointment with the midwife because she wanted to confess her pregnancy to someone unaffiliated with the military--someone she would never have to see again. She looked around the room at the signs on the walls. “Children are a blessing from God,” “Grandchildren fill a place in your heart you never knew was empty,” and “The love of a mother stays in a heart forever.” Her heart sped up.

Jean pictured herself lying down in a bed to have this tiny life sucked out of her body and her stomach quivered. In all her hours of combat flying, she had never felt so horrified by a thought.

“I don’t quite know how to make this decision,” Jean said to the midwife.

“Do you have someone to talk this through with?” the midwife asked.

“I don’t want anyone to know,” she said.

“I understand. But this is not a decision to be taken lightly. It may help to confide in someone,” she said. “Someone besides me. What about the baby’s father?”

“We’re not together,” she said.

“But are you in contact?”

“We’re not in contact,” she said. “We’re not even on a first name basis,” she said, and thought how funny it was that she had sex for the first time with a man wearing a nametag. It all seemed so ridiculous, and yet it was her life.

“I suggest you take some time over the next week to make a decision. Talk to your family or friends, or find a counselor on base.”

“So you can’t help me?”

“If you want to have a baby, I can help you. I can’t help you keep a baby that you don’t want.”

The first blow of guilt hit her stomach. Forever this child would be the baby that she did not want. Even if she gave it away, nothing could right the wrongness of it.

“But maybe you do want it. Maybe you just need some time for the shock of it to wear off. You are right. Having a baby is a catastrophe. Your life will never be the same. But I don’t know anyone who has truly regretted it.”

Joan’s hands were gripping the sides of the chair. The beating in her heart had slowed down to normal but she saw teardrops staining her shorts.