

THE JUNIOR OFFICER BUNKROOM

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J. J. ZERR



Primix Publishing
11620 Wilshire Blvd
Suite 900, West Wilshire Center, Los Angeles, CA, 90025
www.primixpublishing.com
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To junior officers from then till now.
To the academy class of 2018.

Author's note

The story takes place in a US Navy setting, on naval stations, and aboard US Navy ships. Abbreviations and acronyms, where used, are explained in the text. Provided at the end: a list of terms, a list of navy ranks, and a roster of some of the characters and the positions they hold in a navy squadron, along with pilot call signs. Some readers may find these helpful.

Writing is harder than work.

Editing is harder than writing.

Thanks to my Coffee and Critique Group for the red ink, so lavishly and beneficially sprinkled.

God bless editors, especially Margo, Mark, and Susan.

Thanks, Tom Jenks.

As always, I received a lot of help along the way. Remaining errors cannot be blamed on them, however. Those are all mine.

Part 1



1970

Please, God, don't let the war end before I get there.



1

Words roiled in his head, but there was no way to order them and move them down to his tongue for the saying.

“Talk to me,” Teresa said.

She often said that when it was hard to talk to her. After she said it, talking to her was impossible.

Jon stood in their military-housing kitchen, hands on the counter, peering at the utilitarian cabinet doors. Behind him, from where she sat at the dining room table, he felt Teresa’s disapproval. She didn’t want him drinking at 1500—didn’t want him drinking, period. He weighed her wish; then he grabbed a juice glass out of the cabinet, clinked two ice cubes into it, and floated them in Johnnie Walker Red Label. He sensed a palpable *Don’t. Please. For me?*

He sipped, held the cold, hint-of-smoke liquid on his tongue, and then swallowed. He felt it carve a cold-warm pipe down his throat and into his stomach, ignite an expanding balloon of warmth, and fade away. He looked at the amber booze. He half saw it, half saw the tiny red, green, blue, and yellow flowers decorating the glass.

Fully, he saw his future crumbled and mostly destroyed. As if a highway billboard proclaimed his career, his future: Jon Zachery, US Navy Jet Pilot. Only a tornado had ripped away half of the sign

and left enough to know something was ahead, but that future sure wouldn't be what it had been before.

He'd made it through flight training in fifteen months when the norm was closer to two years, but then, after he'd earned the right to wear pilot wings on his uniform, the navy wasn't sure it needed another pilot. He knew it wasn't just him. America didn't know what to do about Vietnam, and the navy didn't seem to know how best to prosecute the nation's war. The navy had expanded. Now it was contracting. Aircraft carriers and squadrons were on the chopping block, and so were a lot of excess pilots. A lot of men had to face what he did, but he did not want their company in misery, and theirs did not make his any easier to accept.

The juice glass rose, and he sipped, and the second slug slipped down smoothly. For a moment, the whiskey soothed the ragged, jagged edges of his ... frame of mind. It was hard to put a word to how he felt. Anguish always popped as appropriate. Anguish, for crap's sake, it sounded like a female ailment.

"Shoot," he whispered and took another sip.

Most of the other pilots blamed the navy for screwing them with lavish use of the F-word. Jon worked hard to keep profanity out of his speech. Teresa would never put up with it at home. It wouldn't do in front of the children, and he didn't want to be one person at work and have to be another when he said, "Honey, I'm home." He couldn't blame the navy for what was happening to him. He had no one to blame but his own dad-burned self. He had made the string of decisions that led to this point.

He'd enlisted in the navy after high school. Nearing the end of his obligated service, he accepted a navy college scholarship for which he owed them an additional four years. Then, with that obligation half-served, the Night of the Dog Poop happened.

In November 1966, he'd returned to the States after completing a seven-month deployment to the Tonkin Gulf aboard a destroyer. A

cousin of Teresa's and some of her antiwar-oriented college friends called Jon a baby killer. In the middle of the night, they trashed his car with dog poop and a garden hose. Until that point, Jon had watched the antiwar protests and marches on the TV and tsk-tsked in disapproval. After that night, though, he became convinced that, if he disagreed with the protestors, he had to do something. "Hell no, we won't go," they said. He said, "Well, then, I will." And he'd decided with great confidence that staying in the United States Navy and applying for flight training was the right thing for him to do. It was even patriotic. For the first time, what JFK had said at his inauguration made sense to him. While everyone else his age ranted and raved in the streets, protesting more—it seemed, to him—against America than against the war, he would serve his country.

So he'd dragged Teresa and the babies through the gauntlet of flight training. And it had been more traumatic for her than for him. In basic jet training at Meridian, they'd run afoul of the Klan when they entered a pew with a colored girl who was "sitting in" Mass at the white Catholic church while the rest of the congregation left an empty pew in front of and behind her. That was undoubtedly the worst year of Jon's life—and Teresa's too, he was sure. During initial carrier qualification, Hurricane Gladys marched up the west coast of Florida with a bead on Pensacola, where they were stationed. The phone rang. Jon had to report to the aircraft carrier *Lexington* immediately. *Lex* would depart for the western Gulf of Mexico, and the students could get their quals completed there.

"What about the babies and me?" Teresa'd asked.

"Get in the car, and drive north," he'd said to his wife with two children, one in diapers. And she was pregnant. Gladys hung a hard right at Tampa, but the fact remained that he'd abandoned his wife and family with a major storm bearing down on them. Then in Kingsville, Texas, during advanced jet training, Teresa went into labor two months early, and they'd lost their son Daniel after Teresa's

third C-section. Jon again abandoned her in the hospital to fly out to the *Lex* for his final evolution in flight training, a second round of carrier qualification landings.

After all he'd been through to complete flight training, after all Teresa and their babies—though they weren't babies anymore—had been through to get him his wings, now the navy didn't need him. Despite the logic that it was due solely to his decisions, there was still a sense of having been betrayed. Worse, his patriotic sacrifice was of no value to the navy or the nation.

Jon felt as if he were falling, as he sometimes did in a dream. In the dreams, he'd wake with his heart pounding, but the waking arrested his precipitous plunge off the earth and on his way to hell. Now, he felt as if he were descending during wakefulness, and though this descent was gradual vice precipitous, it was excruciating in its opportunity for lengthy anticipation of the crash at the bottom.

He drained his glass.

Teresa. He loved her more than he loved his own life. He believed that. The navy had put him in spots where he'd been forced to make choices as if she were not his first priority, but it didn't alter his affection for her. That's what he told himself. Teresa was everything to him.

The Cupid Moment. He thought of it often, and when he did, he saw Teresa walking home from school that day near the end of junior year in high school. During three years of classes together, he'd barely noticed her, but he did that day. Vividly, he pictured her; the sun touching a spot of gold to her brown hair, her short-sleeved white blouse, three books under her left arm, a blue sweater swinging in her right, the hem of her dark-blue, pleated uniform skirt dancing as she walked.

She'd been everything to him since the Cupid Moment. He couldn't imagine life without her.

He looked at the diminished ice cubes in the bottom of his glass.

The Cupid Moment. She didn't want him to drink. When she'd been eight years old, she'd discovered the corpse of the alcoholic man who lived next door. He'd committed very bloody suicide under the tree in the shared backyard where she liked to play. Still, the imposition of her aversion to alcohol on him always rubbed him as heavy-handed moral tyranny.

He dumped his glass and added a fresh cube, two fingers, and a splash.

There was still the future, or lack of one.

He'd completed pilot training and received the exact assignment he'd wanted: a squadron scheduled to go to the Tonkin Gulf aboard an aircraft carrier and fly missions over Vietnam. He, Teresa, and the children moved to Lemoore, California, where he joined the Raiders. A week later, the navy announced that the Raiders would not go to 'Nam—or anywhere. The squadron was slated to decommission, along with an old aircraft carrier and four other squadrons. Out of one hundred pilots needing new assignments, ninety would be sent to no-load, dead-end jobs. That was the word—rumor, maybe—but it flitted around the navy with the weight of the Gospel of John with an *H*. Jon did not expect to be one of the ten. A mind-stultifying job awaited him for his remaining four-year obligation. By then, he'd be ten years out of college. Landing a decent electrical engineering job seemed as likely as snagging one of the ten good jobs one hundred guys wanted.

Since the news of the decommissioning broke, he often thought of growing up in Saint Ambrose, Missouri, population 277. In high school, the boys who didn't know someone at the Ford factory in Saint Louis or at Hemsath's concrete block business, talked about digging ditches or hanging Sheetrock. They talked about getting away from Saint Ambrose too.

Especially Alfie Wiggins talked about it.

"Soon as I graduate," he was fond of saying, "sayonara, adios,

goodbye.” Then Alfie quit high school in his junior year and was hired by Wendal Sullivan. Wendal had a TV repair business he ran out of a panel van stuffed with vacuum tubes. But the business took off, and Wendal rented space for a shop, with Alfie as his number-one man.

Where the Sam Hill did that job come from? How did Alfie even hear about it? What did Alfie know about repairing TVs? Guys asked those questions, although it really didn’t matter. What mattered was that there was no way another great job would drop out of the sky, not in Saint Ambrose.

At the same time God blessed Alfie with the job; Cupid blessed Jon with an arrow.

Jon smiled. Thinking about the Cupid Moment, he’d forgotten her disapproval ... for a moment. And, for a moment, he’d forgotten about his future, or lack of one. The smile leaked off his face. He contemplated his drink, sipped, and wrinkled his nose. Sitting on his tongue was a taste that made him think of mud from a highlands bog.

Teresa stared across the table and through the door of the kitchen at Jon's back. Powerful compulsion to chastise, to speak the hurt she felt butted against desperate restraint.

"Talk to me" had been a mistake. Jon needed time. With himself. With his whiskey.

He knew how she felt about drinking, and he drank, anyway. That wasn't the worst of it, though. He'd pulled away from her, so far that it was like in the early years of high school. They were in classes together but weren't friends, had nothing in common, and rarely spoke to each other. Over the first six years of their marriage, the navy, the children, everything they faced served to bring them closer together. He rarely drank. They made love, but for the last year, since they'd lost Daniel, he drank every day. He wouldn't touch her for weeks. Then he'd take her frantically and in a rush. After, he'd roll off her, drape his arm over his eyes, and sigh as if there was nothing to live for. He'd roll off her, done with what he needed her for, and she felt dirty, used for a shameful purpose.

Over the past year, their life together had become taking care of the children, and she thought he regarded her with a chilly indifference.

Indifference hurt more than open hostility would have.

She wanted to tell him about the hurt she felt, but more, she

wanted him to tell her what was eating at his soul. He wouldn't talk about Daniel. He wouldn't talk about flying. He wouldn't talk to her, period.

Saying "Talk to me" had been a mistake. It hadn't always been like that. Jon had said—or written, actually—in a letter during his 1966 deployment, "Even if there isn't a solution in the dialogue about our problems, now two of us are carrying the burden." But since he joined the aviation community, the navy had inserted forbidden discussion topics into their lives. During the first phase of flight training, a navy chaplain had addressed the small number of wives of student pilots—most of them were bachelors. The chaplain strongly advised the wives to *not* worry their husbands about matters at home. "Flying is a demanding business. Your husbands need to focus entirely on their airplanes." The implication was clear. Load your husband down with worries about home and you could kill him. The student pilots had been talked to, as well. "In aviation, you will have some close calls. Don't tell your wives about those. It just causes them to worry more."

Through the kitchen door, she watched Jon sip and return the glass to the counter. She had to give him time, but, too, she felt time slipping away from them. If she didn't do something soon, there would be nothing between them to heal.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, she prayed. She didn't have to be specific with the supplication.

Teresa looked at the envelope in her hand. She'd written a letter for Jon. That morning, desperate for some way forward with him and despite the cost of the long-distance call, she'd called her best friend, Rose Herbert. Rose's husband, Fred, was an admiral's aide, and they were stationed in Hawaii. When she was troubled, Teresa called Rose. As they talked, Teresa never found a solution to her trouble, but Rose had a way of slicing through emotional turmoil and connecting Teresa to bedrock simplicity. Teresa couldn't help herself. Despite her anguish, she smiled, recalling Rose's way of putting things.

“Of course men don’t talk much. All the blood they have is busy servicing their sex and digestive organs. They have no blood left over to send to the brain for thinking and speaking.”

Jon had described Rose as a five-foot-tall, skinny, redheaded, freckle-faced fireplug that don’t take no crap from *nooooo*body.

Rose.

After speaking with her for thirty minutes, Teresa decided that she had to put aside her own hurt to be able to get Jon to deal with his. She was afraid that in conversation, she would not be able to keep her own pain, her sense of betrayal by Jon, out of her voice. She had to write a letter. There she could think and reason before committing a line to the stationery. She could see her written words, and if they were not right, she would throw the page away and start over.

She should have thought to write sooner.

Before they married, and after when Jon deployed, they wrote to each other every day. Wonderful, loving, soul-baring missives. Love letters. After Jon had gone into the navy and before they were married, he’d written, “Writing digs the depth of the feeling we have for each other out of us and splashes it in ink across sheets of paper.” She thought about how close she felt to him when she wrote hers and read his, even when he was on the other side of the world. *Funny*, she thought, *we have to be apart to really be together*. Or was it sad? Whichever, their letters drew and held them close.

So she’d packed both sides of four pages with her neat, precise, space-conservative cursive, and now she waited for the time to deliver it.

He refilled his glass.

She rose silently, edged past Jon’s back, laid the envelope on the counter next to the whiskey, went to their bedroom, sat on the bed, and began to pray her rosary. And hope.



She was halfway around the loop of beads when ice cubes clattered

in the aluminum kitchen sink. She heard Jon enter the bathroom, brush his teeth, and gargle with *Blisterene*, he called it.

With her fingers on the Our Father bead, she looked up. He stood in the doorway. Warmth cascaded down and suffused the core of her. *How many times can I fall in love with that man?* she wondered. In high school, the girls talked about how cute he was. They also lamented the good-looking ones never had a car.

“Why are you just standing there?”

“Didn’t want to interrupt your prayer. Watching you ... felt good.”

She patted the bed beside her, but he knelt and took her hands.

“Forgive me.” The first words upon kneeling in the confessional.

“Dearest Teresa.” The way he began his letters.

Dearest Teresa. He didn’t have to say it again. In his letters, he wrote it often. The superlative had to be there in front of her name.

Thank you, God—and Rose—for nudging me to write a letter to him.

“I don’t know why I have to learn this so often,” he said.

She gazed at and into his blue eyes. Hers danced from one, to the other, and back again.

He squeezed her hands. “As long as you and I are together, and we keep the Lord in our life, we can handle anything.”

She pulled a hand free and raised it to his cheek.

“In your letter, you said I should take leave. We should go to Hawaii, visit Rose.”

She knew he would not want to leave. He said there was no chance of landing a good job, but she knew he clung to hope of one as if his life depended on it. An opportunity, a good job opportunity, could drop from heaven, and if he weren’t there, someone else would grab it. She knew it was important for them, for who they’d been, for who they could be again, if they could just get away from the dark, heavy atmosphere of despair over and in his decommissioning squadron, where nothing appealed to Jon but whiskey. The way he looked at

her then, there was room for hope—a tiny smidgen, anyway. She held her breath, waiting.

He kissed her hands one at a time, raised his head, and nodded.

Her burdened heart unloaded. She leaned and kissed him with passion.

Little feet pattered on the hallway tile.

“Jon Jon is awake,” four-year-old Jennifer said.

They turned to their earnest-faced daughter, blonde, side ponytailed—the one on the right flattened against her head from her afternoon nap. She repeated her message.

Jon cast blue cow eyes up at his wife.

“Later,” she said.

He sighed as if he had nothing left to live for.

She laughed as if she had almost forgotten how but captured it just before it got away forever.



3

At 1236, Monday, on the second deck of the VA-43—the A-4 training squadron—hangar, Naval Air Station Cecil Field, just west of Jacksonville, Florida, Lieutenant JG (junior grade) Amos Kane knocked on the operations office door and entered when told to do so. He stepped to the front of the Ops O’s desk, stood at attention, and stared at a spot on the green wall.

“Another goddamned Monday with Lieutenant JG Amos goddamned Kane!” the Ops O growled.

An impulse to smile rose in Amos, but laughing at the start of an operations officer ass-chewing crossed the line. He enjoyed seeing how close he could come to that line, touch it like an Indian with a coupstick, and ride away. The thing was the Ops O and all of them took all the military stuff so seriously. Flying was serious. No doubt about that. Screw up and you die. But so much of the squadron chain-of-command malarkey was a little guy like the Ops O putting on a uniform and thinking it made him big. Actually, he didn’t find the chain-of-command issues funny. It was the people the navy chose to stick in responsible positions. They were the joke.

“Normally, the student pilots I see are having trouble with flying. Not you. Down here with your feet on the ground, that’s where you cause me so damned much grief.”

They called the Ops O Lurch, after the butler in *The Addams Family*. Atop the Ops O's 130-pound, five-six frame sat a ventriloquist dummy-sized version of the TV character's head. Gray pallor, sunken cheeks, bangs that appeared to have been trimmed with giant-toothed pinking shears, and a face that never smiled.

"The only reason I haven't shit-canned you is because you are a natural stick-and-throttle jockey. But you just don't give a damn about anything."

Early in Amos's six-month stint with the training squadron, the Ops O told him, "I'm making you my personal project. I will square away your worthless, don't-give-a-shit, college frat-boy ass, or the CO will jerk your wings." But time was almost up. He'd complete his last phase of training, carrier qualification, on Friday. Weekly Ops O ass-chewings, he was going to miss those.

"Just once, Kane, I hoped I could make it through a Monday without seeing your ... your ..."

Amos knew Lieutenant Commander Willie Williamson wanted to say, "Your ugly face," but he couldn't voice the lie.

Amos was six-two, blond, blue-eyed. High school and college sports had sculpted his muscles. He was a good-looking guy and comfortable with the knowledge. And pleased.

"Top grade in weapons delivery and low-level navigation. Same thing now with the bounce hops."

During bounce hops, students practiced for landing on a carrier at night. They flew round and round the airfield shooting touch-and-goes. A landing signal officer (LSO) evaluated each one. Amos always knocked down the highest grade. Until Saturday night. Then the senior LSO gave him a poor mark on his last landing.

"I flew a good pass," Amos snapped in the debrief. "You gave me a power call at the last minute, which I didn't need."

When students conducted carrier landing practice at an airfield, LSOs not only graded landings but occasionally called corrections

over the radio. "Come left." Or, "Power," meaning add power, push the throttle forward a little.

The LSO agreed it had been a good pass, but the most important point was, "You never second-guess the LSO. I gave you the power call to see if you'd respond. You didn't. That's why I gave you the poor grade."

"Seems to me," Amos said, "if you don't want me second-guessing an LSO, you shouldn't pull crap like a power call I didn't need."

"I'm not arguing with you, Amos. I'm telling you. I see a hint of this kind of attitude again, you will not qualify to go to the boat. Out on the boat, if you fail to respond to an LSO call, it'll cost you your wings."

Amos wanted to argue more but held his tongue. It rankled, though, and that night, it kept him awake a long time. Finally, he figured out how to get even. Then he slept.

"That stunt you pulled this morning," the Ops O said, "sticking a whoopee cushion filled with dog turds and water on the LSO's chair. When you pull something like that, do you ever think about the sailors who have to clean up your mess?"

Actually, he'd apologized to the two guys who'd had to mop it up. He expected just noise and smell, not a mess, he told them. They'd both laughed, and Airman Tanber said, "Not to worry, Mr. K. It was funnier'n hell. Mr. Simmons couldn't understand how he'd shit his pants without feeling it coming on."

The Ops O smacked the desk with a fist. Amos stood a little straighter.

"Look at me, numb-nuts!"

Amos did.

"Flying is serious business. Landing aboard a carrier at night is beyond serious. You got your head on straight enough for it?"

That one needed an answer. "Yes, sir. I know it's serious. I screw around down here, once in a while. Not when I'm flying."

"I want to make sure you understand me, Kane. This is the last time I'm warning you. You pull something even remotely like this again and you will lose your wings. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Oh, you're sorry all right. Get out."

"What about my request for orders to a West Coast squadron going to Vietnam?"

The Ops O stared with his mouth hanging open. "Did you hear one goddamned thing I said? You got no room to ask for anything. Get the hell out of here!"

The Ops O was wrong about him not caring about anything. He cared about going to a West Coast squadron and flying missions over Vietnam. What the hell was the point of being a naval aviator if he didn't get to the war?

He cared about that—a lot.

Amos backed out, pulled the door gently shut, and smiled. *That whoopee cushion, man.*



The next morning, the phone rang. Amos knocked it and the lamp onto the floor.

"Hello? Hello?" an anxious voice called from the floor.

He couldn't find it in the dark. He did find broken lightbulb glass. Finally, he snatched it up.

"Kane. What?"

"Um, uh—"

He saw the clock. "Jesus goddamned Christ, 0630. I haven't even been asleep three hours."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I'm supposed to tell you your class has to be at a meeting in the ready room at 0800 with the Ops O."

Crawling to the end of the bed, he mumbled goddamns at the

Ops O and stepped gingerly to the floor. His class wasn't supposed to come to work until noon. It didn't make sense.

It didn't have to. The Ops O said come in.

He cleaned up, ate a bowl of cereal, and got dressed. The thing he took the most time with was positioning his wings precisely straight with the horizon of the top of the shirt pocket. Driving to the base, he kept his speed to no more than ten over the speed limit.

Amos hustled across the aircraft ramp with a few minutes to spare. As he approached the hangar, he saw the black hole tailpipes of eight airplanes arranged in a straight line, precisely spaced, like a rank of troops at an inspection. After passing to the front of the parked A-4s, he stopped. The aircraft at the far end of the row, 423 painted on its nose, had forearm-thick pine tree branches hanging out of both intakes. Another pine bough was wedged in the left wing leading-edge slat.

The night before, the group flew its final field practice landings, the last of ten bounce hops. On Wednesday, tomorrow, everyone who received a qual grade would "hit the boat." Amos and his classmates had until Friday to safely and satisfactorily complete ten day and six night carrier landings to qualify. In the previous field sessions, the landing grades of the class defined a symmetrical bell curve. Six guys held down the middle of the curve. A pilot named Ralph and Amos occupied the high end. Saul and Tully filled the low-grade spots and were not expected to qualify. Three things could happen to Saul and Tully: they could move back a class, they could lose their wings, or they could be sent to fly planes that did not land on carriers. Saul had flown aircraft number 423 the night before and returned it bedecked with evergreen branches. He'd probably lose his wings. He was lucky as hell he didn't lose his damned life.

Looking at those pine branches hanging out of the intakes, Amos tried to imagine how close Saul came to dying in a ball of flame off the end of the runway. Those skinny little pines, they didn't go more

than twenty feet high. Saul had to have been within a half second of sudden death. Amos remembered the LSO's radio calls, "Power, power! Wave-off, wave-off! Climb, climb!"

Those double-word calls ... if there was ever a place for an exclamation point, it was at the end of those. Amos had been flying well, as he always did. Still, that LSO's voice spurted adrenaline into his blood and made the nose of his plane want to climb to the moon. But, the way it works, navy aircraft carrier pilots have to have some fear. That's what the class'd been told. Amos believed it. Some fear has to be there in a pilot's heart and head. Otherwise, he gets complacent, and complacency kills more pilots than stupidity.

Saul wasn't complacent the night before when he went plowing through the trees like a lawn mower. Not stupid, either. Most likely, he was scared shitless and couldn't get that fear balanced with cool-headed "just-fly-the-goddamned-airplane" stuff, which is how one of the LSOs described what a carrier pilot has to do.

The way it worked for Amos, he thought of his mind having compartments with doors. On the ground, the doors between those compartments were open. In a cockpit, one compartment ruled his brain, and all the doors to the other rooms were closed. There was only flying. Fear occupied an adjacent room, and he could hear it buzzing like a hive that'd been bumped, but the door stayed closed. Not a single bee got out. In a cockpit, Amos Kane was Cool Hand Duke. The Cool Hand connoted a top-notch aviator's expert hand on the stick. Cool Hand. Stealing the Luke from the Paul Newman movie wouldn't do. Although Amos was as handsome as Newman, he didn't like the fact that in *Cool Hand Luke*, the *system* did him in at the end. He also admired John Wayne movies, like *Hondo*. In his airplane, Amos was a lord of the sky, just as in the movie *Hondo* Lane out-apache-ed apaches and he out white-man-ned white men. That's how he thought of himself. In his cockpit, Cool Hand Duke had one hand on the throttle and the other on the stick, and the whole

universe boiled down to flying that airplane. During carrier landing, the boiled-down universe separated into three distinct elements.

Meatball. To the left of aircraft carrier landing areas, and to the left of navy runways, a lens was located. The lens had a yellow light in the middle and a row of green lights to either side. A pilot attempting to land on a carrier had to keep the yellow light in the lens centered on the rows of green lights. It meant “on glide slope.” If a pilot allowed the meatball to rise above the green lights, he would likely miss all the wires, called a bolter, and have to try again. If the meatball sagged low, a pilot reduced the nine feet of clearance above the steel cliff at the end of the ship. A low meatball endangered the pilot and everyone working on a carrier flight deck. If a pilot did not immediately correct a low ball, the LSO would call for “Power” or trigger the “Wave-off” lights, red lights lining both sides of the lens and ordering the pilot to abort the landing approach.

Lineup. Margins for error are tiny on an aircraft carrier—about fifteen feet of lineup error for a small plane like the A-4 was tolerable, but every pilot worked hard to plant his nosewheel exactly on the lighted centerline. Planes and equipment were parked adjacent to the landing area. Every square inch of space on a flight deck was precious, and navy pilots were expected to perform precise landings.

Angle of attack. Or airspeed. A pilot must fly on the exact optimum airspeed for the weight and configuration of his aircraft. Too fast could break an arresting cable on the ship or the hook on the plane. Too slow could mean a stall and crash into the water or onto the steel cliff at the back end of the ship.

“Meatball, lineup, angle of attack,” a pilot said over and over during his landing approach.

“Close enough for government work” was not a concept applied to landing aboard aircraft carriers.

Amos imagined seeing inside Saul’s head. A light was on in Saul’s flying compartment in his brain. A calm, quiet voice was saying,

“Meatball, lineup, angle of attack.” The door to the next compartment was open. Dark inside that one. A raise-the-hair-on-the-nape-of-your-neck scream came from there. “I don’t want to die!” It obliterated everything else in Saul’s head.

Watch check. He ran to the hangar, ran up the stairs, ran down the corridor, and opened the ready room door. All eyes in the room aimed at him.

The Ops O stood at the podium to the right. He stared at a spot high on the rear wall and tap, tap, tapped his index finger.

“I am not going to start, Mr. Kane,” the Ops O Lurch-voiced quietly, “until you close the door and sit down.”

Amos grabbed a seat in the second row, looked up, and found the Ops O glaring at him. Weighty silence settled into and filled the ready room. The Ops O let it press on his audience a moment.

“In case any of you are wondering about Saul, he turned his wings in last night.” The Ops O shook his head. “This squadron has been training pilots to fly A-4s on and off aircraft carriers for ten years. Never before today has an entire group failed to field-qualify for carrier landings.”

Amos jumped up. “Who the hell said I didn’t qualify?”

The Ops O smiled. “Sit down, please, Mr. Kane,” the quiet, reasonable voice said.

He sat.

“Actually, Mr. Kane, you did qualify. So did two others. But. I am not sending a detachment out to the carrier for three pilots. I gave our time slot to an Oceana-based squadron. Most of you will have to requalify next month. The LSOs will talk to each of you and explain the plan. That’s all.”

The Ops O left the room. Amos bolted after him.

“Goddamn it, Ops O, can’t you find a way to get me out there so I can qualify on the ship? You know I got good grades.”

“No. You have to wait until next month.”

“Bullshit! You’re the goddamned Ops O. You could do it.”

“Mr. Kane, do not push one micrometer further. Take some leave. Come back, and we’ll get you qualled next month.”

“The goddamned war will be over by then!”

The Ops O stopped and looked up at Amos.

“A lot of people hope like hell it will be. A lot of people are going to have their hopes dashed.”



4

The morning after Teresa gave him the letter, as Jon drove to the airfield, part of his mind lolled in contentment. It had been a long time since that part of his head was not filled with anguish—that morning, he felt no compunction to argue the appropriateness of the word—over the future. Another part of his mind worked driving. He approached that task as he did flying, attentively, tense with anticipated sudden appearances of crises. It was a good tension, buzzing with an electric awareness of the world around him, senses heightened to pick up minuscule cues. Behind a steering wheel or with his hands on control stick and throttle, the driver part of him operated like a robot that enjoyed the hell out of life. It was the other part of his mind that had boiled up black and ugly thoughts. But that morning, he was content.

Then he parked the car and entered the hangar.

The squadron, in desultory and despondent fashion, was assembling itself into ranks. The door closed behind Jon, and he felt the mood, the squadron's mood. He'd seen it before on his destroyer and with his classes in flight training. Something would happen and suffuse itself through the unit and unify the members in grief, or outrage, or despair. The Raiders were slated to decommission, and not one member of the unit wanted that to happen, and not

one member could do a thing about it. The feeling of helplessness that, in the military, an individual was a minuscule cog of limited function on a gigantic wheel coalesced in the squadron as if the Raiders were a living, breathing entity, and it felt helpless, hopeless, and inconsequential.

Jon didn't have orders, but most of the other officers did. Not one of the others with orders had been assigned a "good" duty station, but they had all been vocal in wanting to check out of the Raiders and get on with it. Commander Ted Lomax, the CO, had another idea. He wanted his officers and sailors to remain attached to his command until he could hold a formal decommissioning ceremony.

"So hold the stupid ceremony already."

"He finally made squadron CO, and even though it's the dead-end Raiders, he just can't bring himself to let go. Son of a bitch CO."

"Why the hell doesn't the goddamned navy just pull the plug on us?"

Those were some of the individual opinions giving voice to the communal viewpoint.

Jon tried to keep himself at a distance from the communal viewpoint. He had learned in grade school, during an examination of conscience, that he'd been confessing not his own sins but the sins of those he chose to follow in situations like egging the mayor's house. He had determined that if he was going to hell, he was not going to let anyone else lead him there. He'd make his own choices.

After his own eleven years in the navy, Jon knew that Commander Lomax, to be selected to command a fighter-bomber squadron, had been compared to his peers in each of his assignments. At each comparison, Ted Lomax had come out on top. He'd assumed command, arrived at what was a penultimate achievement itself, but squadron CO could be, if he could continue to rank number one in the annual performance appraisals, a stepping-stone to subsequent

higher command and maybe even admiral. But then, everything changed.

Jon thought he knew how the man felt.

Once the squadron was assembled, Commander Lomax announced that he did not have a firm date yet for the decommissioning ceremony. "Dismissed," he said.

Jon had been in the front row of the officer and chief petty officer formation. From behind him, he heard someone say, "For that, we had to form up in ranks?" Not many of the Raiders had any sympathy for what the CO was going through.

Jon was personnel officer, and he helped enlisted sailors apply for GED tests, review available schools, and negotiate desirable orders. After the decommissioning had been announced, since all the officers were going to no-load jobs, Jon asked Chief Petty Officer Mayer, the senior enlisted man, what he thought would happen to the sailors.

"Hell, Mr. Zachery, you don't have to worry about the troops. Bureau of Personnel buddy of mine says they'll offer early outs to kids with six months or less to do. But if the guy wants to stay, he can. There'll always be maintenance and admin jobs."

"Huh," Jon said, and he wondered if there could be any other situation in navy life where there was not one good deal for the officers involved and not a single bad one for the enlisted sailors.

At 1000, Jon walked down the passageway to the ready room to get a cup of coffee. An enlisted man sat at the duty desk reading a comic book. No one else was there. There was nothing to be ready for. The ready room, he thought, felt like a ghost town even the ghosts had abandoned. Walking back to his desk, it occurred to him the Johnnie Walker bottle was still a third full.

At sea, Jon wrote every day. Ashore, he called home at noon. During the last several weeks, their conversations had been shallow, perfunctory, going through the motions. But he'd phoned religiously,

sensing that if he stopped, he'd lose something forever. Back at his desk, he sipped, set his mug down, and dialed.

"Jon." The tone in her voice lifted his spirits, and in that instant, he saw clearly how low he'd sunk with his drinking and that if she hadn't written the letter to him—

"Why don't you invite the other two left-in-limbo Louies for dinner tonight?"

"Tonight?" he asked.

He'd been thinking how pleasant dinner would be with his family instead of with his whiskey, which still called to him. And, he expected, would for a while. But he could choose to not listen to the call. Thanks to Teresa and her letter, he could choose.

The left-in-limbo Louies: besides Lieutenant Jon Zachery, two other junior officers were still without orders.

"With what's going on in the squadron," Teresa said, "I'm sure invitations for the bachelors have dried up. Ask them. You can grill steaks."

"Steaks?" he asked.

"Sure. You think they'll come?"

"Serve shoe leather and they'd come."

After he hung up, he thought about how Teresa saw or intuited things he was oblivious to until she pointed them out, like the situation with the two bachelors. In better times, there would have been plenty of dinner invites. At work, the saying went, junior officers should be rarely seen but never heard. In the evenings, however, there were plenty of dinners where the JOs, the junior officers, could absorb navy custom and culture while dining with their seniors and betters. In the Raiders, all the officers had orders except Jon, Lieutenant JG Larry Monday, and Lieutenant JG Butch Felder. Larry Monday was one of those junior officers who was neither intimidated by his lowly rank nor by the attitude of his seniors. "The three of us," Larry had decreed, "are the left-in-limbo Louies," which further ostracized

them, smacking as it did of brash, unruly, juvenile misbehavior and the ebullient and sacrilegious humor resident in fighter pilot ready rooms—in normal times.

After the call, he was still thinking about Teresa's letter. He saw it was the one thing she could have done to pull him out of his ... whatever it was. He hadn't wanted help, especially not hers. With the perspective of a past day, he could appreciate it. But reconciliations always, always led to passion, which he was as powerless to control as an upraised hand would be to stop an avalanche. *Please, God, don't let her be pregnant.* It was too soon after they'd lost Daniel.



At the table, Jon raised his water glass in a silent salute to Teresa opposite him. Lieutenant JG Larry Monday noticed the gesture, and his eyes met Jon's for a moment. Jon had only known Larry for a couple of weeks, and he was still surprised by the young officer's blue eyes, exposing as they did at times a bright, lively intelligence possessed of the ability to mine humor out of anything that passed into their field of view. Larry sat with his back to the door into the kitchen. He faced Teresa to his right and raised his beer bottle, and black-haired, low-browed, hulking Butch across from him did too.

"Teresa," Larry said, "an elegant table and a sumptuous repast. Thank you."

"*Sumshush?*" four-and-a-half-year-old Jennifer asked. She sat next to Larry.

"Tasted real good, princess," Butch offered.

Jon had intended the same thought. Teresa had covered their move-scarred, bolt-on-legs table with their second-best tablecloth and set out the second-best set of dishes, the ones he'd brought back from Japan in 1966. She'd created an island of elegance in the middle of their utilitarian government quarters.

Edgar Jon, aged two, sat atop phone books, next to Butch. Butch

had only eaten half his baked potato. He cut bites of potato and put them on Edgar Jon's plate.

"Looks like you made a friend for life," Larry said.

"Oh yes," Jon said. "Edgar Jon will love you for life as long as the food holds out."

"My kinda guy," Butch said.

Larry stood, and Butch helped him clear the table. Butch scraped plates, and Larry rinsed and stacked them in the sink. After they returned to the table, Jon asked if they would like coffee with dessert.

"Beer," Butch said.

"With peach pie and ice cream?" Teresa asked from the kitchen.

Butch flashed his ready smile. He always reminded Jon of a happy bear in a Disney cartoon.

"Beer goes with everything," Butch said.

Jon got up and stood beside Teresa as she sliced and spooned dessert. He put his arm around her.

"Need help with the ice cream?"

She smiled and moved against him, shaking her head.

"You make my *wees kneak*," Jon whispered.

"Beer. Get the beer," she said.

He sighed theatrically, popped the caps off Heinekens, and delivered them to the table.

"Can't believe you're taking leave when we don't have orders yet," Larry said.

Jon shrugged. "Skipper says that the Bureau of Personnel is swamped right now, that we shouldn't bug them. Teresa wants to visit Hawaii. So why not take leave?"

"BUPERS, I don't trust them. I want to be here. They'll screw ... uh, sorry." Larry grimaced and hooked a thumb at Jennifer in the kitchen by her mother.

"Me too," Butch said as he raised his bottle, apparently toasting

even the Bureau of Personnel. "I don't trust 'em, either. I'm stayin' right here."

"For Mr. Monday," Teresa said as she handed a plate to her daughter.

Carefully, Jennifer carried the dessert to the table; then brought in a second plate.

"Mr. Felder," she said, offering him the plate.

"You can call me Botch, princess. That's what everybody calls me."

"You can call him Mr. Botch," Jon said.

"Mr. Botch? That's a funny name."

"Everybody in our squadron gets a funny name," Larry Monday said. "They call me Tuesday because I'm always late."

"What do they call you, Daddy?"

"We call him Smiling Jack, because he doesn't," Tuesday said.

Teresa carried in two more dessert plates. "Don't try to figure out why pilots behave the way they do. Even grown-ups can't figure them out."

Jennifer climbed onto her chair next to Mr. Tuesday Monday with a perplexed look on her face.

"I heard today that there's going to be a decommissioning ceremony, but wives aren't invited," Teresa said. "Jon doesn't know why. Do you?"

Botch washed down a bite of pie. "Tuesday knows everything," he said, grinning, lifting his bottle, and saluting his friend this time.

"Our skipper wanted to have a big ceremony," Tuesday said, "but the admiral wasn't going to attend. None of the other senior officers from the base, either."

"Right," Botch said. "Tuesday, as the head of JOPA, complained. 'If the heavies from the base aren't coming, why do we have to stand in ranks in dress uniform?' he asked the skipper."

"Joppa?" Jennifer frowned.

"It stands for Junior Officer Protective Association," Botch said. "Tuesday is our fearless leader. Because he knows everything."

"Don't ask them to explain," Teresa said to her daughter. "Pilots speak a different language. Just eat your pie."

"So anyway," Botch said, "the skipper wasn't impressed, because junior officers always complain. But then the skipper's wife weighed in. Tuesday heard that Mrs. Lomax told the skipper that his squadron was being executed. 'It's morbid and tragic for your pilots,' she said. 'I am not going to get dressed up and pretend otherwise. I'm not going.'"

"The skipper canceled the ceremony," Tuesday said.

"But I'm not the only one who botches things up," Botch chimed in as he pointed at Tuesday. "He got Brad Colman's wife, Janet, to cross-stitch an eight-by-ten piece for Mrs. Skipper."

Teresa rolled her eyes. He wanted her to ask. "What did the piece say?"

Botch beamed a massive grin. "Linda Lomax," with thumb and index finger, he drew the imaginary lines on the needlework, "Honorary Member," and "JOPA."

"That needlepoint torqued off the skipper something fierce," Botch said. "Now we're having a ceremony. Just the squadron in ranks. Tuesday has to sing the *Star-Spangled Banner*, a cappella. If he screws up the song, the skipper promised Tuesday he'd be sent to Adak, Alaska, for the rest of his obligated service."

"JOPA," Teresa said. "More like never-never land."

Tuesday grinned and shrugged.

"Finish your pie, Jennifer," Teresa said. "It's time for bed."

Jennifer looked at Mr. Tuesday Monday as if asking for his permission.

"Recruiting four-year-olds, are you?" Teresa asked.

"I need one to offset forty-four-year-old Helen Lomax."

"Never-never land, see?" Teresa declared more than asked.

"Don't ask them to explain, Mommy."

Botch reached his arm across the table, his fingers curled into a fist except for the extended pinky. “Secret JOPA handshake, princess.”

Jennifer grabbed the pinky and shook it solemnly.



They finished their prayers, and Teresa placed the rosary on the nightstand. “So, how do you feel, about no orders yet, I mean?”

“I’m handling it. Nothing I can do about it.”

She took his hand under the sheets, still worried about him. The idea to invite the bachelors worked out. Social drinking wasn’t the issue. The solitary kind was. At least he wasn’t holding her off anymore, withdrawing into a turtle shell, embracing whiskey in a way she couldn’t fight, not like she could fight another woman. Even as she had the thought, she knew it was self-delusion. If he wanted another, she wouldn’t be able to fight. She’d be crushed. Such moments, though, were prone to overstatement. As if casting a problem in the worst possible outcome helped a person cope with the actual eventuality. *See? It’s not so bad.*

She wasn’t worried about another woman. She did worry about pushing too hard, too fast with the healing going on, but she decided to try.

“I think you’re uptight about it,” Teresa said. “Just trust in the Lord. Just let go. Let Him take care of it. Give Him the future. Give Him the Night of the Dog Poop.”

She squeezed his hand.

“I’m not going to start drinking again.” He squeezed back.

They lay in bed holding hands, and in the silence that lay over them like a quilt, she knew he was thinking about the Night of the Dog Poop—as was she.

In 1966, Jon returned from a deployment to the Tonkin Gulf aboard the destroyer USS *Manfred*, and after a week at home, they visited Teresa’s uncle Edgar and aunt Penelope in LA. Their daughter,

Christine, was a Berkley freshman, not expected home. An opportune ride popped up, and for most of the four-hour drive south, she and the three boys in the car talked about joining an upcoming antiwar protest at the Alameda Naval Air Station. After the boys dropped her off, she walked in as her parents were finishing dessert with the Zacherys. A sudden astonished look on Christine's face devolved quickly to anger and loathing. "Baby killer!" she shouted at Jon and stormed back out. At 0200, Jon awoke to find three of Christine's male friends trashing his car with dog poop and a garden hose. Teresa watched Jon fight the boys, all of them bigger than he was. She was appalled at the violence he absorbed and delivered. Jon lost his two upper front teeth. The boy who hit him fell to the ground groaning, holding a severely damaged knee. Jon broke another boy's arm. The third fled. The fight lasted an instant. Two bodies lay moaning on the driveway. Teresa would always remember seeing Jon's head swivel, as if eagerly searching for another to punish.

It took her a week to reconcile what she'd seen him do with the man who'd overwhelmed her heart with the love he gave her during those *glowy* days of high school. It would have taken longer, were it not for her friend Rose, and God bless her for so many reasons. Rose knocked on Teresa's apartment door and informed her she was taking Jennifer to her house.

"You can't have your daughter back unless you come to claim her with the smell of sex on you."

They retrieved their daughter, and that night, Jon informed her he wanted to stay in the navy. Until the Night of the Dog Poop, the protest reported in the paper was news. "You know," he'd said, "you watch the protests on TV, and it's news. News is stuff that happens to other people. The TV makes it into ... a story, a novel."

He disagreed with the protestors, but he couldn't stand on a soapbox and outshout them. He was thinking of staying in the navy, he told her. They were saying, "I won't go." "I'm saying, well, I will," he'd said.

It was something different from what he'd promised her, those years before in high school. He would not stay in the navy unless she agreed.

"You have to do what you think is right," she replied.

Then he said he wanted to apply for aviation. Teresa was appalled again. He had spoken before about how dangerous it was for those who flew off and onto the carriers. Often sailors from his destroyer pulled dead pilots and dead back-seaters from the ocean when night landing attempts went wrong. She became angry. He didn't fight with her. He let her burn her anger out, burn out her sense of betrayal by a life-changing decision she didn't see coming. It took a while for that to happen.

Through the past four years, so many things had happened that could easily have derailed Jon's quest to fly, to bomb North Vietnam. It would have devastated him. For her, it would have lifted the weights hanging from fishhooks stuck in her heart.

The Night of the Dog Poop and the week after.

"The Night of the Dog Poop," Jon said.

"You did what you thought was the right thing for you to do," she responded. "It's all any of us can do."

"I see that. I think. A little bit. Thanks to you. Now, I look back, and it was like I was on a treadmill, and it was going faster and faster. I couldn't get off, and there was no switch where you let go and it stops. Your letter ... where would we be if I hadn't had just enough sense to listen to you about Hawaii?"

How could it be, she wondered, a couple of days ago, life was so close to intolerable, and now, with a four-page letter, so very much different? She rolled up against him.

"I'm worried about making you pregnant."

She playfully bit his earlobe.

"Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me," he said declaratively. "Aren't you?" he asked with the highly hopeful interrogative.



5

Amos sat at the table in the high-ceilinged breakfast room with the paper held open in front of him.

“Amos,” his mother said, “you’ve been home a week, and all you do is watch TV and deplete my wine cellar. You won’t play tennis. You have to get out and do something.”

Amos called her Mom, though Ethyl Kane preferred Mother. Forty-eight, tall, athlete’s hard upper body. Blonde hair, bottle assisted, worn short. Her tanned face looked thirty-eight, surgical assistance there. She wore a thin silk floral-pattern robe and stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out at her garden with the pile-of-rocks fountain in the middle. Her left arm crossed her chest under her bosom, propping her right, which held a demitasse up to her lips.

Amos looked over the top of the paper to ensure she still had her back to him. “I’ve got leave for another week,” he said. “Then I’ll be back at it, busting my butt.”

“Busting your butt!” She spun around, and he folded the paper. “Screwing off in that floating flying club, you mean.”

“You talk to my operations officer?”

Amos had seen the glower before. It was the one she aimed at a doubles partner who just double-faulted. He told her once he’d rather get beaten by her in singles than win with her in doubles.

"I still can't believe you entered the navy and left the company for your uncle to run."

"It's what I did, Mom. It can't be undone. I owe the navy four more years of service."

"By the time you get out, your uncle will have his slimy hands all over your father's company. He'll keep trying to take it public. He will find a way to get the shares he needs."

"It was Dad's company, not mine. Not yours, either. Dad always told me to look behind me long enough to learn from my mistakes and then keep charging forward. I look back and do not see a mistake in joining the navy."

Amos got up, went to the sideboard, lifted the aluminum espresso pot, emptied it into his cup, and left the breakfast area. Behind him, a bell tinkled.

"Netty, another pot."

Mom didn't say *please*, Amos noted. Pissed off some, she was. Amos hoped she couldn't see him smile. That might be pushing it.

He used the phone in the library and called his high school football coach. The coach's only all-state quarterback could always get access to the Nazareth, Pennsylvania, Wildcats gym and track.

"Coach Bracket, it's—"

"Amos goddamned Kane." He pulled the phone away from his ear. He'd forgotten how loud the coach was. "Hell, boy, I know who you are."



After he worked out at the high school, he walked toward the locker room. Voices drew his attention through an open door to where a ponytailed blonde, about his age, conducted a girls' gym class in calisthenics. A fine-looking woman, that teacher. Long, shapely legs disappearing into loose-fitting shorts. His eyes gravitated to COACH on her T-shirt.

A red-pimpled, skinny boy stopped next to him to look in the door. He asked who she was.

“Miz Wilkins,” Red Pimples said with the hushed awe of a church whisper.

Amos almost laughed. The thoughts inscribed on the beanpole’s face brought to mind the joke about a horny mouse climbing an elephant’s leg with rape on its mind.

“New this year. Teaches girls’ gym.” Red Pimples smiled. “Teaches health and chemistry too.”

Red Pimples sighed and walked on.

The class was over in fifteen minutes, and the girls, gushing excited babble and giggles, crowded the door and funneled through opposite where Amos leaned on a wall in the hallway. As the girls flowed out, a clot of them would notice Amos, and their chatter would cease, and then a few paces later resumed with an “Oh, my gosh!” or “Did you see—”

Finally, Ms. Wilkins came out and studiously avoided looking at Amos. He watched her walk down the hallway and enter the faculty locker room. He knew she was playing hard-to-get. He’d seen the act before, and he knew it was just that: an act. It meant she was interested.

When she came out, he pushed off the wall, took a step toward her, and flashed his smile and blue eyes at her.

“I don’t have time right now,” Ms. Wilkins said, her face full of business and purpose. He walked briskly beside her to keep up. She gave him a hint of a smile. “I’ll meet you at George’s Kitchen at seven.” And she was gone through a spring-loaded door.

They hadn’t even introduced themselves. Amos stood looking at the door she’d gone through. He closed his mouth.

Throughout the afternoon, he wondered if she, the blonde, Ms. Wilkins, would show up. He thought about not showing up himself. The way she’d acted at the high school had bothered him. She was just too damned ... something. Sure of herself, full of herself, in

control maybe. But he did show up. He was reading the menu when she stuck out a hand with, "I'm Charlotte."

He stood and shook her hand. "I'm—"

"I know who you are."

As he moved to pull her chair out for her, she waved him off.

His mom was self-assured and used to bulldozing over people. That night at the restaurant, Amos thought Charlotte Wilkins was just like Mom. He didn't want another woman like that in his life. *It's not all about sex*, he decided over the last of the wine. There wouldn't be a second date.

She'd taken a taxi to the restaurant. After parking in front of her apartment, Amos told her, "I had a nice time," and started getting out of the car. She put her hand on his arm.

"Don't you want to screw?"

He stuttered and mumbled something. He thought it had been obvious. They hadn't hit it off at all. Now Charlotte asked if he wanted to screw! It was dark in the car, and he couldn't see her face. He was pretty sure she was enjoying his discomfiture.

"At dinner, you wouldn't talk about yourself. I asked you a question, and you turned it back on me. So, Charlotte, how do you like teaching?"

It was her first year. She liked the job. It had just the right balance of physical and mental elements. Working with the girls, especially the freshmen and sophomores, was rewarding. She talked about growing up in Indiana on a farm and going to school at Ball State.

"Everyone back there has her life laid out. It's like they're all robots. People have babies. The babies grow up the same way the parents did. They go to the same schools. They settle into the same jobs. They get married. They have babies. I had to get out of there or drown. The job here saved my life."

Finding something to say was difficult.

She pressed a button on the side of her watch. The dial lit up.

“School night,” she said. “You coming in?”

“I’ll walk you to the door.”

The front porch, a pad of concrete, one step above the walk. Black iron banisters. Overhead, a dish-sized cover shielded a bulb. Amos took her hand and kissed it. He was a gentleman, even if it was a one-timer, and he wasn’t going in.

“I had a nice time,” he said again.

She thanked him for dinner, said good night, and went inside.

Her door closed. Amos returned to the car but didn’t start it right away. Images of her pulling her clothes off, brushing her teeth nude, crawling into bed, and sleeping nude skittered through his head. Strange, but not one thing in those imaginings was attractive. He went home happy, feeling relief, like he’d escaped.



The next morning, Amos held the sports section with an upraised left and a coffee cup in his right hand when he heard Mom open the fridge for her yogurt.

“Morning, Mom,” he said to the paper.

He didn’t hear her coming, and it flat got his heart going when she karate chopped the paper, knocked the coffee cup out of his hand, and it shattered on the tile floor.

“Goddamn, Mom.”

“I don’t care for profanity in the breakfast room. That’s one of the reasons your”—there was always a pause after *your* for the listener to supply an unmentionable adjective—“father always ate breakfast out. That, and he buried his face in the paper each morning.”

The swinging door from the kitchen opened, and Netty did her side-to-side wobble-walk and knelt to pick up pieces of the cup.

“Let him pick it up, Netty. He broke it.”

“Oh, I know how coffee cups get theyselves broke in this room.”

Netty took his saucer, piled the broken cup pieces on it, and mopped the spill with a rag.

Mom set a newly filled cup on a saucer by him, and she sat. Amos got up to help Netty to her feet.

"Thanks, Netty. Sorry about the mess."

She glared at Mom. Mom acted oblivious.

Netty had been with the family for thirty years, four years longer than he had. Besides running the house, she played her *Netty* role: aged, crippled by long years of servitude and arthritis, and about to be tossed onto the trash heap of no-longer-useful servants. Actually, Eula Nett was a spry fifty. He often wondered if Eula played her Netty role when it was just she and Mom around.

Netty mumble-bitched as she departed with the broken cup. Mom worked the spoon to get the last smidgeon of yogurt.

"Why do you and Netty play that game?"

Mom licked her spoon. "How was your date last night?"

Amos shrugged.

"You going to see her again?"

Head shake negative.

"You put off because Charlotte Wilkins doesn't shave her armpits and legs?"

Amos blushed and felt the heat radiating off his face.

Mom laughed. "Is the rumor about where she does shave true?"

"Jesus Christ, Mom!"

She stood up. "Invite her to dinner." At the swinging door into the kitchen, she turned back. "Tonight."

Amos sat at the table, wondering what Freud would say about the relationship he had with his mother when Netty pushed through the door.

"Miz Charlotte a vegetarian, your momma says. Ax her for cocktails at six." She put a bowl of chocolate ice cream in front of him.

"Ice cream for breakfast?"

“Cures leprosy of the soul.”

She stopped at the swinging door, just as Mom had. “You see what she doing? Since Miz Charlotte joined the country club, your momma know Miz Charlotte gonna kick her butt in the singles’ tennis tournament. She want at least one trophy this year.” Netty flashed a rare smile. “You gots to pimp up a doubles partner for your momma. Least a boy can do.”

Amos wished he’d taken only one week of leave, but he dialed, she answered, and he invited.

“I was about to leave for school,” she said. “Glad you caught me. I’d be happy to come to your house tonight if you will go somewhere with me tomorrow afternoon.”

“Okay,” Amos said, and he hung up feeling like a puppet with a mind to go right, but the damned strings kept pulling left.



She wouldn’t tell him why she wanted to go to Kane Industries, and no, he didn’t need to phone ahead and arrange for a tour. When they topped the rise, he saw a crowd blocking the front gate. Closer, he could read one of the picket signs: NO NUKES.

“Stupid protestors,” he said. “Kane Industries has nothing to do with nukes.”

“They do napalm, though.”

He slowed to pull off the road onto the grassy shoulder.

“Keep going. Get closer,” she demanded.

“Like hell.”

He heard a distant wail of sirens from behind them. Ahead, at the gate into the plant, he saw two guys hurl buckets of something on the two gate guards.

Amos gunned it, spun the car around, and accelerated away from Amos Industries.

Charlotte grabbed his arm.

“Why the hell are you running away?” she yelled over the wind rushing over them with the top down.

“You know what would happen if someone got a picture of me with those protestors?”

He thought the Ops O could probably get him booted over something like that.

There was a hill ahead on the stretch of two-lane blacktop they were on. The sirens were getting close. He was doing eighty miles an hour. They’d see the police cars when they topped the rise. He let up on the accelerator. Next to him, Charlotte stood up.

She had her blouse open. The wind strung her hair and blouse straight behind her. The nipple he could see was erect.

Jesus!

At the base of the hill, there was a road leading off to the right. He grabbed Charlotte’s arm, pulled her down hard onto her seat, jammed on the brakes, got two hands on the wheel, took the right turn, and sped away from the sirens.

“Button your damned blouse,” he snapped.

He checked the rearview. Clear. He slowed the car to fifty.

She sat with her arms crossed over her boobs, glaring straight ahead.

“What the hell are you mad at me for?” he asked.

The siren wailing was but a whisper now.

“Shit,” he said. “This whole thing was to get me arrested, wasn’t it? You wanted a headline. Son of Amos Industries founder arrested with antiwar protestors.”

“The headline would have said something a little different.” The look on her face indicated she was enjoying his anger. “Navy pilot son of Amos Industries founder arrested. That’s what the headline would’ve said.”

“How about this for a headline? Son of Amos Industries founder dumps conniving bitch in a roadside ditch.”

She laughed like that was the funniest ... no, she laughed like *he* was the funniest thing. The impulse to reach across her, open the door, and shove her ass out coalesced out of his anger. The impulse just needed the “do it.”

She put her hand on his thigh and slid it toward his crotch.

He jerked her hand away.

“Button your blouse,” he snapped, “or so help me, God, I’ll push you out of the car.”

She was buttoning.

God, she was a confusing woman—or maybe not so confusing. She obviously was used to getting men to do what she wanted. She certainly had the goods. Finely chiseled jaw on a movie-star face, muscle-toned athlete’s body, the breasts, just so, not—

It occurred suddenly. There might be a “don’t embarrass Kane Industries” provision in the trust his father set up for him. If there wasn’t such a provision, his uncle could probably get the company lawyers to make it be that way. His uncle managed the trust. Amos could draw \$50,000 a year from it, but he couldn’t know how much money was in the trust or how long it would pay out. He had to be careful. And he’d been making excuses for her.

“Do you have any idea what you could have cost me? If I’d been caught back there with those dipshit protestors?”

He glanced at her a couple of times and found her smiling at him. Not a hint of remorse, just a casual amusement.

“I could like you, Amos,” she said. “If you weren’t so establishment.”

Amos frowned and looked at her. He didn’t consider himself to be that way. Being establishment meant running with the pack. It meant the pack decided the right and wrong of things. Amos Kane made his own mind up. *Ask my Ops O back at the squadron if I’m establishment.* He almost said it to her.

“What?” she asked. “You don’t think you’re a brain-encased-in-concrete spoiled rich kid? I got mine, and screw the rest of you peons.

Don't mess with things, because that's where my money comes from.' Tell me I don't have you pegged."

They were passing through a residential area. There were places to park, and he pulled to the curb and stopped.

"You don't know me," Amos said. "You don't know a damned thing about me, and you sure as hell don't have me pegged."

"You want to go to the war and bomb the North Vietnamese. You don't even question whether the war is undeclared and immoral. The war is just a grand and glorious adventure to you."

"You want to lecture me about morality?" He was talking loud, and the top was down. He looked around to see if anyone was watching them, and then he found her laughing at him again. He forced constraint onto his words. "You want to lecture me about morality when you invited me to have sex after dinner at George's Kitchen? You opened your legs to get me to go along with you on this stupid protest."

"You don't want morality lessons from a whore, but you'll swallow them from your whore of a government?"

Amos leaned back against the door and returned her glare. There was heat in her eyes as there had been in her words. He crinkled his lips into a manufactured smile. She looked away.

"Here's a question for you," Amos said. "What's the point in one encased-in-concrete brain arguing with another encased-in-concrete brain?"

She stared straight ahead.

He put the car in gear, checked the rearview, pulled out, and drove to Charlotte's apartment. There, she got out, closed the car door, and stood staring at Amos. He held her gaze and imagined wheels turning furiously inside her head, digging frantically for a parting shot. Then his eyes betrayed him. They dropped down to her nipples poking at her white blouse.

Furious with himself, he floored the accelerator and made the

tires squeal the way he wanted to. He'd gotten the upper hand with her, beat her in their undeclared war of wills. But his eyes had pissed victory away.

Half a block away, he forced control onto his temper. Never before in an airplane or a car had he lost control the way he just had.

He came upon the road heading north to Wilkes-Barre, and he took it and drove and purged his mind with wind and miles and nothing to think about but oncoming traffic and passing trucks. Outside of Wilkes-Barre, he'd had enough sun on his face, and he stopped and put the top up on his 1961 Chevy Impala convertible.

As he snapped one of latches on the top in place, he thought about his sixteenth birthday.

"I know you wanted a Corvette," his dad had said, "but this is the car I'm giving you. Now listen to this and listen good. Never hurt anyone with this car or any other one. Do not wreck this car, because they won't be another to replace it. Questions?"

His dad stared hard at him.

"No, Dad, no questions."

"Disappointed because it's not a Vette?"

"Some, but it's a nice car. Thanks."

He snapped the second latch. "Thanks, Dad," he said.

He got back in and fastened the seat belt.

"Car," he said.

When he said "car," he fancied himself as John Wayne in *Hondo* addressing his dog Sam. Hondo never said more than the animal's name. Sam always knew what to do. So Amos didn't have to tell the car, "Let's go home."



At five in the evening, he stepped onto the concrete pad in front of Charlotte's door. He had a grocery bag in one arm. He knocked.

If she didn't answer, or if someone was with her, the Chinese takeout would go in the trash.

The door opened. She was in sweatpants and a sports bra. Her hair was in a ponytail, but some of the strands had escaped and hung over an eyebrow. She smiled, and the smile was warm and welcoming and innocent with no hint of duplicity. Amos hadn't been sure she'd even want to see him. A warm welcome was the last thing he'd expected.

"Come in."

"Charlotte, I don't want to fight or argue. Okay?"

"No problem."

"I've got Chinese takeout. That okay?"

"That's okay too. But come in."

Amos didn't know why he went back to see Charlotte. Part of it was that no woman had ever gotten to him the way she had. And she was like his father, a moral *Titanic* plowing through life with no fear of icebergs. During his drive, he'd concluded she was a zealot possessed of the convert's single-minded conviction of her recently revealed rectitude. He didn't understand the protestors, what motivated them to wave signs and shout, what convinced them the war was wrong. Maybe he could learn something from Charlotte. And no woman had ever gotten to him the way she had.

During the week he had left, he saw her every night. At first, they didn't talk about the war or protest. On the third night, after he brought her home after dinner out, he asked her how she came to be associated with the protestors.

In her junior year of college, she met three women who felt as she did, that the way of life in Indiana was akin to morally and intellectually drowning. Her group didn't have a name, but one of her friends, Gloria, was on the mailing list of Derail. Derail mailed monthly pamphlets assailing the US government for railroading the youth of America with their propaganda.

"So, this Derail, that's where you get your ideas from?"

“No,” she said. “Derail gives voice to ideas I already have.”

“And Derail mails ideas, not propaganda?”

She smiled. “Either the US government or Derail propagandizes bullshit.”

She had an answer for everything. And she left it like that, as if it were so obvious even a Neanderthal like Amos Kane would figure it out. It was hard to keep his temper from flaring, but he had to. Otherwise, she’d win.

Night after night, he returned, because if he stopped, she’d win. He hadn’t gone to bed with her. Oh, it was there for the taking. That was clear. It was the only thing that was clear. Well, it was clear, too, if he had sex with her, he’d lose.

The last night of his leave, he asked her if she’d like to go to a movie.

“Sure. Which one?”

“*Patton*,” he said.

“I saw it.”

“You saw it!”

“Sure. The hero is a spoiled rich kid who thinks war is an opportunity to reap glory.”

He’d thought about how to end their association. He’d decided on going to a movie, and after, just leaving, not saying goodbye. He’d offered *Patton* even though he’d seen it too, but he thought he’d get a rise out of her; once again, she’d won with her unspoken “like you.” He’d expected her to suggest something else.

Well, maybe it was time to just leave. After a week, he didn’t understand her or her views any better. He hadn’t gone to bed with her. That was his victory. Or a draw. He told her he’d changed his mind about a movie. He was leaving in the morning and hadn’t packed yet. He hoped she didn’t mind.

He stood up and told her goodbye.

“Goodbye,” she said, and she didn’t get up from her place on the sofa.



The next morning, Mom offered to drive him to the airport, but he took a cab. He didn’t want to be locked in a car with her. He wanted to get the hell away from women he couldn’t manage and back to the navy. He’d even begun to miss Lurch, the Ops O.



6

Over the Pacific, Jon looked past Teresa out the window. Thin cirrus coated the blue sky with a milky veneer. Teresa stuck a finger in her book.

“It feels better already,” she said. “It was time to get away from the Raiders for a while.”

Jon didn’t say anything.

“You don’t agree?”

“I do,” Jon said. “I’m just thinking about the kids.”

“You’ve left them often enough before.”

“Yes, but they were always with you.”

“Silly, the Nortons will take good care of them.”

They would. They were good friends. Like most of their good friends from college, Teresa had met Angela Norton at Saint Elizabeth Hospital in Lafayette, Indiana, when Jon attended Purdue. Teresa made friends, and the friends’ husbands became default friends for Jon.

She’d met Rose Herbert there too. Teresa had been assigned to work on the surgery recovery ward. Rose was the charge nurse. Midmorning during Teresa’s first day at work, an irate God’s-gift-to-medicine surgeon tore into Teresa over some aspect of the care the doctor’s post-op patient was receiving. Rose had described the

doctor as a pissed-off Mr. Clean. Dr. Mr. Clean towered over Teresa and shouted down at her as Rose hurried to the scene.

“Back off, asshole!” Rose had barked up at the surgeon. Rose knew what he’d done. He’d almost removed the good lung from the patient rather than the diseased one, but he’d been prevented from doing so by an OR nurse. Rose moved her diminutive frame between Teresa and the surgeon, and after a moment of staring contest, Mr. Clean stomped out.

Rose offered a Kleenex to Teresa. “First, blow your nose. Then get back to work.”

That they’d become the best of friends still seemed so unlikely to Jon. But best of friends they surely were.

Rose met them at the airport in Honolulu, put a lei around Jon’s neck, kissed him on the mouth, and said, “Aloha.” It was two hours before she spoke to him again. Rose and Teresa, however, erupted words like two happy volcanoes.

After dinner that night, Rose, Teresa, and Jon sat in Rose’s backyard overlooking Pearl Harbor.

“Too bad Fred couldn’t be here,” Teresa said.

Fred Herbert was an admiral’s aide, and he was deployed.

“Husbands are overrated and in the way,” Rose said.

Jon sat up, inclined to snipe back, but he knew Rose. Sometimes Teresa defended him, but not then. And he could tell how much Rose had lifted Teresa’s spirits in the hours they’d been there. Teresa had her faith. Nothing ever shook it or even made it tremble. Still, she seemed to need something substantial, something solid and of earth, to cling to, to sustain her. Rose was that for Teresa.

“She sees things so clearly,” Teresa said once. “In a heavy situation, I get all wrapped up in emotion, but Rose sees through the BS, you’d call it. I don’t know what to do. ‘Do this,’ she says, and it’s so clear. That is exactly the thing to do. ‘Do this,’ Rose says, and you know,

it's more important that I see what she said is right than knowing the right thing to do. Does that make sense?"

It did make sense, sort of, and, too, it made sense that Teresa had become so fond of Rose. What he couldn't see was what Rose got out of the relationship. Rose was so self-assured, a sort of emotional turtle. Teresa, on the other hand, was open and deeply wounded by the pain of others. Whether it made sense to a man or not, Rose *was* fond of Teresa.

Sitting there in Rose's dark backyard, silent except for the subdued hum of the two women's voices, the scent of jasmine—or perhaps some other exotic tropical flower sweetness—floated on the balmy air. Stars filled the sky above. Before him, street and house lights cascaded away to Pearl Harbor below, and beyond over a wide swath of impenetrable black until an indistinct horizon gave over to, again, the stars. He hadn't been listening to them, more wrapped up in looking. Rose was talking about growing up. He knew some of her history, but not much.

Rose Mudd grew up in Morrison, West Virginia, a coal mine town. When she was eight, her father died, her mother ran off, and a moonshiner uncle took her in with his common-law wife and eleven kids. Uncle Sol and Aunt Ada screamed at each other often. Uncle Sol hit Aunt Ada and the children, including Rose, when he'd had enough of the screaming. At school, the other children teased Rose mercilessly. They shouted, "You're so ugly, your ma ran off to get away from you!" Fred Herbert, two years older, stuck up for her. Rose worshiped Fred. He, however, was more intent on proving he was tough and barely noticed her as they grew up. Then a year after Fred graduated from high school, he wounded another young man in a knife fight. The judge suggested Fred enter the service; otherwise, he was going to jail. Fred entered the navy and was sent to San Diego for boot camp. Rose hitchhiked after him. They married.

Fred, it turned out, was no dummy. He won a slot in the same navy scholarship program that sent Jon to Purdue.

Maybe, he thought, Rose envied Teresa's tenderness. All of Rose's had been clawed out of her by a struggle to survive.

Later in the guest bedroom, Jon sat on the bed, and it emitted a loud squeak.

"Rose told me about it. She and Fred looked all over the island to find one that squeaked like that."

Teresa lay down on a sheepskin rug beside the bed and beckoned. The bed squeaked when he arose. The floorboards squeaked when he settled beside her. They heard Rose giggle in the silent house.



The next morning, as he sprinted at the end of his run, he thought about Rose and Teresa. Rose, tougher than most men he knew, and Teresa, softer than any other woman he knew. He thought about Teresa's letter that afternoon back in Lemoore, and he wondered how Rose would have handled that situation if they'd married each other. *She'd probably have hit me*, he thought, *and said, "Don't drink." Thank you, God, for Teresa.* As he coasted down from his sprint, a shadow fell on earth. A puffy cloud had drifted in front of the sun, stealing light and warmth. Since she handed him the letter, they'd been making love like newlyweds, with no worry about making her pregnant again, which should be worrying him.

Huffing, Jon heavy-legged it around the side of Rose Herbert's house and into the backyard. He mopped sweat off his face with his T-shirt, sucked in a huge lungful of air, and blew it out.

"How was your walk?"

Rose sat on a white wooden lawn chair, her slender legs stretched out. She looked like a kid on the adult-sized lounge. Initial impressions led a lot of people to underestimate her.

“Walk?”

His breathing and heart rates were still settling down.

“After all the squeaking last night, I’m surprised you could get out of bed this morning.”

Even when she was joking, Rose’s face wore no hint of humor. Poker players would kill to own a face like hers. If you looked into her green eyes, there was absolutely nothing of a kid’s soul looking out of those diamond-hard emeralds.

“I didn’t hear any squeaking.”

“That’s because ears need blood to work.”

Jon shook his head. Getting into a verbal duel with her never worked out well.

He sat on a chair beside her and looked down at Pearl Harbor. The view from Rose’s backyard was amazing, more than spectacular. From there, the harbor appeared to be lollipop-on-a-stick shaped, with Ford Island like a bullet hole in the ovoid candy disk.

Moving ghost images from December 7, 1941, projected onto that day’s geography. Gnat-sized planes flew against the real blue sky with puffs of clouds clinging to the ridgetops to the west. Opaque ghost-gray ships burst with muted orange and yellow and red blooms against today’s backdrop. Fireballs, visually subdued by decades of time, rose into the sky, up to and rising above the gnat planes. Columns of thick, black, imagined smoke were rendered opaque by the equally vivid real-world inputs to his senses. Shining through yesterday and today, the white slice of the *Arizona* monument.

“I look down there a hundred times a day,” Rose said. “Each time, I see more of 1941 than I do of 1970.”

“Huh! You and I see the same thing.” He pointed at Pearl.

“Men aren’t so stupid when their blood isn’t all occupied with sex and digestion.”

The briefest flicker of a smile visited her face.

“So when’s breakfast in this squeaky-bed flophouse?”

“Later,” she said.

Silence, soft, light, comfortable, settled over them. After a time, pressure to say something built.

“Fred’s doing well,” he said. “Admiral’s aide. Not bad for a West Virginia miscreant.”

“And you don’t think you are.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with *doing well*,” he said. “It’s about why I decided to stay in and what’s happening now. I thought I was serving a high purpose. So many of our generation seem to be trying to tear the country apart. I was trying to do a little part to hold it together. The navy is saying, ‘Oh, thanks so very much for that. Now, don’t let the doorknob hit you.’”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Jon. This high purpose, the United States of America. Democracy, the best form of government. How many forms of government has the human race tried? Many of them have had good moments. Politics is a beast that eats itself to death. The protestors that worry you so much, if it’s not them, it’ll be some other movement that gets people all fired up and leads this country to its place on the dung heap with all the other organizational ideas that worked for a while.”

She sounded like the protestors. Where had that come from?

“Well?” she asked, glaring at him.

“I’m thinking. I haven’t caught up to what you said yet.”

Jon stood and looked out at the horizon. The world did seem to end there.

He turned. “The country isn’t important? That what you’re saying?”

“No. It is important. I have Fred. I have me. I expect to have to fight for whatever we get no matter what country we’re in. This country is okay.”

Rose wore a white sleeveless blouse and white Bermudas. The sun had topped the peak of the neighbor’s roof. In the bright sun,

the glare from the white was like sun off a blanket of snow on a not-a-cloud-in-the-sky morning. Against the white chair, her legs, arms, and head appeared to be disembodied.

Whenever he spoke with her one-on-one, she often hit him with a zinger that took him a long time to sort out. He wondered if Rose and Teresa spoke about things like that. They talked about everything else.

“Teresa and I worried about you this past year,” Rose said.

“You worried about me? Does Teresa help you worry about your husband?”

“She doesn’t have to. Fred’s my only child.”

“Whereas Teresa has Jennifer, Edgar Jon, and ...”

“You.”

Drinking. Rose is going to bring up the booze.

“Sit, please, Jon.”

“Where’s Teresa?”

“She’s in talking to your babysitter back in Los Angeles, and don’t worry. I know what a cheap screw you are. It’s on my bill. I told her to call and check on them. Sit. Please.”

Jon pulled his T-shirt on and sat. The coconut scent of her suntan lotion edged aside the smell of jasmine bushes from the side of the house.

“Tell me about when you lost Daniel.”

An electric bolt of irritation flashed across the darkness in his mind. Rose could do that to people. Jon didn’t want to talk about losing their baby. It had happened. It had been tough. It was behind them. They’d moved on.

When ninety-five pound, four-foot-eleven Rose went after something, obstacles and objections didn’t stand much chance.

After a moment, Jon shrugged. “Since Teresa’d had two previous C-sections, the doctor told me I had gotten her pregnant too soon

after Edgar Jon. 'If Teresa goes into labor, her uterus could rupture. Her life is in real danger,' he told me."

Jon, upright in his white wooden lawn chair next to Rose on the lounge, gazed again at the horizon above Pearl Harbor.

"I never thought I'd live in such a special place," Rose said. "Out there, you can see the end of the world. And hear the quiet? Quiet is a sound the ears of your soul hears."

Rose laughed. "The look on your face! What? Crude Rose from the coal country of West Virginia is incapable of profundity?"

It was exactly what he thought. *Profundity!* Rose was like an upside-down iceberg. Ninety percent of what you saw was no-nonsense hardcore practicality honed by scrabbling survival from a barren and hostile mountainside through her early teenage years. In rare once-in-a-whiles, much less than 10 percent of the time, an attentive observer caught a glimpse of a deep understanding of people, how they sin, how they attain grace, and wasn't it all something to chuckle about?

"Men are such boobs. You especially. There are times when someone has to remind you that you are a good man."

Rose leaned over and put her hand on his arm.

The look on her face surprised him even more than the twists and turns of their conversation. Softness and warmth, an angelic radiance glowed from her freckled cheeks.

"I'm pregnant." She laughed. Her laugh was different too. Joy gilded the edges, whereas so often when she laughed, it sounded like hard, sharp saw blades of irony or disdain at the foibles of mankind, or maybe just men.

"Your mouth is hanging open." She laughed again.

"I ... what did Teresa say?"

"I didn't tell her yet."

Rose was a woman. She and Fred were married. Why was it so hard to understand she was pregnant?

She turned. The joy and softness evaporated, gone as sudden and unexpected as they'd appeared.

"Daniel," she prompted.

"I told you."

"Didn't scratch the surface."

He futzed feebly and then gave up.

"Kingsville, Texas, Sunday night," Jon said. "The next morning, I had to get up early to fly out to the *Lexington* for carrier quals, the last part of advanced flight training. After that, I'd get my wings. We went to bed at 2200. Teresa woke me an hour later. 'Take me to the hospital,' she said. I told her she was only seven months. What I was thinking was I didn't want false labor to screw up my chance to complete flight training. If I missed that opportunity, it would mean another month and a half in the training command. I wasn't thinking about Teresa or the baby. I was thinking about getting my wings."

"But you did take her," Rose said.

"Oh, yes." Jon stared at the horizon for a moment and then glanced over at Rose. "She just said my name. And it didn't matter anymore if it was false labor."

Jon shook his head.

"Come on," Rose said. "Say it."

"I prayed to the Almighty to spare Teresa. I wouldn't let a thought about *it* enter my head. *It* threatened Teresa's life.

"At the hospital, her doctor ordered an emergency C-section. He also said Teresa should have a hysterectomy. And I thought, *A doctor-ordered hysterectomy!* A permanent, non-confessable solution to a married Catholic man's number-one problem. 'Don't let him do that to me,' Teresa said as they wheeled her away to be prepped. I watched the swinging doors close behind Teresa with the doctor next to me.

"'Teresa told me how she feels about birth control,' the doctor said. 'If you don't let me do this surgery, every time you have sex with her, you will be threatening her life.'"

As he spoke, Jon had been staring at the horizon. He turned toward Rose.

"I thought about it. I wanted to tell him to do it. But I couldn't. I couldn't do what she asked me not to."

Rose's poker face looked back at him, and he turned back to the sea.

"We named *it* Daniel the next morning. A chaplain baptized him, and he died. I guess he had to die to become Daniel to me. Teresa's parents drove down to Texas from Missouri. I went to my CO and asked him if I could still go to the ship and get my carrier qual. He said if the LSOs agreed, okay. They did. I left Teresa in the hospital. Just left her after Daniel ... I went to the ship. Knocked out my landings. Came back and went to the funeral parlor and had Daniel shipped home to be buried there."

Jon heard himself breathe. That's all he heard. A distant seagull soared, silent, or maybe the wind carried its squawk to places where sound happened.

"That it?"

"What?"

"That it?"

Rose rested on an elbow, waiting for a reply. She shrugged, got up, and entered the house.

Jesus!

Those two things he'd never been able to tell Teresa. It was as if Rose twisted a corkscrew in him and popped them out. The night Teresa'd gone into labor with Daniel, his first thoughts had been selfish. Over the years, many times he'd said and written to her about how important she was to him. All that had been rendered lies by a real-world test. Even after Teresa's plight sunk in, he'd prayed for her but not for Daniel. Nobody prayed for an It.

He stood, his eyes still on the horizon as if he expected to espy a mast top, a harbinger, perhaps, of answers to questions, or even

absolution, sailing toward him. He decided to go inside. Before he did, he raised his eyes. To heaven.

“Shoot,” he whispered.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

Then he went inside.

Amos needed to sleep, but he lay on his top bunk in an eight-man room on the USS *Lexington*, the US Navy's training aircraft carrier, with his eyes wide open and nothing to see but pitch blackness. Exhausted, wrung out—at least his body was. The other seven student pilots slept, but Amos's head wouldn't shut up. Over the snores, over the drone of the ventilation fans, he was behind the carrier, and he heard the radar controller. "On glide slope. On heading." The *ons* stretched. The voice so calm, so cool, so collected. He sounded exactly how Amos had felt. Calm, cool, and collected. During his first approach to a carrier at night, Amos Kane was Cool Hand Duke. Just like the practices, Cool Hand had it wired. *Piece of cake*. That's what he'd told himself in the red light of his cockpit as he flew his instruments, airspeed, rate of descent, and heading.

"Onnn glide slope. Onnn heading." Then the voice snapped crisp and clear, "Three-quarters of a mile. Call the ball."

Amos Kane was always on glide slope, on centerline. "Call the ball," he said.

Looking up, Amos should've found the lens with the yellow light, the meatball to the left of the landing area. The ball had to be there, had to be lined up with a row of green lights. Had to be there, except he didn't see the ball or the green. Every other light on the carrier he

saw: the three lines of white *lights* marking the edges and center of the landing area, the line of red *lights* dropping straight down from the centerline and off the end of the ship, showing the steel cliff at the stern. The ball was there to the left. He knew it would be there, if he just looked, but his eyes refused to let go of the red and white lights. Then, in peripheral vision, he saw the lens. Still, his damned eyes just wouldn't move over there.

"407, call the ball," demanded a radio voice, a new voice, the LSO.

Then he saw it, the ball, and it was high. *Pull a little power, not too much. Tweak the nose, easy, easy.*

Red lights flashed around the lens, and the radio voice demanded, "Wave-off. Wave-off."

Wave-off meant add full power and climb. No thinking necessary. Left Hand rammed the throttle full forward. Right Hand pulled the stick back, keeping the airspeed optimum to arrest sink rate and get a climb under way. His hands did what they were conditioned to do. Every other part of his body seemed to be glad as hell to be getting away from those white and red lights down there. It just seemed like death was everywhere. It hovered in the blackness. It waited in those lights to smash him to pieces when he hit the hard steel at 127 knots. Death almost got him; that's what it felt like. But, climbing up into the dark, damn, that felt good.

"407, this is the LSO. Do you read me?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry. My mic cord came unplugged."

Amos didn't know where that lie came from. From the same place that programmed his hands to respond to the wave-off call, probably.

He leveled off at 1,200 feet and turned when the controller told him to. He flew and talked to himself, firing questions. On altitude. *Cool Hand Duke, what the hell? Over.* Airspeed, good. *Where were you?* Landing checklist, done. *Why didn't you just look at the ball, for Christ's sake?*

Behind the ship again and pissed off at himself this time. *What*

the hell good was Cool Hand Duke if he wasn't there when you needed him? "On glide slope. On heading." That damned calm voice, those damned stretched *ons*, they pissed Amos off more. He sneaked a peek and found the lens on the left side of the landing area. *How the hell could I not have seen it the first time? Jesus!* They were trained to see that lens and exclude most of the rest of what they saw. How the hell could Cool Hand Duke have screwed that up so badly, have allowed fear to come in and rule *his* brain and *his* body? Amos remembered that training flight back at home base when Saul plowed through the trees. *Poor, pathetic Saul.* That's what he'd thought. That pissed him off all over again. *Amos Kane is not a pathetic wuss.*

"Three-quarters of a mile. Call the ball."

"407, ball," he said.

Meatball, lineup, airspeed. That was the universe for a handful of seconds. No other factors mattered. Meatball centered. Lineup, right on. Airspeed, on. Ball centered. Lined up. On speed.

"Power," the LSO called.

His hand responded. *Shit!* Not low. Not slow. That quick, he went high. *Shit!* 407 smashed onto the deck, and Amos felt as if he was skittering across a sudden spot of black ice. Full power, back on the stick. Climb into the dark, again.

The LSO had screwed him! First, Cool Hand Duke was *dicking off* someplace. Then the goddamned LSO with that unneeded power call. But anger could be as dangerous as fear. Cool Hand Duke needed to be in charge.

He started his third approach with only enough fuel for one more landing attempt. If he didn't catch a wire, the ship would send him to the nearest base ashore. The damned LSO was probably the goosey one, Randy. He was on the radio one night at the practice field. Right on glide slope seemed to look low to him. Leaving 1,200 feet, Amos kept his rate of descent slightly less than optimum. The controller's calls were all "Slightly above glide slope."

After he called the ball, he kept it slightly high, as well. Just before touchdown, the LSO called, "Power." *No way*. Amos tweaked the stick forward and caught a wire.

Cool Hand Duke logged night carrier landing number one. *Piece of cake*.

Down in the ready room, the LSO was red-faced as he debriefed.

"On your last pass," Randy said, "I called for power, and you dumped your nose. You caught the number one wire."

The number one wire was not the target. Catching it was substandard performance, but Amos had had to compensate for substandard performance by the LSO. LSOs graded his passes. He Amos goddamned Kane graded LSOs. And Randy was substandard.

Hal Simmons, the senior LSO, Mr. Whoopee Cushion, took over. "Amos, I am this close to washing you out of carrier aviation. On your second pass, you thought the LSO was wrong to call for power. You think that's why you boltered. The next pass, you were slightly high all the way. Randy called for power because he was afraid you'd land hard, but you dumped the nose, which really caused a hard landing. Did you down the plane?"

Down the plane meant put it into non-flight-worthy status until maintenance had checked it for damage.

He hadn't downed it.

"Randy," Hal said. "Go back and tell maintenance that 407 is down for a hard landing." Randy got up and left.

"Amos, you never, never second-guess an LSO. They see things from beside the landing area that you can't from the cockpit. The LSO is there to keep you alive, to keep you from crashing and endangering all the people on the flight deck."

Hal was a good guy. Amos had learned a lot from him. Still, he was three years older, but he acted like his dad.

"So, Amos, I'm not going to shit-can you tonight. I know what you can do. You did well practicing ashore and today on all six of

your day landings. You have the makings of a good stick. But you need to manage that attitude of yours. The Ops O and I have both talked to you about it. If I get even a hint that you won't respond to LSO's calls tomorrow, we're going to pull your wings."

Hal stood up. "Get some sleep. You need to get five landings tomorrow night to qualify." Hal peered down. Amos thought Hal was waiting for him to say something. Amos thought if he did, it would be a major mistake.

"Get some sleep," Hal had said four hours ago.

Amos wanted to sleep, but his open eyes sucked in blackness. Christ. The next night would be a long one.

On that first approach, Amos Kane'd been pants-pissing scared. Those white and red lights had hold of his eyes and pulled him toward crashing in a ball of fire. Where the hell was Cool Hand Duke? Thank God he showed up, but then goddamned goosey Randy did too.

What the hell was he going to do tomorrow—tonight?

Don't second-guess the LSO, Hal said. But what if it's Randy? What if Cool Hand Duke doesn't show up at all?



The next day, Amos zipped through four day landings. Day landings, nothing to them. Nothing to night flying, either, before. Before that first approach last night. What the hell happened? He asked the question of himself several times.

That stupid fixation on the white and red lights stuck in his mind, he thought, like ... *like Charlotte. Huh.*

He hadn't thought about her since he came back from leave. Charlotte, she counted as an interesting entry in his logbook of life. Interesting.

Self, he told himself, *you need to be interested in night carrier landings.*

Sundown was several hours away. A visit to the landing signal

officer platform, he thought, might enable him see what they saw. Maybe it would help.

The passageway to the platform ran under the flight deck to a catwalk where a ladder led up to the edge of the deck on the port side near the stern. Four or five people fit on the platform. With a radio handset in one hand, the wave-off light trigger in the other, LSOs owned and controlled the space right behind the ship, and they owned the handful of seconds an aircraft was approaching the flight deck to land. The air boss owned the rest of the space around the carrier, and he owned the flight deck. He operated from the tower located aft of the pilothouse. He didn't speak on the radio often, but when he did, generally, it was because a pilot screwed up. He chastised as if tact and patience were bred out of air bosses.

Just before he exited the passageway, Amos heard Hal, the senior LSO, talking. "We're a training squadron, Randy. This isn't a fleet outfit filled with experienced pilots. What you're doing is, somebody flies a bit of a ragged pass, and it rattles you. You get goosey. You're quick to call for power. Last night, and a couple of times today, it wasn't needed."

Son of a bitch.

He'd been right. The night before on Amos's second pass, the ball had been right in the middle of the row of green lights, exactly where it had to be for him to catch a wire. That power call made the ball go high, and so he missed all the wires. *Randy and his damned power call!* He no longer needed to go out onto the platform, either.

Cool Hand Duke would be flying the ball tonight!

Now he was anxious to get out there. The afternoon inched along. He had time for a nap, but he was too wired to sleep. Finally, the sun set.

Usually, a high pucker factor accompanied night flying. Even for Cool Hand Duke. But not that night. The first cat shot, it was so cool. *Maybe somebody else has a different or better word*, he thought.

What I've got is cool. It was like he was the airplane. He didn't pull back on the stick to get the plane climbing. It was more like he got his nose up to get himself climbing. He felt as if he had two sets of eyeballs. One set flew the instruments, the other took in the stars, gazillions of them against the black, and they seemed to twinkle happy light at him. It was the first time he'd felt like flying was just the coolest damned thing—and at night, too. Night flying was kind of like work, but not that night.

"407 airborne," he called, but he heard his businesslike voice over the radio as if it came from someone else.

Leveling at 1,200 feet, he turned to fly to behind the ship. Landing checklist complete.

The radar controller lined him up and fed him, "*Onnn* glide slope." Cool Hand Duke and 407, a single living, breathing entity, blood and hydraulic fluid coursing through their arteries and veins. The flight instruments welded them together. He called the ball when told to do so. The ball was just where it was supposed to be, and it behaved just the way he made it act during field practices. *Meatball, lineup, airspeed.* Repeat the three over and over, until right at the end, when a pilot said, "Ball, ball, ball," to lock his eyes on the lens for the last seconds before slamming onto the deck and snagging a wire—no, not *a* wire, the *three* wire. The wire you caught when you did it right.

Blam. Slam onto the deck. Full power. Lurch forward against the seat straps. Power to idle. The plane rolls back. Raise the tail hook. Add power, taxi clear of the landing area. Do the takeoff checklist while watching the taxi director's signals like a hawk. Taxi onto the cat. Just the way it was supposed to be done.

They shot him, and he did it again. He was zoned in on the business. After his third landing, he thought they'd direct him off to the side to refuel, but they headed him back to the cat. Amos keyed the radio.

"Air Boss, this is 407. I'm low on gas."

“407, follow your director.”

“Boss, 407. My fuel state is 2.4.”

“Follow your damned director, 407.”

Amos sucked in a deep breath, tamped his pissed-offedness down into his belly. The cat fired, and he raised the landing gear. Students were supposed to leave the gear down, one less thing to screw up. But he was low on gas. He needed to save a few sips. The ship turned him before he got to 1,200 feet. That saved another sip.

Flying abeam the ship, he saw a long line of airplane lights ramping up into the darkness behind the carrier, the spacing precisely equal. On the flight deck, a plane landed. The next was on its approach. The way it was planned, there was just enough interval to allow one plane to clear the landing area, with a few seconds to spare, before the next plane touched down. If a pilot screwed up exiting the landing area expeditiously, he would cause the plane behind him to miss the tight window of opportunity.

Amos looked at that line of planes and wondered how they were going to work him into the traffic. He checked the fuel. A hundred pounds before he hit bingo. At bingo fuel state, he had just enough gas to make it to the nearest shore base with a minimal reserve by flying the optimum profile. Optimum profile meant flying *the* precise speed that bought you the most miles for each pound of fuel burned. Bingo fuel was close to “emergency fuel state,” but not quite an emergency.

“Carrier aviation boils down to working every day with margins so tight that they’d make mere mortals crap their skivvies,” Hal said in one of his lectures.

At the time, Amos liked that characterization. The ragged edge of disaster is here. Skate right up and touch it and then sashay away. *Cool*.

Looking out at the line of lights again, he didn’t see a hole to fit in. That damned air boss screwed him. Amos was sure he’d have to bingo. The arrogant prick air boss should have listened to him.

“407, turn left.”

He rogered the call and turned. It wasn't going to work. One plane had started its descent. Amos would fly into the next plane in line. *What the hell are those idiots doing?* Then the plane he was worried about climbed abruptly.

Hah. The idiots made a hole for me.

Amos lined up behind the ship and started his descent. Cool Hand flew a perfect approach.

"Three-quarters of a mile. Call the ball."

"407, ball. Bingo fuel," Amos said.

The LSO rogered, and Cool Hand flew a perfect pass.

He thought he had it made, that he'd land.

The wave-off lights flashed. "Foul deck. Wave-off. Wave-off" over the radio.

"Shit! Goddamned idiot air boss."

Climbing, turning toward the bingo airfield.

Oops!

Amos had the mic button depressed. He released the button and raised the gear handle. It was really quiet over the radio.

He climbed toward the star-speckled blackness, keeping exactly on optimum climb speed plus a handful of knots. 407 and Amos, they had a headwind. Because of the headwind, they'd land with less than the eight-hundred-pound planned margin, which was ten minutes of flying time. The margin could be down to seven minutes. More than enough for Cool Hand Duke and 407.

Cool Hand Duke had a Vulcan mind-meld going with 407, the laws of physics, and aerodynamics. Some people called it "seat-of-the-pants flying," but it wasn't. It was having the science down pat.

Cool Hand Duke. But Cool Hand had called the air boss an idiot over the radio.

Oh, well, another visit with Lieutenant Commander Williamson for an early morning ass-chewing. One more day landing in the

afternoon, two at night, and he'd be done and up for assignment to a fleet squadron.

Those sessions with Willie Williamson, they'd gotten to be like that first cup of coffee in the morning.

After spending three days on the Big Island, Jon and Teresa settled into seats for the flight to LA, an early one. Teresa buckled her seat belt and rested her head against Jon's shoulder, which was okay with him. He didn't want to talk.

It had been seven days since he had the conversation with Rose about America. He thought about what she'd said every day. There was no way he could know what she went through growing up or understand how those experiences colored her thinking. She wasn't against the American government, he decided. She didn't trust it and didn't expect much from it.

It was easy to look at Rose as infallible. She was like a world-champion Ping Pong player. No matter what idea a person fired at her, *crack*, it zinged right back.

For a week, he'd wondered at how she had seemed to laugh at the idea of America, at the idealistic language establishing the nation. Jon had always considered humans to be a flawed species of animal, but he thought the language in the Constitution and other founding documents to be the best anyone had come up with to date. Rose had made him think about those beliefs, and he decided that the nation hadn't done very well achieving a state where all people were treated as equals. But he'd also decided that was no reason to stop trying. Just

the opposite. He was convinced the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were better statements of what organized mankind should be than any ever devised.

He imagined Rose saying, "At the end of that trail is mindless zealotry."

To imagined Rose, he said, *Yes, a patriot has to watch out for that too.*

He was a patriot, he decided. He was not a moral lemming. *As the protestors were.*

He imagined Rose saying, "The other guys are always the mindless zealots."

There was some truth in everything Rose said. But he knew, too, that it was easy for a man to find excuses to do nothing. Every point could be debated.

Teresa's hair tickled his cheek. He smoothed her wayward strands and smiled as he smelled it. She didn't use scented shampoo. Her hair smelled clean, that was how he always thought to describe the scent. And he was glad she slept and allowed him time to think through the ideas that still needed settling in his head.

After weighing Rose's observations about the nation, Jon was convinced he had followed the only course available to him after the Night of the Dog Poop. He did not agree with the protestors, and he'd had to act accordingly. At the time, he'd considered the *idea* of the United States of America as something that needed to be preserved. The idea, in practice, needed to be improved, but it could not be destroyed, he'd concluded then. He'd done what duty called him to do. Now the navy had to decide some things, as well. It was up to them, and to God, as Teresa would remind him. He'd listened to Rose and thought about what she'd said, and he was sure now that he was right to look at the country his way, not Rose's.

It was easy to argue with Rose when she wasn't there.

"What are you smiling about?" Teresa asked.

“Sleeping Beauty awoke, and the handsome prince didn’t even kiss her.”

She kissed him on the cheek and said, “Answer the question, HP.”

“It was a marvelous idea you had to come to Hawaii, but I’m ready to go back and see the kids and see what wonderful news BUPERS has in store for us.”



The day after Jon and Teresa returned from Hawaii, Commander Ted Lomax conducted the decommissioning ceremony with Attack Squadron 21 assembled in three rectangular formations. Enlisted personnel made up the two largest rectangles. Looking from the CO’s podium, the leftmost rectangle contained the officers and chief petty officers. Tallest men to the left and a plane of hats sloped to the shortest on the right. Jon stood at the short guy end of the first row of the officers’ and chief petty officers’ formation. He watched as Commander Lomax looked up from his written speech on the podium and swept his eyes across his squadron arrayed in ranks.

“Navy men take an oath to serve,” the CO said. “Sometimes following orders does not feel like a service to our nation or to anyone. It feels like a screw job. Each of us has our own reasons for having joined up and for doing the things that brought us together at this time, in this hangar, at Naval Air Station Lemoore. I know you. I know most of you pretty well. I know you do not want to push the destruct button on this squadron. We bled, we sweated, we poured our souls into this outfit. We want it to go on living, carrying the banner for our country, and for our navy, as it has since 1943.”

The commander gripped the sides of the podium and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“I wish I could say to the heavies, shit-can me. Keep the rest of it going. But of course, I don’t amount to much. We need to get rid of an aircraft carrier and seventy-five planes. So it boils down to this.

We need to swallow our injured pride. Maybe me most of all. But we need to make damned sure we retain a steel-rod core of pride inside ourselves and walk out of here with our heads held high. What the United States Navy is asking us to do is harder than dying for our country.”

Jon thought the commander grew taller.

“Attack Squadron by God 21,” Skipper bellowed. “*A ten hut.*”

Jon and the others popped to attention with a click of heels.

“I hereby declare VA-21 decommissioned. Formations, you are dismissed.”

Commander Lomax spun on his heel and charged out of the hangar.

Jon had wanted to talk to him. After the speech, there was more to say to him. But the man ran away. Jon looked around. There were 155 people in that part of the hangar. They had been part of a squadron, a unit, a pack. They had been party to the organization. Poof. The organization disintegrated.

What the hell do we do now? A shared common thought suspended in the air in the cavernous hangar.

“JOPA meeting in the O Club at noon!” shouted Tuesday Monday.

“Bullshit!” shouted Lieutenant Abelein. “I’m going home.”

The exchange seemed to pull the plug on whatever force constrained the men to remain together, and a general exodus toward the side door flowed around Jon.

Botch walked up. “Have a nice time in Hawaii?” he asked.

“I did, and we’re still the left-in-limbo Louies.”

Tuesday had been next to Jon in ranks. “If they don’t give us orders soon, we’ll be the only ones left. As head of JOPA, I’ll take over as CO. My first act will be to un-decommission the Raiders.”

The braggadocio fell flat, and the left-in-limbo Louies stood together watching everyone else stream toward the door.

“You guys want to come over? I’ll fire up the grill,” Jon said.

"I don't want to get you in trouble with Teresa," Tuesday said. "You just got back."

"You can come over, but I'm not buying the beer."

"You sure we won't get you in trouble with Teresa?" Botch asked.

"Long as I don't buy you beer."

"I'll buy the beer and the hamburger," Botch offered.

Tuesday said, "I'll get salad, potato salad, baked beans, pasta salad, and ice cream."

Jon laughed. "Ease up. Potato salad will do it. It's eleven. Come over at 1500."

The door to the stairs leading to the upper level of the hangar slammed open. A yeoman from the admin office ran out onto the hangar floor.

"Sirs. Sirs. The exec, I mean the acting exec, sent me to find you. I'm glad you're still here. The three of you. I was afraid I'd be looking for you for hours."

"What's he want?" Jon asked.

The kid was eighteen. He looked worried but plowed on. "I'm supposed to tell you"—he shifted his weight from one foot to the other—"to get your useless asses up to the XO's office. That's what he said to tell you, sirs."



"Teresa," Jon gushed into the phone. "I'm going to VA-92 here at Lemoore. Oh, and so are Tuesday and Botch. Cool, huh?"

She didn't answer.

"Botch and Tuesday and me, we're the only ones who got good orders."

"I'm glad you're happy," she said.

"I invited the two of them to come over. We just got back, but, you know, this is something to celebrate. Who'd have guessed all three of

us would get good orders? We Louies, we're not left in limbo anymore. I told them I'd grill burgers. They're bringing most of it. Okay?"

Jon hung up, still grinning. The acting XO told them VA-92 and the carrier USS *Solomons* had just returned from what was to have been their last cruise. The ship and all the resident squadrons had been slated to decommission, along with USS *Luzon*, the carrier, which was home to the Raiders, but the navy had changed its mind. Apparently, someone decided decommissioning two aircraft carriers and assigned squadrons at one time was too much.

The *Solomons* would make one more deployment to the Tonkin Gulf. Then she would decommission along with VA-92, but it would mean Jon would get to Vietnam before that happened. That was good enough for him.

He recalled arriving in Meridian, Mississippi, to begin basic jet training at the end of March 1968. After a long day unpacking boxes, he'd turned on the ten o'clock news. The first story featured President Johnson announcing he would not seek reelection. Instead, LBJ would spend his remaining time in office working to end the nation's involvement in Vietnam.

Please, God, he'd prayed to the TV in 1968, just don't let it end before I get there.

That's the first time I've had a prayer answered! flashed through his mind.

"Hey, Smiling Jack," Tuesday said. "Teresa said do not bring those reprobates to our house, didn't she?"

"No, no. It's okay. It's all set."

"Smiling Jack," Tuesday said to Botch. "Did you see him after the acting XO gave us the news? He smiled. We thought his face would crack."

Tuesday rubbed his hand through Jon's hair.

"Come on, Botch," Tuesday said. "We got shopping to do."

"Beer. Buy beer," Botch said.



The government acquired a lot of land for Naval Air Station Lemoore. The nearest town was seven miles away. In the past, the government had permitted houses to be built close to military airfields, which led to an endless string of noise complaints. And of course, it was easy to conclude the government just didn't care about those complaints. But, in this case, someone in government had taken note. The citizens of the town of Lemoore would not have their windows rattled by the sound of jets taking off. They wouldn't even hear a whisper of a jet engine at full power.

At Lemoore Naval Air Station, the base owned fifty-five thousand acres, forty thousand of which it leased to farmers, most of whom used the land to grow cotton. Two miles of farmland separated the airfield from the base housing and administrative area. Seven miles separated the base from the town whose name the navy shanghaied to title the station.

As Jon drove away from the airfield, he noted the tractors working the fields on both sides of the access road. There were always tractors, six days a week, and often in darkness with muted headlights speaking of churned-up dust particles hanging in still air, settling back like dirty snow on a windless night.

Commander Lomax had said, "What the United States Navy is asking us to do is harder than dying for our country." When he said that, Jon thought his CO nailed exactly how he was feeling. But Jon had gotten good orders. He didn't have to feel bad about his future any longer. He did, though. The thought that the answer to one man's prayer was disappointment and despair for a hundred gnawed at him.

The euphoria he'd felt after the acting XO gave them their orders lasted only until he got to the parking lot to drive home. *Bummer!*

Even good news was cause to feel bad. He thought of Job. *J* long *O B*.
Jobe without the *E*. He was John without the *H*.

He thought of Rose seeing him wallowing in self-pity. He didn't
even have to try to imagine what she'd say.

Teresa hung up the wall phone in the kitchen and put her hand over her heart. The day she'd dreaded. Jon assigned to a fleet squadron bound for Vietnam. A blessed reprieve when the Raiders decommissioned. There'd not be another. It seemed so far from the life he'd talked about them sharing during high school. It was wondrous in recollection as episodes appeared in sepia images suffused with golden aura.

That day, junior year in high school, he'd surprised her with his call, that he'd noticed her. "Would you, um, go to a movie, um, with me?" She liked his *ums*. Jon Zachery was cute. She liked that too. In her class, the girls outnumbered the boys two to one. Almost all the cute ones were locked in steady relationships. Dreams of a call from a *cute* boy had been put aside.

It occurred to Teresa she was taking too long to answer. "Yes," she'd blurted. Then he surprised her even more when he called her the day after the first date to ask her out again the following week.

Her parents argued viciously over her high school. They argued viciously over many things. Both were used to bulling the way to their way. Her father returned from World War II, obtained a degree and a position with the only bank in town with a main and branch office, and quickly rose to manage the branch.

Her mother joined. She joined Girl Scouts, Ladies' Sodality, The Historical Society. She joined an organization and at the next election of officers secured a top spot.

"Math, physics, and chemistry courses," her father decreed.

"She's already an asocial recluse," her mother fired back. "Those kinds of classes stuff her into the corner with Clarice and Laura. She'll wind up a nun or a spinster schoolteacher."

The two were Teresa's classmates and A-students. Heavyset Clarice blushed ferociously at the hint of attention. Six-foot-two rake-handle Laura regarded the world through dark eyes set in a lips-pressed-together resentful scowl above a determined jaw. "She never blushed," the boys joked. "Or needed a training bra." Neither Clarice nor Laura took physics or math beyond algebra. Teresa slaved to scratch out Cs in trig, geometry, and precalculus, as well as physics and chemistry.

Her parents argued over her—not about her, but about raising her their ways. She took the courses he'd demanded, but she knew it would not garner his approval. To do that, she'd have to be a boy. She also could not be the kind of social butterfly her mother was and pushed her to be. So much of her life had been being pulled between her parents.

Then cute Jon Zachery called. She could still feel the physical response of her heart. She'd agreed to go to a movie, even as she began constructing resignation to another one-time date. That's the way her dates always seemed to go. She supposed it was her fault that the boys never called back for a second date. She supposed they knew she really didn't want to waste another evening with them; at the same time, she wanted at least one second-time date with *some boy*. And then Jon called again.

She remembered that summer as weeks ripping off the calendar, weeks defined by the evenings of their dates. Senior year arrived. They saw each other every day, had all their classes together except gym and home ec. The Saturday night on the riverboat *Admiral* after

he gave her his class ring, dancing every slow dance, and after, after they'd said good night in the car. He walked her to the porch. They kissed again. She went inside and closed the screen door.

"I don't want to leave you."

His voice, so filled with longing, touched her heart much more than her ears. He'd arrived in her life with his affection for her full blown—which, along with an unexpected joy and relief that a cute boy called, engendered suspicion and wariness as much as reciprocity. "Boys have no consciences. Girls must have to have the morals for both." Sister Mary Francis, seventh grade.

"I don't want to leave you," he said again.

They stood, looked into each other's dim-lit, shadowed faces. Jon pressed his lips to the screen. She kissed him through the mesh and tasted dust, which didn't matter.

Her affection for him unfolded from that moment, as if a dawn sunbeam touched a shuttered-for-the-night morning glory.

They'd each had two aspirations. Hers were to become a nurse and to become a mother. His were to go to college and to become an electrical engineer. He built others. They would marry and have four children. Fewer would not be enough, he'd said. She cared for him—loved him, actually—but his dreams lacked elemental bedrock practicality. "The most important thing is that we are together," he'd said. "We'll find a way." She wanted to believe it. She did love him, but a corner of her heart remained uncommitted, awaiting proof of Jon's theorem.

In retrospect, Jon won the navy college scholarship just in time. After his freshman year, he proposed, again, just in time. That practical corner in her heart, perhaps spurred by her biological clock, not satisfied for long with becoming a nurse, yearned to bring a baby into the world.

Enough of a promise of security for her, and a baby, was there after Jon completed his freshman year with an A average. Following

graduation, he would owe the navy four years. He had no intention of serving longer. But he'd have his electrical engineer degree. After he left the service, he'd be able to land a good job.

That was the old dream. Her new dream didn't have a job or a house in it. It did have Jon alive, not just a memory, as if he'd been a dream all along.

Through the flight from the carrier toward the Florida coast, Amos felt fine. Squeezing max miles out of the remaining gas kept him alert. After landing at Cecil Field, he filled out the postflight paperwork and walked to his car in the lot adjacent to the hangar. He flopped onto the seat, slammed the car door, and strength and energy drained out of him. Every ounce. Sleeping in his car seemed like a great idea.

After that first tense day on the carrier, after next to no sleep that night, and after another night in the carrier-landing pattern, he had a right to feel wiped out. Then he remembered the landings. He'd been Cool Hand Duke again. Cool Hand slept in a bed.

Driving away from the base, he watched for skunks. He'd hit one his first month in Jacksonville. But he arrived, still smelling honest-labor-sweat sweet, at home, Gulf Stream Luxury Suites. He drove around to the rear of the eight-unit breadbox.

What the hell!

Somebody had parked in his spot. Pennsylvania plates. *Charlotte*? A light was on in his second-floor unit.

Back around to the street side of the complex and into the only spot open, the one reserved for prospective new tenants. Amos stomped around the building, climbed the stairs, and let himself in.

Charlotte looked up at him from where she lay on the sofa, a blanket over her. She smiled.

“Amos,” she said. She threw back the blanket and swung her long legs to the floor, tossed her head, swinging her long blonde hair away from her face. She wasn’t wearing anything. “I hope you don’t mind. I told the manager I was your girlfriend from Pennsylvania.”

He considered throwing her out—and her clothes after her. He shut the door.

“It’s good to see you too, Charlotte,” she said, enjoying the hell out of saying a line Amos himself would never say.

She showed up unannounced, confiscated his parking spot, broke into his apartment, and then sat there buck naked. Like, *Go ahead, screw me. It doesn’t matter.* That’s what was wrong with her. Sex not mattering. It *did* matter. Back home, when he’d been on leave, she’d told him the Vietnam War was immoral, because it wasn’t declared.

Morality lessons from a sex-doesn’t-mean-anything ... nudist!

“You are glad to see me, aren’t you?”

“Why are you here?”

“They fired me.”

“The school?”

“Yes. We went back to Kane Industries. They arrested me. My picture wound up on the front page of the local papers.”

“Why come here?”

“Didn’t have anyplace else to go. And I haven’t figured you out.”

She shrugged her shoulders. Her boobs jiggled. *Jesus!*

“You can’t figure me out?”

Amos spun around and stomped down the hallway to his bedroom. Sitting on the bed, he unzipped his flight boots and pulled them off.

When he left her back at home, he hoped he’d never see her again. She confused the hell out of him. He couldn’t stay away from her, but she just opened her legs. Like she would do it for any man. Like it meant less than a handshake. Those evenings he’d spent with

her, it was there for the taking. As available as manna had been for the Israelites in the desert. But he couldn't, or wouldn't, he didn't, touch her.

Amos looked up. She stood in the doorway, leaning on her upraised left elbow against the door frame, weight supported on one leg.

"You seem tense."

There it was again, the offer. Just reach out and take it. Take *me*.

"You act like sex doesn't even matter to you."

"It doesn't."

She laughed. A naked woman with hairy armpits laughed at him!

"The look on your face! How many women have you screwed? Do you remember them? Any of them?"

"I have a headache."

Which was true. The switch was next to her. He turned the light off without looking at her.

Amos dumped his socks and sweaty flight suit on the floor and fell onto the bed. Tired as hell, in bed finally, and, thanks to her, guts all twisted and knotted. *Oh, hell yeah. Glad to see ya, Charlotte.*



The phone rang. Amos knocked the phone to the floor again. Clock: 0600. He picked up the handset, considered saying something other than, "Lieutenant Kane."

"This is Petty Officer Larkin, sir. Ops O wants you in his office at 0700."

"You know what for, Petty Officer Larkin?"

"All I know is the message, sir."

"You okay?" Charlotte asked.

She stood in the doorway. He hung up.

It does matter!

She asked again.

“Yeah, yeah. I knocked the phone over.”

“Bad news?”

“I have to be in at work in an hour. Probably get another ass-chewing.”

“Another?”

“I get them now and then.”

“You have time for breakfast? I can fix you something.”

He got up and grabbed a T-shirt and threw it to her. It didn’t cover everything.

“Coffee and Wheaties. Please.”

Aviation Officer Candidate School training kicked in, and he was dressed in seven minutes. At the table, Charlotte sat across from him, drank coffee, and watched him shovel in the cereal.

After he finished eating, he said, “I don’t know what’s going on. I expected to go in about noon and fly back out to the ship. So, I may not make it until late tonight.” He studied her a moment. “You got any plans?”

“Not yet,” she said. “I hoped I could spend a couple of days with you.”

The night before, he didn’t want her in his apartment. Now, though, especially since she had a T-shirt on, it was like it had been when he’d been home on leave. He was drawn to her.

“You want me to leave, I’ll go,” she said.

“No, no. Stay. You just—hell, you probably know what you do to me better than I do. Stay. If I get a chance, I’ll call you from the squadron.”

He started to leave and stopped. “I’m glad to see you, Charlotte,” he said.



Back in his familiar spot. 0659. In front of the Ops O’s desk.

“Kane. I wish I could tell you how disappointed I am in you.”

The Ops O shook his head and sighed. "I've met some good sticks in fourteen years. You're one of them."

It wasn't starting out like the other reprimands.

"How many times did I talk to you about your attitude? Hell, I was a *phys ed* major; I can't count that high. When you cussed out the air boss last night over the goddamned radio, you screwed the pooch. You just don't get it. It's not about *you* on a carrier deck. The boss manages thirty, hell, fifty planes. It's his call when to try to squeeze one more landing out of a light load of gas. A fleet pilot doesn't argue with the air boss, much less a dipshit student. The skipper said, 'Lieutenant JG Kane, a fleet pilot? No way in hell I'll let that happen.'"

"What? 'Nam—"

Ops O shook his head.

"The skipper wanted to send you to P-3s."

"Shore-based, four-engine prop job! Bullshit."

"I pushed for a composite squadron for you."

A composite squadron had jets, but they used them to tow targets for surface ships to shoot at. *And other menial shit jobs.*

"I flew good last night. The goddamned navy *cannot* keep me from carriers!"

The Ops O held up his hand. Amos shut up. But his fists clenched. His lips parted baring his teeth.

"Listen. Just once, listen. The composite gig is not a bad deal. Build flight hours in jets. Serve a little time in purgatory. Keep your nose clean and your goddamned mouth shut. You could get another shot at carriers."

Amos's head filled with white light. He ripped the wings off his khakis. The little brass clips from behind the gold insignia dropped down inside his shirt to his belt. He pulled the wings off and threw them onto the desk. They bounced, hit the wall behind the Ops O, and

clattered onto the tile floor. The Ops O bent down, picked them up, locked eyes with Amos, and dropped the bit of metal in the trash can.

Clunk.

Amos Kane was no longer a pilot.

He had no memory of leaving the office and getting in his car, but he was in it and driving fast. He hoped like hell Charlotte was still at his apartment. She showed up suddenly. She could leave that way, knowing her. Or not knowing her. And now that he wanted her to be there—

Her car was still in his spot.

He ran up the stairs and opened the door. She was perched on a stool, a mug of coffee and the newspaper on the counter in front of her. She looked at him.

He slammed the door, rushed to her, and ripped the T-shirt off.

Jon Zachery checked in to his new squadron, the Warhorses, and was assigned the job he had in the old one: personnel officer. Chief Ebersol, the senior enlisted man in the Warhorses, handed a slick brochure to Jon across his desk.

“We got a problem, Mr. Zachery,” the chief said.

The slick, three-panel Naval Air Station Lemoore Welcome Aboard Brochure began:

Naval Air Station Lemoore is located in the San Joaquin Valley exactly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Yosemite is an hour away to the east. Drive an hour to the west and you will be at the coast.

The chief pointed to the paragraph with a stubby finger. “You know what a young sailor reads from that? You need a car. These kids don’t know enough to figure out they can’t afford one. Used car salesmen tell them it’ll be easy paying it off over time. So the kids wind up with a car, in debt up to their ears, and pretty soon something breaks, and they can’t afford to fix it. And they still have the payments.”

“Yeah, Chief,” Jon said, “I remember driving into the valley the

first time. Brown dust and haze in the air, nothing but fruit trees, vegetables, and cotton in the valley. A person gets the idea there isn't anything to do here but farm."

"Yes, sir. We're taking in a lot of young kids. Seventy-five percent of them are digging themselves into debt."

"That many?"

"The kids never think of tires, parts, insurance. Those salesmen know if a sailor defaults, the government will take it out of the guy's pay."

"How about if I work up a talk to give the new guys when they come in? And 90 percent of them go to the maintenance department. We'll make it part of an indoc program."

"We need to help the ones already in trouble."

"Sure. I'll put it in the talk. If you owe money on a car, come see the personnel officer or Chief Ebersol. I'll work something up tonight and get back to you tomorrow."

"I talked to the maintenance officer. His department has to train a whole bunch of new guys with not much time to do it. That's what he told me."

"Well, Chief, you convinced me we ought to do something. I'm going to work up the indoc talk and check it with you. I'll keep it short. I'll talk to the MO and show him the pitch."

The chief shrugged. Jon interpreted it as *Good luck with that*.



Since the squadron had been slated to decommission, a large number of sailors departed for new assignments upon arrival at home base. As a result, Jon and his boss, Lieutenant Commander RT Fischer, the admin officer, spent a major portion of each day on the phone pushing Bureau of Personnel detailers for specific skills and for experienced replacements.

Jon admired RT's phone personality. "Hey, I know you have a

real mess on your hands,” RT would say, “and I hate to bug you, but this is important. We really need two senior ordnance men with experience loading bombs on A-4s. Can you help us out, please?” RT would listen. Then he’d say, “Well, no, one experienced *ordie* won’t do. You see, we need at least one on days, one on nights, because all the rest of the guys we have loading bombs and missiles graduated from high school eight months ago.”

Jon, on the other hand, tripped quickly to exasperation over the bureaucratic balderdash spewing out of his phone. He tried to train his tongue to voice words as RT did, but he always hung up with the feeling that a trip to the confessional was in order.

RT had noted that he and Jon had the same outlook on work hours. Arrive early, work hard, and return home as soon as the day’s work was done. The Zacherys and Fischers both had two children and one car. To RT’s invitation to take turns driving to and from work, Jon said, “Sure.”

It was RT’s turn to drive them home.

“Steady progress on our list of critical skills,” RT said. “The electronics tech you lined up today was a biggie.”

“We got another problem,” Jon said. “Chief Ebersol told me most of the young kids checking in are in debt to shyster car dealers. I’ve checked. The chief is right.”

RT had both hands on the wheel. He was slender, an inch or so taller than Jon, with a black crew cut over an unlined face that wasn’t boyish. He glanced at Jon and nodded.

“The personnel man and the yeoman we got in this week had the problem,” Jon continued. “Chief Ebersol and I helped them get rid of their cars. It cost them some money to get out of the deals they made, but they are happy to be out from under. Most of the new guys go to the line division, though, in maintenance department. I worked up an indoc program to help these kids straighten out their

financial messes. I talked to the maintenance officer. He basically told me to take a hike.”

Actually, the MO had said, “I told Chief Ebersol we can’t do an indoc program. And I don’t have time to listen to dipshit ideas from a numb-nuts newbie. Even if you are a lieutenant, you’re still a dipshit newbie.” Lieutenant Commander Clark sat with his elbow on his desk, and he pointed. “Newbies need to keep their stupid mouths shut and their stupid ears open. That’s the only way they’ll learn anything.” The MO picked up a document from his desk, read a few lines, and looked up. “Everyone except a newbie would know he’d been dismissed. See what I’m saying?”

RT asked, “You and Chief Ebersol think it’s a good idea to work with the new kids?”

“Yes, sir, we do,” Jon said.

“Well, AB”—AB was short for *American Bandstand*, Lieutenant Commander Dave Clark being close enough for government work to Dick Clark to merit the nickname—“doesn’t change his mind once it’s set. I don’t want to try to get the XO or CO to overrule him; that would for sure generate a lot of hate and discontent, whether or not the CO or XO told him he had to accept the indoc program. You don’t need AB as an enemy.”

“I think he’s already an enemy.”

“No,” RT said, “he’s just giving you the new-guy treatment. That’s a long ways short of being his enemy.”

Jon kept his mouth shut. It rankled, though, considering he had eleven years in military service.

“Listen,” RT said. “In one way, you’re not a newbie; you have almost as many years in the navy as I do. You have experience as an enlisted man. You served on a destroyer. You earned a Bronze Star and two other combat awards.”

“If there’s one thing I know about, RT, it’s being a newbie. That’s all I’ve ever been. After boot camp and electronics technician school,

I got to my first destroyer and, for a year, I didn't do anything but scrub pots and pans in the galley and clean berthing compartments and heads. Then the navy sent me to college. After that, I went to another destroyer. On that ship, ensigns were considered the lowest life form on earth, a whale-dung-eating worm that lives at the bottom of the Marianas Trench."

RT chuckled. "That's pretty low. But you got the Bronze Star. How'd that happen?"

Jon looked out the window at the cotton fields flanking the road between the airfield and base housing. During his time in flight training, whenever guys asked him about his medals, they always seemed to ask with the expectation that Jon hadn't done anything worthwhile to earn them.

"You don't want to talk about it?" RT asked.

"Ah. It's okay. I got it by serving as the gunfire liaison officer to a company of marines patrolling along the coast of South Vietnam. The funny thing is, the CO put me ashore as a punishment. Before we came out to the Tonkin Gulf, the ship stopped in Subic Bay in the Philippines. Three guys got promoted, and they threw a party. It got pretty rowdy. I wrote to Teresa about it."

"And she told the other wives about it?"

"It wasn't like that. My CO and XO thought it was, though. When we're apart, I've always written to Teresa every day. There isn't much I don't, or didn't tell her. It helped me see things more clearly for myself, writing to her. The other wives knew I wrote every day, and they hounded Teresa to tell them what was in my letters."

"So it got out, and the wives' group got all fired up about drunken parties, right? And the CO got mad and sent you ashore?" RT asked.

"Pretty much."

"So what happened when you got ashore?"

"The marines were sweeping along the coast from Da Nang to Chu Lai. They patrolled during the day. My second night ashore, I was with

three marines manning an OP—observation post—overlooking their bivouac position. In the middle of the night, the Vietcong attacked our OP prior to launching a major assault on the company. Two of the marines with me were killed. One wounded. But we fought off the attack on the OP, and then I was able to call in gunfire from my destroyer off the coast.”

RT glanced at Jon. “Thanks,” he said. “For telling me.” A little smile tweaked up the corners of RT’s lips. “That part of it.”

Jon returned his attention to the cotton plants.

“Cat got your tongue?” RT asked.

“Yes, sir, it does.”



The next morning, the two new admin sailors came up to Jon’s desk.

“Thanks for helping me with the car, Mr. Zachery. I feel like I got the weight of the world off me.”

The other said, “Yeah, me too, sir. I wasn’t going to have any money to do anything, like, forever, you know?”

Jon said it was nothing, but it was something. When he’d been a junior enlisted man on his first destroyer, his division officer had steered him to the college scholarship. Helping sailors today paid his division officer back for helping him all those years ago.

Amos poured white wine into Charlotte's glass, red into his. He had offered her something vegetarian.

"I'm a vegetarian when it suits me," she said. "The shrimp is excellent."

"Can't beat fresh. I bought it right off a boat."

Charlotte peeled another and bit off half of it.

Amos sipped and placed his glass on the dining room table.

"I'm going to have to move next week, Charlotte. I've got a school I have to go to. Near Atlanta. Want to come along?"

"What about your conscientious objector application?"

If he couldn't be a pilot, he didn't want to be in the damned navy, but he owed them four years of service. The navy would not let him out of his obligation, so he applied for conscientious objector status.

"The CO laughed at me. 'Last week, you couldn't wait to get to 'Nam. Now you object to war based on what your conscience is telling you? You don't have a conscience.' He enjoyed the hell out of saying that to wiseass Amos Kane."

He hadn't told her how hard he'd pushed for orders to a squadron going to Vietnam.

"Neanderthals. A person fights his way clear from the years of

government brainwashing and develops a conscience. They can't see that?"

It hadn't been that way at all. *Conscientious objector* had been an afterthought. He'd thrown his wings at the Ops O. Then he'd rushed home and taken Charlotte. Then she took him. A little later, they drove to the beach and walked holding hands. After they ate dinner and went back to his place and made love like they might mean something to each other, Charlotte slept. Amos stayed awake and wondered what the hell he was going to do. There was no point in staying in the navy if he couldn't fly. But they wouldn't just let him out. Finally, around 0200, he thought of conscientious objector status. That might work. The next morning, he applied. He never explained to Charlotte why he did it.

It was funny. A week earlier, he'd looked on conscientious objectors as beneath contempt. He'd have never considered applying for it if Charlotte hadn't visited him. And she was ascribing it to his newly discovered conscience.

Funny. *There's a concept for you.* A couple of days earlier, everything was funny. Now, nothing was, and nothing was the way it had been. The two things he'd considered to be so damned important—be an attack pilot and go to 'Nam—and, hell, he hadn't even known they were important until they took them away. He had them, those two things, and the world was in order, and funny. Now, all that was gone. They, the son of a bitch *they*, had taken it from him. There was nothing to take its place.

Sitting there, eating with Charlotte, he wasn't quite sure how it happened and what it meant. In one sense, everything had changed, but in another, with Charlotte there, everything was—hell, he didn't know how it was.

She hadn't answered him.

"What about it, Charlotte? Come with me?"

Charlotte dabbed the napkin at her lips, wiped her fingers, took

a sip of her Chablis, set the glass on the table, and looked into his eyes. She was leaving. She didn't have to say it.

He got up, grabbed car keys from the dish on the credenza by the door, and left at 1830. Mayport Naval Station had a beach area. Forty-minute drive. There, he rolled his trousers up and walked at the edge of the surf. He walked a long time.



He drove back to the apartment and stopped the Vette, one foot on the clutch, the other on the brake, and he felt the grains of sand pressing into his bare soles. The headlights illuminated the rears of cars, a row of bachelors' wheels, in front of him. He turned his head and stared at the empty parking spot for a long time.

Eventually, he parked, went up, and flopped on the bed. He was so damned tired. And so damned awake. It felt as if something the size of a fireplace log, extending from his sternum to below his belly button, had died. It was cold and hard one instant, a cylinder of warm, roiling maggots the next, spurting bile juice onto his tongue.

He felt like driving back to the beach, walking out into the water, and swimming and swimming and not looking back. But he was too damned tired.

Lieutenant Jon Zachery sat on the bolted-to-the-shiny-green-tile bench in the VA-92 locker room and laced up his flight boots. He and Lieutenant JG Butch Felder were alone. Butch had gotten his flight boots modified with a zipper. Butch talked. To Jon, noise registered, and smells. After not flying for two months, the stinky sweat socks, jet fuel, and hydraulic fluid aromas were pleasantly familiar, if not pleasant. Another smell—residual, acrid, concentrated stale cigarette smoke, Jon remembered that from his time on the destroyer USS *Manfred*. There were a lot of smokers aboard the destroyer. After a seven-month deployment to Vietnam, Teresa washed his clothes three times to get the smell out of them. Aircraft carriers too must be home to lots of smokers.

A month earlier, the VA-92 Warhorses had returned from an eight-month deployment to Vietnam, and the flight gear in the lockers still smelled like the ship.

Butch slammed his locker shut and sat next to Jon.

“Get a zipper put in your boots, why don’t you?”

Jon shook his head. There was something of a permanent commitment to being a navy pilot in such a convenience. Jon’s commitment was to get to the war, to serve the purpose his sense of duty called him to, to see the Vietnam War through to a conclusion,

but that was it. It seemed as if it would be a one-cruise deal, since the Warhorses were slated to decommission after the deployment as the Raiders had. So maybe he wouldn't see the war to a conclusion. But that was for worrying about later.

"Sure am glad to finally be a fleet pilot," Butch said. "Being a training command newbie for a year sucked."

At first glance, from a distance, Butch was a burly five-foot-ten linebacker. As a person approached him, though, his face morphed into a boy's with perpetually rose-blushed cheeks.

Jon considered telling Butch that they weren't done with being newbies. That's the way it worked in the navy, probably the other services too. Until you proved yourself in a new assignment, you were a newbie. Butch had been in the US Navy for two years. It'd probably be the hard way, but Butch'd figure out a lot more newbie treatment was in his future.

Jon doubled the bow in his bootlaces and headed for the door to the ready room.

"Sure glad we got orders to the Warhorses," Butch said. "My detailer said I almost got orders to VA-93. They're called the Sea Lions. You see their emblem? That is one sissy-looking picture to have on your airplanes."

Jon was thinking about his first combat flight. It was months away, but finally, he could see it.

The ready room was large. Four rows of six pilot-briefing chairs filled perhaps a third of the floor space. In the right corner against the wall opposite the locker room door, Lieutenant Red Nelson, squadron duty officer, sat behind a battered gray metal desk.

"Hey, Red," Butch said, "How's the Ops O to fly with? I heard he's a real hard-ass."

The door to the passageway opened, and Lieutenant Commander Wendell Walker stood there glaring at Butch. The operations officer was six foot two, 245 pounds. Thick black hair didn't leave much brow

above black eyes just made for stare downs. He was called Bear, and the only officers senior to him were the CO and XO. Bear walked in, followed by AB.

Jon and Butch stood.

AB, the maintenance officer, was a slender six-footer with curly blond hair and blue eyes and next senior after Bear.

“Sit down, sit down, for Christ’s sake,” Bear said as he walked to the plywood podium in front of the room.

The podium had a squadron plaque fixed on the front. The plaque featured a bronze Clydesdale in silhouette with enough detail to show face armor and the horse snorting fire. Squadron lore had it that the Budweiser beer wagon was there behind the Clydesdale, but they just couldn’t get it in the picture.

“You guys are fleet pilots,” Bear said to Jon and Butch. “The Bureau of Personnel says so. Right, AB?”

“Right, Bear. That’s what BUPERS says. Unfortunately, as everybody knows, BUPERS is full of shit.”

Bear positioned himself behind the podium. AB handed him a piece of paper, which Jon could see was the preflight briefing sheet. Squadron policy required a flight lead to cover all items on the sheet prior to signing out an airplane.

“Okay, newbies,” Bear said as AB sat next to Butch, “fleet pilots stand when the CO or the XO walk in. The rest of us are fleet pilots, not training command pukes, and we are equals. We fly in combat together. You watch my ass. I cover yours.”

Bear was glaring exclamation points at Jon. Jon didn’t want to be in a staring contest with those eyes. He nodded, agreeing or non-verbalizing an *Aye, aye, Bear*. Jon’s eyes dropped to the shiny green tile and back up again in time to see Bear roll his eyes.

“First order of business,” Bear said. “Butch Felder, you are the junior pilot and the lowest life form in this squadron. Nobody expects you to do anything right. Your Botch name is confirmed.”

AB ripped the “Butch” name tag off the Velcro on his flight suit and threw it toward the duty officer desk. Red got up, picked up the tag, and tossed it in the trash can as AB slapped a new name tag on Botch.

“Jon Zachery, *whaddaya* think, AB? Runt? Pissant?”

“How about Puke, Bear? He was a destroyer sailor. Puke’d work.”

“There is that, but you know, he’s got a Bronze Star. He is a full lieutenant, not a whale shit JG like his buddy Botch. Something more dignified.”

“What about Stretch, Bear?”

Bear put his hand up to his chin and frowned.

Jon wondered if he was trying to look like Rodin’s statue, mind-muscling weighty thoughts. He glanced from Bear to AB. The show they were putting on for the newbies was really kind of pathetic, as well as demeaning.

“Red,” Bear said, “call the flight equipment shop. Tell them to make up a Stretch name tag and hustle it up to the ready room.”

Red grabbed up the phone, dialed three numbers, relayed the instructions, and slammed the phone down, and there was a knock on the door.

“Enter,” Red bellowed.

A sailor wearing dungaree trousers, a white T-shirt, and a white hat entered and walked to Bear. “Name tag, sir,” he said, saluted, about-faced, and marched out.

Bear tossed the name tag to Jon. Jon became Stretch. Stretch shook his head. Botch sat and stared with his mouth hanging open.

Bear, AB, and Red started laughing.

Botch said, “What?”

They laughed harder.

AB, still chuckling, walked over to the coffeemaker in the forward corner of the room opposite the duty desk. Mugs hung on pegs above the pot. He got the first and second ones from the second row. The

CO's and XO's mugs were the only two on the top row. Even coffee mugs stood in ranks.

Bear took a sip from the mug AB handed him. "Listen up, newbies. You are fleet pilots, but you don't know a damned thing." The glare. "Here's the deal. Normally, we get a year to train up for a peacetime cruise. We got four months to train you wusses for war. Fortunately, the rest of our pilots have combat experience—except of course for that numb-nuts you brought with you named for the worst day of the week. You got a Bronze Star on your destroyer tour, Zachery. Maybe that means something on earth. In the sky, it doesn't mean a damned thing.

"You're a lieutenant, Stretch. We've got to be able to count on you for stuff we won't see out of your buddy Botch here for a year. If he lives."

Bear scrunched personal threat into his scowl and pointed. "You two are my personal project. I will make something worthwhile out of you. You will measure up, or you will be in the shit-can there with your old name tags."

Bear covered the items on the preflight briefing sheet. He was lead, Stretch was Two, AB was Three, and Botch Four. They would fly east and over the Sierras where they would break up into two two-plane formations.

"During the two-planes," Bear briefed, "don't lose me, Stretch. You don't lose sight of AB, Botch. No matter what he does, you hang on to your leader. But this is even more important; do not run into your leader. You run into me, Stretch, you'd better hope I'm dead, because you don't even want to think about what I will do to your living body or to your corpse.

"Two damned things to remember. You got two fingers, Botch? Show me. Hold them up. What do they mean? Yeah, I mean for you to answer the question. What do they mean?"

"Um ... don't lose my lead. Don't run into him."

“BUPERS says you are fleet pilots,” Bear said. “Convince AB and me you are.”



In maintenance control, a sailor pushed the book for airplane number 510 across the counter to Jon. There were thirteen up gripes on the plane. Up gripes were minor discrepancies with the plane, such as “paint chipped and peeling from left aileron,” or “small hydraulic leak from nose landing gear.” A significant hydraulic leak, however, would be cause to down the aircraft, put it into non-flight-worthy status until repairs had been completed. Two of the up gripes on 510 were worrisome. “Oil pressure reads two pounds low at idle, okay in flight.” If the oil pressure was low at idle, the plane should have been downed. The pilot should not have gotten airborne with it. The pilot had been Bear.

The other worrisome gripe read, “Hydraulic pressure fluctuates at idle, okay in flight.” The flight manual specified tolerable ranges for pressure gauges, and this was another down gripe.

Jon felt squeezed. For just a moment, Teresa and the children came to mind, but he shouldered them aside and followed the other three out to the flight line.

The two lieutenant commanders walked side by side. AB laughed at things Bear said. Bear and AB both had their G suits zipped up, but their torso harnesses were not cinched.

Navy jet pilots wore torso harnesses, which looked like gray coveralls with no arms or legs. Suiting up, first, the G suit went on over the flight suit, and it contained air bladders. The bladders inflated when a pilot pulled Gs and kept blood from pooling in the lower body. To avoid blackouts or grayouts, brains need the oxygen carried by the blood. A G suit supposedly pushed the onset of blacking out up a G or two. The G suit zipped up the inside of the legs and around the belly, and it looked like chaps a cowboy would wear, except it fit

snug over the legs without the wide loose flaps of leather. The torso harness went on next. Inside the nylon shell of the harness, heavy straps connected the pilot to the parachute and survival kit in his ejection seat.

Jon—rather *Stretch* now—and Botch had both cinched their harnesses up before leaving the locker room. They walked silently a couple of paces behind the two lieutenant commanders to their planes on the flight line.

Bear and AB immediately started walking around their planes, preflighting. They continued to talk about a trip up into the Sierras. Apparently, they had gone fishing together over the previous weekend.

Stretch stopped a few feet from 510.

Hello, airplane.

That was his ritual when he manned up. Saying hello to the airplane meant saying goodbye to everything else. There was only room for flying in his brain after greeting 510.

He finished his preflight and looked toward Bear's airplane. Bear and AB were standing and looking at him. Botch wasn't finished with his preflight yet. Apparently, the two senior guys had completed theirs some time ago. Botch came around the front of his plane. Bear looked at AB, shook his head, and cinched up his torso harness.

Before he got strapped in the cockpit, Stretch heard Bear's engine come to life and settle into its idle whine. The other two planes started, and then the start cart came to him. The plane captain plugged the air hose for starting the engine into the belly of 510.

Stretch's engine cranked up. The exhaust temperature peaked and dropped into range. Oil pressure was five PSI low. Hydraulic pressure was fluctuating and below the minimum limit. The fuel gauge read zero, but that couldn't be right. If the wing fuel tank had been empty, a yellow light would be illuminated. It wasn't. But maybe the yellow warning light didn't work right. A bunch of things didn't work right

in 510. As he noted those items, he began turning on his electronic equipment: radio, TACAN, radar altimeter, radar.

He tapped the oil pressure and hydraulic gauges, but the needles refused to budge up into acceptable readings. Then his radio came to life with a loud squeal in his ears. Changing frequency, changing the volume and squelch settings, nothing affected the squeal. Stretch checked the oil, hydraulic, and fuel gauges again. Each of those gauges by itself constituted a down airplane. The unusable radio was a down gripe.

Stretch gave a thumbs-down and a throat-slash signal to his plane captain, and he shut his engine down. After climbing out of 510, Stretch walked in front of the other turning planes to Bear's and gave him a thumbs-down.

Bear looked agitated, and he stabbed his finger at a spot on the ramp by the side of his plane, indicating where he wanted Stretch to stand. After shutting down, Bear climbed out of his cockpit and stormed around the front of his plane and leaned over, his face just inches from Stretch's.

"The hell you down your airplane for?" he spit-flying shouted above the noise of the two jets next to them.

Stretch took a step back and held up four fingers. "Oil pressure, hydraulic ..."

Bear grabbed Stretch's arm and got in his face again. "I flew 510 last week. Oil and hydraulics are good in flight," he bellowed. "Didn't you read the write-up?"

"I read 'em!" Jon shouted. "You said oil was two PSI low. Now it's five—"

"I can't hear a word out of your pussy mouth!" Bear hollered, and he started stomping toward the hangar. His big right paw gripped Stretch's left bicep, and he dragged him across the ramp.

AB and Botch taxied out behind them.

Next to the hangar, Bear let go of the arm, stopped, tore off his helmet and got in Stretch's face again. "You said four things."

"The fuel gauge and the radio," Stretch said.

"Jesus Christ, Shit-for-Brains. Look up there. Sky is clear. Nearest cloud is two thousand miles away. You don't need a goddamned radio. And you don't need a fuel gauge! Your warning lights tell you when you have 1,500 pounds left. Plenty to make it back from the Sierras. Don't you know a goddamned thing about the A-4?"

Bear started turning away, stopped, dropped his helmet, bared his teeth, grabbed Stretch's torso harness, and lifted him off the concrete floor of the hangar and shook him.

Spit and curses flew out of Bear's mouth.

Stretch looked into Bear's eyes and said, "Let go-a-me," in a quiet voice.

Bear shut up and stopped shaking him but held him, feet dangling a couple of inches off the deck.

Stretch cocked his head to the side and quietly voiced, "Let go-a-me," again.

Bear put him down, and Stretch walked toward maintenance control. Bear watched him for a moment, and then he followed.



That afternoon, at 1700, Stretch, tucked military creases into the rear of his khaki shirt, zipped up, ensured his gig line was straight, and pushed his locker closed. Lieutenant Commander Robert T. Fischer entered from the ready room. RT let the door swing shut behind him. He stood to the side of the door and put a hand on it to keep it from opening.

"What did you do to piss off the Ops O? Down another aircraft?" RT asked.

"No. Before the flight, I told him that, after thinking about this morning, I appreciated that he was telling me I didn't know the A-4

well enough. That if a pilot really knows his aircraft, he can still get the mission accomplished if a system or two fails. What I didn't tell him is that you explained it to me, and I got it. He tried to ram it down my throat, and I didn't. I told him that I trusted him to lead me on a flight with some of my systems inop and to bring me and my plane back home again. Some things I wasn't going to compromise on, though. Oil pressure and hydraulic pressure being two."

"What'd he say to that?"

"Oh, he Bear-stared me for a while. Then he said, 'If you're going to fly in combat, you need iron in your backbone. There's a line where I'm concerned. You're pretty damned close to it.' So we finished the brief and flew our hop."

"What happened on the hop?" RT asked.

Jon shrugged. "We did some acrobatics with me on his wing. He flew rough, on purpose, I'm sure. He tried to spit me out."

"You hung on?"

"I hung. Then I got behind him, and he told me to try to stay there. I did, including when he did a high-g roll. I stayed with him."

"Why didn't you pull off and go high, the way we're taught?"

"I knew he was going to do it. I knew, and I set myself up to go right with him."

Jon did not tell RT that it was the first time he'd ever tried that, to follow another plane through a high-g roll, and near the end of the maneuver, he was scared he would crash into Bear's airplane, but he hadn't. He came out of the maneuver in great position to shoot Bear down.

"So, he couldn't shake you off his tail?"

"Nope."

"Let me guess. Then you shook him off yours."

Stretch nodded.

"That'd piss him off, all right. What'd you do?"

"It's my secret move. I might want to use it on you."

RT signaled “give” with his hands.

Jon thought about it for a moment. He hadn’t known RT long. In that time, he recognized a man to respect.

“Simple thing, really. We started out straight and level, going 450. I snapped a hard left roll and saw him start to follow. I snapped back to level, pulled straight up, parked the nose, rolled ninety degrees, pulled down another ninety, rolled, and there he was—dog meat.”

“You turned, then pulled up to vertical, then rolled, pulled down ninety, and rolled again. So you were level again, on the same heading you started from?”

“Nope. The opposite direction. Got him a little out of sync with the roll and then got some displacement in the vertical plane pulling up. Then I rolled and pulled again, and he was out of position in two dimensions.”

“If a guy knew what you were going to do, you’d be the dog meat.”

“Just like his high-g roll. If you know what’s coming, it’s not hard to beat it.”

“You know that’d never be a good idea to try in combat.”

“Takes too long, and you’re blind on the guy behind you too long.”

RT grinned, but only for a moment.

“You know, Stretch, you might wait awhile before you piss off the Ops O again. Like fifteen years or so.”

Amos, from in front of the officer-in-charge's (OIC) desk, glanced down at the came-up-through-the-ranks, old fart, asshole lieutenant commander. Parts of his jowly, puffy, swarthy, oily-sheen face moved into what might have been a smile. The ends of the lips curled up. A smile, then.

"So, Boar Tit," the OIC said. "Technically, you haven't flunked out of your maintenance officer school, but the end-of-course test is scheduled for Friday, week after next. All of your instructors say the same thing about you. Doesn't pay attention in class. Doesn't take notes. Doesn't give a shit. Here's the deal. You're pissed off at the navy because things didn't go your way in the training squadron in Florida. Truth is, not one single solitary person is to blame for what happened to you, other than you. And here's another truth. You signed your soul over to my navy. My navy is not going to give you a free ride for the rest of the time you owe."

He picked his cigar up from the ashtray, sucked a major lungful, and blew the smoke up at him.

Amos wondered what the hell was in that thing. It wasn't tobacco. Stinkweed? Dried sweat socks from the gym locker room?

"—hack."

"What?"

“That got your attention, did it? Yeah. You’re in hack for the next two weeks.”

Hack—an informal method of punishing a junior officer, getting his attention, without a career-killing entry in his service record. It meant confinement to quarters except for visits to the head.

“Wait, Commander.” *Jesus!* Getting off the base every afternoon was the only thing keeping him sane. “I’ll buckle down. Honest to God, sir.”

“Hack.”

Another puff. Another stink cloud to breathe.

“You cannot leave the base. There’s a room in your name at the BOQ. Give me the key to your apartment. I’ll have one of my lieutenants pick up your things.”

Shit!

“The other thing, Kane. I hereby inform you that we have been documenting your behavior in class. If you do not buckle down, if you do not pass the end-of-course test, I am going to convene a court-martial. The charge will be dereliction of duty. Sign this statement.”

He pointed his cigar butt where he wanted a signature.

“You don’t want to sign it, no biggie. I’ll get two witnesses in here to testify that I informed you that court-martial proceedings are contemplated. Just another bit of evidence that you are an incorrigible, mutinous boar tit. YN1!” he hollered.

The door was jerked open and a first-class yeoman stepped in.

“Grab another guy from the office. I need two witnesses.”

The YN1 left the door open.

Amos grabbed a pen off the desk and scribbled.

“You, Mr. Kane, will enjoy life more if you pass your test.”

Amos clenched his fists as the lieutenant commander leaned back in his chair and sucked on the slimy end of his cigar. The slug had him in a box. He hated being in a box. He hated being under

the thumb of someone so damned common. At least with his Ops O back in Florida, he'd been able to push back.

"Now I know you don't want to be late for class. Just give me your apartment key, and you can go."

How the hell did this happen to me? How the hell could it happen to Amos Kane?

The course material wasn't hard, but studying so he could learn how to fix planes other guys would fly, guys who were so goddamned average, that got his teeth grinding.

"So, run away to Canada," Charlotte had said.

They were not going to run him away. They were not going to drive Amos goddamned Kane to quit.

After the Warhorse Wives' Club coffee, Teresa Zachery stood beside the passenger door of Helen Fischer's Ford station wagon and glanced back at Marla Walker's house. The Walkers' ranch style fell well short of a mansion, but it exuded an air of uncommon prosperity in the town of Lemoore. The cedar shake roof, the lower half of the outer wall dark stone, the upper half tan stucco, all appeared fresh and new. Trimmed jasmine and hyacinth bushes and a podocarpus set off the house nicely as a scarf might set off an ensemble with just the right touch. The edge of the lush lawn was sharply sliced to separate shrub territory from grass.

Helen, with her driver's door open, said, "The Walkers have no kids. They do have a Mexican couple taking care of the inside and outside."

Teresa wondered if Helen thought she was envious. It wasn't envy but other emotions she was trying to sort. During the afternoon VA-92 Officers' Wives' Club coffee, she'd learned things about the dangers Jon would face when his carrier took him to Vietnam. It also brought back into sharp focus four years previous when Jon had deployed to the Tonkin Gulf on a destroyer. She'd worried about him then. After he returned, she found out she hadn't worried enough. He had been in danger several times and had been awarded medals,

including a Bronze Star. During the cruise, he hadn't even mentioned those incidents in his letters. She thought he told her everything. It took a month after his ship returned to the States before she found out about the medals.

She found out one Monday night when he told her she was invited to attend an awards ceremony on the ship on Friday afternoon.

"An awards ceremony?" she'd asked.

"Yeah. After a cruise, some guys get medals."

"Are you getting one?"

"A couple," he'd said.

"A couple of them. For what?"

"There were ... incidents with the Vietcong."

It was pulling her's teeth to get him to talk about his incidents. Eventually, he showed her the citations. She would always remember the words that went with the Bronze Star.

Jon had been with three marines. They'd been attacked, and two of the marines had been killed, the third wounded fighting off the attack. Then Jon radioed the *Manfred*, and her guns killed more than two dozen Vietcong.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you," he'd told her.

"You could have been killed like the marines, and you didn't tell me!"

"The marines did the real fighting," he said. "They died, and they deserved the medals they got."

The more she pressed him, the more he downplayed the danger he'd faced. Eventually, she tired of asking, and it slipped into the past.

During the Warhorse wives' coffee, listening to the ladies talk, even peacetime carrier flying was dangerous. On his destroyer, the Vietcong were the danger. On his carrier, his ship tried to kill him. That's what she drew from the conversations.

The dangers for the pilots, she learned, were in each and every cat

shot and every carrier landing that for fleet carrier pilots, the danger they faced came from their ships. The wives also talked about being sucked down a jet engine intake and being blown over the side by jet exhaust. Jon had told her about Bear and AB giving Botch and him the new guy treatment. Maybe the wives were laying it on heavy for the new wife. That thought brought little comfort with it.

During Jon's time in the training command, during his time with the Raiders, she'd worried about him but never got the feeling of Death reaching out a skeletal hand to snatch him away from her. But Death was there during that coffee, more a member of the wives' club than Teresa. One thing she did know as well as the Warhorse wives: she knew how death could come out of the night with no warning and snatch someone, like it did Daniel. She was trying to decide whether she was glad to know or if it would have been better to not know. After Jon had called all excited about going to VA-92, she thought she had discovered the extreme edge of anxiety. The women's conversation showed her a new extreme.

Another thing had ambushed her. Marla Walker assigned her the responsibility for hosting the next squadron party. Marla hadn't asked whether she would do it or whether the date suited her or not. She'd said, "Teresa, you host the next squadron party. We always do it the first Wednesday of the month. If the guys are gone, we wives get together, anyway."

And the wives of the CO and XO puzzled Teresa. Anita Wister and Darlene Riley gossiped, nibbled on cookies, and sipped white coffee. They didn't say a thing during the business portion. Marla Walker and Sybil Clark alternated dispensing news and guidance as seamlessly as a *Huntley-Brinkley* newscast. On Jon's destroyer, the CO's wife had been the leader of the group.

Teresa entered the car and waited until Helen pulled out of the drive and onto the street.

"I was surprised the CO's wife didn't run things," Teresa said.

“The previous CO’s wife wasn’t interested in the club. Marla and Sybil ran it. Commander Wister joined the squadron just before the end of the deployment. He was expected to decommission the squadron. But now, the navy changed its mind. A new CO is ordered in to take the guys on the next deployment.”

Helen stared ahead at the road, the unfinished subject hanging in the air. They rode in silence until the car turned onto Highway 198 and headed for the base.

“You were here in ’66 and ’67,” Teresa said. “Was it like they said? Every day, the black sedan came to announce somebody’s husband had been killed or captured?”

“The black car did not come every day,” Helen replied, “but every day, we dreaded it. The minute the car entered the housing area, someone would see it, and the phone calls began. The word made it around the housing complex most times before the car reached its destination.”

“The bombing halt in 1968. Hasn’t that made a difference?”

“Yes, some. But the car still comes with the news that a pilot died in an operational accident. On the last cruise, three pilots died. Two F-8 pilots. Apparently, that is a hard airplane to land on a small carrier. The other one was an A-4 pilot. A bad cat shot. When the car comes, it doesn’t make any difference if it’s combat or not.”

Helen pulled off the freeway. The sentry at the back gate stood, noted the officer’s sticker on the windshield, and waved the car through.

Helen pulled into a parking spot in front of the child-care center. She didn’t turn off the car.

“May I offer you a bit of advice, Teresa?”

“Sure.”

“It was not a good idea to tell Marla no about hosting the squadron party.”

“I said I had to check with Jon. What’s wrong with that?”

“Bear, he’s Marla’s husband, the operations officer; he might make it tough on Jon. That’s the way the two of them do things.”

Teresa bristled and almost mentioned that Jon had been in the navy for eleven years and had never been treated so poorly. Except it wasn’t true. As an enlisted man, Jon had gotten seasick, and his chief petty officer despised him. He assigned an endless string of the dirtiest jobs to Jon. As an ensign and as a lieutenant JG, he’d encountered other horses’ behinds, as Jon called them.

“I know you’re trying to help Jon and me. Thanks. I appreciate the advice.”

But Teresa was far from ready to accept whatever unpleasant baloney Marla Walker, Mrs. Ops O, dished her way.

Helen shut off the car, and she and Teresa stepped into the 103-degree afternoon heat to bail Jennifer and Edgar Jon Zachery out of child care.



Jon had gotten home at 1900. After dinner, they bathed the children and put them to bed. Teresa said she was too tired to stay up for the news. As they undressed, she told Jon about hosting the next squadron party.

“Helen Fischer said I should have just accepted the tasker from Marla Walker. She made me mad. She didn’t ask, just told me to do it. I said I had to check with you. Helen hinted I might have gotten you into trouble.”

“One thing’s sure. I don’t need help getting myself in trouble. Remember in Meridian, in basic jet training? The squadron XO there said I had a magnet in my butt that attracts trouble. I’m already on the Ops O’s list. I don’t want you to worry about it.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“How could I be mad at you?” Jon pulled the sheets up. “At work, the Ops O being a bit of a jerk is okay. He’s not the first person to

abuse a position of authority. I have to put up with it. You shouldn't have to. You did the right thing."

"The future has been so iffy looking for a long time."

"I wonder what Rose would say about Marla."

Teresa laughed. "Probably not words I'd use."

"Probably. But you should not have to put up with my Ops O treatment from Mrs. Ops O."

Teresa squeezed his hand.

"Tuesday told me today," Jon said, "Commander Wister had his time in the navy all programmed. He'd had a cushy job to ride out his time to twenty years and retirement. But the navy needed to scramble a replacement for the Warhorse CO slot. Wister was only supposed to have to bring the squadron home from deployment and carry it into decommissioning. Then, after the navy changed its mind about that, they had to scramble up a man really qualified to lead a squadron into combat. According to Tuesday, the new CO will be CDR Franks, and supposedly, he's a good guy. The XO—"

"Tuesday does seem to know everything, just like Botch said."

"Even Botch knows what he's talking about. Once in a while. Anyway, normally squadron execs are screened for command. After a year as XO, they step up to be CO. CDR Riley never screened, but the navy was hard up, and they stuck him in as XO, never expecting the not-screening business to be an issue. So, he just played it *along for ride* and let Bear and AB run things."

"I expected things to be, I don't know, somehow better than in the destroyer navy."

"Maybe it will be better when the new CO is here awhile. According to Tuesday, Commander Franks has a good rep. It's a tough time. A lot of people had their careers all lined up, but everything is jumbled up now."

"We heard today you'll be gone a lot for training."

"Yes. A couple of stints at sea on the USS *Solomons*. Two weeks

of bombing practice at Naval Air Station Fallon, Nevada. Three weeks at home and then we depart for seven and a half months to the Tonkin Gulf.”

Teresa felt it happen as he spoke. She felt him leaving. When he’d been on the destroyer, it had happened the same way. As the beginning of cruise drew nearer, Jon’s excitement increased. He looked forward to an adventure. Back then in 1966, she looked forward to living alone in a strange town with a baby to care for. It turned out the officers’ wives’ club provided tremendous moral and emotional support. Still, she’d had a tough first two months after Jon left. In the end, she did what Rose was fond of saying. “First, blow your nose; then get to work.”

Now, in the Warhorses, she felt Jon withdraw from his family and sink into his navy job. She also recalled those injunctions laid on student pilots’ wives during flight training. “Do not worry your husbands. They need to have their minds on flying, totally.” The clear implication was there: if *you* worry them, *you* could kill them.

Jon looked forward to doing the thing he’d been aiming at for so long. She looked forward to dealing with the night. It was close to dread and fear, but she wouldn’t let herself think those words. With Jon beside her in bed, she felt safe. Alone, except for Jennifer, those first months in San Diego while Jon was on deployment, she could not keep her mind from imagining sinister men creeping in shadow up to the flimsy front door with the flimsy security chain. Each night, back then, she fell asleep with *Into Thy hands I commend my baby, my spirit, and my body*.

Then, her days had been filled with her baby and managing the house. Nights were filled with worry for Jon and Jennifer. For herself, too, and now, whether it was rational or not to worry when they lived inside a fenced, guarded navy base, the nights, she knew, would be hard. At the coffee, she found new things to worry over.

Toughest Job in the US Navy: US Navy Wife. Several navy wives

she knew had needlepoint or cross-stitch pieces with that message. It felt like truth often enough. Like then.

Teresa rolled against Jon and pressed herself to him. He put his arm around her. After a moment, she rolled onto her back and sighed.

“Marla Walker said you’d be in Japan for Christmas. She and Sybil are planning to fly over.”

“Talking about it,” Jon said, “I feel like I’m half-gone already.”

“It’s what you wanted.”

“Yes, and I should have known how much it would cost you for me to get what I wanted. But I’m just a stupid man.”

His revelation made a bit of difference. Still, she fell asleep holding hands with her husband, who’d left, though his body wouldn’t depart for four more months.

Stretch, Tuesday, and Botch leaned forward in their ready room chairs in the hangar at Naval Air Station Lemoore as Bear rolled into the final harangue of the prior-to-flight briefing.

“If you screw up around the ship, you make a fool of yourself, which I don’t care about. What I do care about is if you make me look bad. I’m the operations officer, and if you don’t perform, it reflects on me. Do not make me look bad, newbies. Suit up, and I’ll see you on the flight ramp.”

They were flying out to the *Solomons*. All the squadrons assigned to the carrier would fly aboard for two weeks of training preparatory to deploying. The first day of operations was dedicated to qualifying newly assigned pilots to fly from the carrier at night. Besides VA-92 newbies, the other squadrons in the air wing, two A-4 Skyhawk plus the two F-8 Crusader units, each owned a couple of new guys who hadn’t logged a night carrier landing in months.

Even with Bear’s admonition, Stretch was feeling good. After chasing the goal over four interminable years, he was a fleet pilot. Finally. Except for one thing. He had to log a night landing on a fleet aircraft carrier. Besides accomplishing that purpose, he’d also reconnect with his good friend Greg Haywood, whom he hadn’t seen for a year. Greg was in one of the two F-8 Crusader squadrons assigned

to the *Solomons*. Stretch had met him on the USS *Manfred*, and they'd been friends since. They'd also gone through flight training together at Naval Air Station Meridian. Greg had consistently scored the top grades in all phases of instruction. He was considered to be a good stick by the other students, which wouldn't mean anything in the fleet. On the *Manfred*, Greg had been called Tutu. Greg hated the name. If his squadron mates found out about his nickname—and that Greg hated it—he would be Tutu until hell froze over. It'd be good to see the big guy again. He was even bigger than Bear.

Stretch and the other two newbies took off and joined on Bear. He led them to the carrier and entered into a wide orbit around the ship at fifteen thousand feet. Looking down at it, an uneasy feeling stirred in Stretch's stomach. It had been eight months since he'd landed on a carrier. The way Botch was flying, Stretch could tell he was uptight too. Bear rendezvoused on a tanker aircraft for practice plugs. The tanker pilot reeled a hose out of the modified three-hundred-gallon fuel tank carried on the center bomb rack. At the end of a hose was a basket-shaped device for a navy jet to plug his refueling probe into. Botch had trouble engaging the basket. *You're wrapped too tight, Botch. Just relax a bit.* In the training command, an instructor would sometimes radio a suggestion like that. In the fleet, a pilot was expected to hack the program on his own. After a couple of tries, Botch finally flew his refueling probe into the basket properly.

Bear established the formation back at fifteen thousand feet, and Stretch saw how the other *Solomons* squadrons orbited below, and one above them. The lead pilot in each formation had to know when to take his flight down to the ship and enter the landing pattern. It was how things were done in the fleet. Stretch had completed a lot of training to become a naval aviator, but he caught a glimpse of how much he had yet to learn to be considered a fleet pilot.

Below, Stretch saw an F-8 Crusader three-plane descend to the

landing pattern. One of those pilots was Greg Haywood. He'd heard him on the radio.

Airplane to fly, Zachery. Carrier landing coming up.

As squadrons below entered the landing pattern, the ones above descended. Each thousand feet lower, Stretch's anxiety ratcheted up. Then it was their turn. Botch would land first. He hoped Botch would do okay. He'd been uptight with the practice plugs.

Stretch couldn't worry about him. He forced his mind to remain on his own situation. When it was time, he lowered his gear and flaps and ran through the landing checklist. He saw Botch land. He hadn't boltered or been waved off. Bear was next. Set the proper interval on him, job one. Stretch rolled out behind the ship and saw Bear catch a wire. Then Stretch was descending to land. *Meatball. Lineup. Airspeed.* He recited the words. He flew the words. Then he was close to touchdown. *Ball, ball ... bolter.* He landed just past the wires. Full power and take off again. He knew what he'd done. He'd taken his eyes off the ball to look at the deck. Even Botch had landed, and he'd thought Botch was the one to worry about. As he set up for another approach, a spurt of anger fired, and he barked at his stupid brain to get its stuff together. The next time, he kept his eyes on the ball until the jolt of the landing surprised him, which was how it was supposed to happen. He taxied to the catapult. They shot him. Suddenly, the tempo of carrier ops caught him up. The slimmest margins of pilot performance, the slimmest time margins, and all a pilot had to do was to execute his piece of the play perfectly. Stretch knocked out three more landings, and he was directed to the bow and parked. As his plane captain chained his aircraft to the deck, Stretch thought carrier flying could be just so cool, *if only I wouldn't have boltered.*

He shut down and deplaned. Walking from the bow to the island, the tall structure rising from the starboard side of the flight deck in the middle of flight ops, was a tense business. Bear had briefed, "On the flight deck, keep your head on a swivel. Watch continuously. Don't

get in the way. It'll screw up the operation. Don't get hurt. It'll screw up the operation. Don't dawdle. It elevates the chance that you'll screw up the operation." Stretch made it to the island and descended to the third deck. He headed in the wrong direction first, got himself turned around in the press of moving bodies, and found the ready room.

Ready 4, World Famous Warhorses in large calligraphic letters. He stepped inside and was surprised with how familiar it looked.

To the left of the door, a chest-high counter cordoned off a space for two men to work. Maintenance. Pilots checked the repair history of the planes they'd fly at the counter before signing for a specific nose number. At the far end of the ready room, the duty officer desk occupied the left corner. The far bulkhead was covered with a whiteboard. Flight leads used the board to diagram flight maneuvers and to pass out information, such as radio frequencies, TACAN channels, and so on. Suspended from the overhead in the forward right corner, a closed-circuit TV screen showed the landing area of the carrier. Jon watched an A-4 roll wings level and a little low in the center of the screen. The plane went high and then low again and then high in close, slam onto the deck, and bolter.

"How's 510, Stretch?" Lieutenant Carl Midlin asked from behind the counter.

Carl wore a green, long-sleeved turtleneck with a large *AMO* stenciled on the chest. The assistant maintenance officer was a ground-pounder, not a pilot.

"No gripes," Stretch said as he filled out the form to record his flight time and landings.

Paperwork finished, he regarded the rows of ready room chairs. Above each chair, a hook had been welded to the overhead. Pilot helmets hung from some of the hooks. Four rows of six chairs each. An aisle in the center sliced the room in half. He was trying to figure out which chair would be his. Each pilot had an assigned seat arranged by seniority.

“There.” One of the Warhorse pilots, Hulk, a skinny guy, pointed to a chair against the right bulkhead in the second row where Stretch would hang his helmet. “You got a visitor.”

A tall, black-haired, broad-shouldered pilot stood from the center seat in the last row to Jon’s left. He banged his head on the helmet above him.

“Greg,” Stretch said.

Greg wrapped his arms around his friend and hoisted him off the deck. Then he set him back down, grabbed his biceps in his big paws, and grinned.

“Good to see you,” Greg said. “Damned good.” He eyed the name tag. “Stretch, eh?”

“Hey, bolter boy.” Bear looked over his shoulder from his front-row seat. “Forget your boyfriend and get your ass up here for debrief.”

Stretch recognized the glint of fiery rebellion in his friend’s black eyes.

“My Ops O.” Stretch shrugged. “My problem. What ready room are you in?”

“One,” Greg said.

“See you there in fifteen. Okay?”

Stretch walked up to get his nose rubbed in it some more.

Hack. The last time Amos had been punished like that was when he took two of his mother's tennis rackets and tied them to his feet for snowshoes. He could still conjure up the dangerous fury she struggled to contain when she ran out into the ten inches of snow in the backyard wearing pajamas to grab him. Back inside, she shook him and sent him to his room. After his father came home, his mother brought him to Amos's room and told him what his son had done. His father had laughed as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. That laugh ratcheted Mom's anger right out the roof again, and he was restricted to his room for three more days. Amos was pretty sure he'd have been confined to his room only one night if not for the laugh. The extra punishment didn't matter. He'd felt a bond with his father.

It was the only time he had felt that bond. His father left early for work and returned late every day. For birthdays and Christmas, he was home. On those occasions, his father gave Amos a gift and, always, a pithy bit of wisdom. "Look back long enough to learn from your mistakes; otherwise, keep charging forward. The world is full of SOBs. Don't let the SOBs get you down."

Hack. The first two days had been agony. He ripped through his studies. They were easy and didn't take much time. Then, there

was not one thing to do but look out the second-story BOQ window at the parking lot. He'd asked if he could go to the gym, get a TV, a radio, a book from the library. No, no, no, and no.

Looking through the half-open draw drapes, Amos thought it was funny how he remembered his father's fortune-cookie wisdom. On the other hand, his mom had been there at all his football games and for everything else until college. He couldn't put a name to anything he got from her.

And Charlotte, he'd ached for her, but that had dulled. Looking back, she might have been a mistake. It was hard to put that word to her, though. He'd never see her again. *Keep charging forward, Amos.*

When he returned from classes the next day, there was a letter on his desk. From her. She'd arrived safely in San Francisco. She'd met some people. She was doing fine.

Thought I should let you know.

Charlotte

PS: If you get out here, look me up.

The return address was the Rainbow Café. He didn't have orders to San Francisco, but close to it. Naval Air Station Lemoore was two hundred miles away. Not far at all. Then a moment of panic shot through him. The café, was it a temporary job? She might quit and not leave a forwarding address.

Amos sat down and wrote on both sides of three legal-size sheets of paper. He was coming to find her, and she should reply to him at the Bachelor Officer Quarters at Naval Air Station Alameda, just across the bay from her. He addressed it to Charlotte, care of the Rainbow Café. After paying a steward in the BOQ a dollar for two six-cent stamps, he dropped the letter in the box.

Amos rode his final week of school on elevated spirits. In the afternoons and evenings, as he looked at the BOQ parking lot, he thought about her. The way she viewed sex, originally, he'd considered

her to be amoral, to have no concept of good and evil. But she'd asked him, "How many women have you screwed?" and "Do you remember any of them?" She'd thrown his moral outrage right back at him, made him see his hypocrisy. She had morals, all right, but hers were not what a person would call traditional or mainstream. Napalm was immoral. She was firm on that point. Kane Industries manufactured the canisters that contained napalm, and she held Kane Industries accountable for the newspaper picture, which broadcast the horror on the face of the naked, prepubescent Vietnamese girl screaming and running from her flaming village.

No, Charlotte was not amoral, he concluded. She was absolutely firm in her notions of what was right and what was wrong, much more than he himself was. Charlotte was a moral person.

That night, Amos finished dinner and placed the tray outside the door to his room. He hadn't thought of basic jet training in Meridian, Mississippi, since he'd left. It came to mind, though, at his window.

He'd arrived in the fall of 1968. Throughout the early part of the year, the KKK waged a campaign of violence against a resurgence of civil rights activities. Monthly, a Negro church was burned. Civil rights activists' front windows were blown out with shotgun blasts. Synagogues were bombed. On July 4, Klansmen engaged the Meridian police in a machine-gun shoot-out—in the front yard of a student pilot, it turned out. The Klan didn't celebrate the holiday. They retaliated for Grant shelling Vicksburg.

The local citizens, including the local police, the local mainstream, Amos was sure, covered for the KKK. The national mainstream looked the other way. At the time, the KKK hadn't bothered him. He hadn't paid much attention to what they did. It took thinking about Charlotte and her moral code—it took her leaving—for him to see it.

But he saw it then, looking out that window. Charlotte was right. The problem was the mainstream.

And Kane Industries was certainly that.

“Go to Canada,” she’d said. Running wouldn’t fix anything. Amos would not run. He’d fight the system. How? He wasn’t sure. Not with buckets of blood and pig shit, though, which Charlotte told him had been thrown at the Kane Industries gate guards.

It occurred to him that being in hack was maybe a blessing. Hack afforded him time to think. A person goes ripping through life, and there’s never any time to think. Since he turned his wings in—threw them away, actually—he certainly needed to take stock, to figure some things out, put his life on some new path.

Looking out the window, his eyes stopped roaming when they reached the Corvette. Kane Industries bought it. Mainstream Kane Industries bought it. Charlotte, he was just beginning to see, was right about a lot of things. The Vette, he decided, had to go. And he would stop living off the proceeds of Kane Industries.

He smiled as he anticipated telling Charlotte what he was doing. He’d tell her after he finished school and traveled to the West Coast. After he found her. It was nice having something to look forward to.

Amos knew what to do with the Vette. A dweeb named Bob Roberts lived next to him in the BOQ. Short guy, skinny, thick glasses, pimples, and he practically drooled when he looked at Amos’s car. Bob drove a Volkswagen Bug. The gray paint job made the car look as though it had eczema. It didn’t have a passenger seat in front. Amos told him to get the eyesore checked out by a mechanic, put new tires on it, and get the passenger seat replaced, and he’d trade him. Even Steven.

Bob would be a happy dweeb, and so would Amos—be happy, that is.

The next day, Amos discovered he had to revisit the money decision. It would take two months to get his allotment sent to his new Navy Credit Union account. Surviving on navy pay would wait until he got to his new squadron aboard the *USS Solomons*.

He easily passed the final test, loaded his worldly possessions into

his VW, and headed west. The car looked like crap, but it hummed a steady, reliable tune. He made it in three days.

Amos had two weeks' leave before he had to report to San Diego for more schools. He checked in to the BOQ at Naval Air Station Alameda, picked up a letter waiting for him, dumped his bag in the room, and asked for directions to the O Club. After three days of eating junk food in the car, steak and a baked potato and a nice French wine beckoned. He walked the two blocks to the club. The VW motor drone had burned into his brain so deeply he still heard it even though he'd turned the damned thing off fifteen minutes before. Over the first glass of Haut-Médoc, he opened the envelope. Charlotte had been happy to hear from him. She looked forward to his visit. Charlotte didn't write long letters.

By the time he got back to his room, though, the world was mellow and silent, and he was half-asleep before he undressed.

He fell on the bed. Tomorrow, he'd find Charlotte. Tomorrow, she'd be at the café. Or they'd know—

Tomorrow, she'd be at the café.

Stretch suited up for his night hop, grabbed his helmet from the hook, and started walking toward the rear of the ready room. Carl Midlin stood in the aisle between the last row of chairs. Suddenly, his mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened. Jon felt a shudder through the hull of the ship. He spun around to see what Carl was looking at. The landing-area TV screen was whited out.

“Fire. Fire. Fire on the flight deck!” blared over the ship’s announcing system.

“F-8 hit the ramp,” the SDO said. “Guy didn’t get out of that one.”

Stretch threw his helmet onto a chair, tore out of the ready room, and ran forward in the passageway, shoving people out of the way. He entered a ladder well.

“Coming up!” he hollered and bulled his way onto the ladder. Sailors pressed aside until Jon stomped past. He cleared the first ladder and raced around to the next ladder. He hollered and shoved and moved up more slowly because the crowd of bodies coming down was heavier. Just as he neared the top of the ladder, someone grabbed the back of his torso harness. He thought he was going over backward but managed to grab onto the rod banister.

“Where the hell you think you’re going?”

The hand released him. He turned and looked into Bear’s ferocious

face. "Get back to the ready room. The ship could call for you to man up your airplane anytime now. You have to be in the ready room."

"I'm going to check on my friend," Stretch said. "Be back in a minute."

Stretch took one step, and Bear grabbed him again. Stretch twisted violently and jerked free of the hand.

"In a minute," Jon said. "In a minute."

Bear reached for the front of Jon's torso harness. Jon shoved his hand away, and Bear tumbled backward down the ladder.

Nobody had been on the ladder below when Bear fell. The sailors had gotten out of the way of the altercation.

Jon looked at him lying unmoving, his lower left leg at a funny angle. Jon wanted to go on to ready room one and make sure Greg was all right. He almost did, but after a moment's hesitation, he rattled down the ladder. Half a dozen sailors huddled over Bear. Jon grabbed one with third-class petty officer insignia on his shirt.

"Note the frame number. Get to the nearest place with a phone and call the bridge. Tell them about the fall. Possible broken bones. The man is unconscious."

The sailor left. Jon bent over and felt Bear's chest. He was breathing.

"Injured man, second deck, frame 125, port-side ladder. Away the medical response team," came over the ship's announcing system.

"Okay," Jon said to sailors standing there. "The quacks will be here soon. Best go on about your business. I'll stay with him until they show up."

Looking down at Bear, he felt no remorse. No sympathy, either. Growing up, he'd been in a few fights, and bullies had beaten the crap out of him. He learned a few things about fighting. Fighting a bigger person, a little guy had to be willing to hurt the larger one to stop the aggression. He'd asked Bear to stop the physical intimidation. Still, he was bound to get in trouble for what he'd done. Major trouble, maybe.



Teresa sat at the dining room table writing to Jon. A knock rattled the screen door in back. 2150.

Teresa turned on the outside light and opened the door. Amy and Mike Allison stood on the walk.

Mike began, "There was a—"

Teresa's hand went to her mouth.

"Jon's okay," Amy hastened to say. "Jon's okay."

Mike: "There was an F-8 ramp strike, though. The guy didn't make it."

"Our friend Greg Haywood was out there too. Do you know—"

"I don't know who it was," Mike said. "A fighter pilot from Miramar. If it was an A-4 guy from here, we'd know who it was."

"You want us to come in?" Amy asked.

"Mike, you're flying out to the ship tomorrow," Teresa said. "Thanks for coming over, for letting me know. Get some rest. Fly safe tomorrow."

Teresa closed the door and leaned her forehead against it. *The first night, God?*



The next day, at 1020, Stretch stood with his back to the bulkhead outside the CO's cabin. The door opened, and Red, the SDO the day before, exited and nodded to Stretch.

"Stretch," the CO called from his desk with his back to the door.

As Stretch entered and closed the door behind him, lean, wiry Commander Franks spun around and fixed hard eyes on him.

"Let's hear it."

He related the events of the previous evening, in detail, and mentioned Greg as the best friend he had.

"After the F-8 ramp strike, I wanted to find out if it was Greg. I

was sure we wouldn't be flying for a while. All I wanted to do was to go to ready one and check on him."

The CO: "Bear tell you not to go?"

"I didn't ask. I just left. Bear caught me on the ladder and grabbed me. I almost went backward down the ladder. Made me mad. I jerked away, and he tried to grab me again. I knocked his hand away. I was trying to get him to stop. He wouldn't. He went over backward."

"Bear wanted you in the ready room in case flight ops started up again. Fires on the flight deck always look bad. Sometimes they're not, and you're right back at it."

"Yes, sir."

"The F-8 driver, it wasn't your friend, I heard."

"Right, sir. It was a JG from Greg's squadron, but not him."

The CO rubbed his chin.

"There something between you and Bear?"

"Bear thinks I'm a sissy. He thinks he has to make a man out of me. I don't have anything against him."

"Last night, the SDO was going to cancel squadron flying, because we had no other senior officers out here; you talked him into going, anyway. You still think that was a good idea?"

"Yes, sir. I talked to Tuesday and Botch. We were all good to go. We all did okay out there last night."

"Bear said you came to see him this morning."

"Thought I should check on him, sir."

"Bear wouldn't tell me what you said."

"I just said I hoped he got better soon."

"You didn't apologize?"

"I did not."

Tuesday was waiting in the passageway when Jon closed the CO's door.

"You in serious doo-doo?"

"The skipper didn't say I was. We'll have to see."

“What I heard, Bear was having trouble letting go of the reins. The new CO and he were butting heads quite regularly.”

“So?”

“Bear’s got a concussion, broken collarbone, and a broken leg. He won’t be making workups with us. He won’t be going on cruise with us. AB is moving up to Ops. RT is taking over maintenance. The skipper may not be displeased is all I’m saying.”

“Where do you get your information?”

“JOPA has to have good intel. Otherwise, there is no protection for junior officers.”

Tuesday walked away and passed RT coming the other way. RT wore a flight suit and a look of concern.

“What did the CO do to you, Stretch?” RT asked.

“Nothing. I didn’t even get chewed out.”

“Guys in the ready room told me what happened. What’s your side of the story?”

Stretch told him.

“The CO didn’t punish you; are you punishing yourself?”

Stretch considered it and answered, “No.”

“Stretch, this coldhearted Jon Zachery I’m seeing, he reminds me of myself a few years ago. You think you can slough it off as Bear had it coming to him, which he may have. But I thought I was a tough guy too. This kind of thing sticks to your soul. It’ll come back after you get a bit older. Think about it.

“Now, though, tough guy, we’re flying this afternoon. Let’s get something to eat.”

Amos woke at 0730 feeling good, better than he had for a month. Great dinner the night before, eaten without pressure to scarf and get back on the road or eaten while driving. Breakfast secured at 0800. He entered the dining room at 0753.

Amos took a table in the nearly deserted room. A Filipino steward placed a plastic thermos of coffee on the table.

“Paper’s here.” Another steward offered a folded paper.

Amos thanked him and opened it.

Front-page headline: NO CHARGES FILED AGAINST NAVY DRIVER

Another steward, this one a young black man, brought his omelet. Ah, bacon. A nicer nose than the Haut-Médoc the night before.

He propped the paper, took a bite of the eggs, and began to read.

Five days prior, there had been a disturbance outside the main gate at Naval Air Station Alameda. Demonstrators, as many as a hundred, waved signs: No Nukes, Baby Killers, Vietnam War Immoral, Make Love Not War. As a navy sedan—with the base commanding officer, Captain Bob Carpenter, riding in the rear seat—approached the gate, the demonstrators surged into the street, forcing the driver to jam on the brakes. The demonstrators, an equal number of young men and women, shouted and waved their signs.

Witnesses said that the young sailor driving the car appeared to

be frightened. He began sounding the horn and inching forward. The protestors parted, and the car shot forward. A young woman fell in front of the car, startled perhaps when the car suddenly accelerated. The right front headlight of the navy car hit the protestor in the chest and threw her to the pavement in front of the car. Again the driver jammed on the brakes. After a moment of stunned silence, a couple of young men tried to open the passenger door of the navy car, but it was locked. Several young men began to beat the car with their sign sticks. The driver appeared to panic. The car shot forward, driving over and fatally injuring the young woman lying on the pavement.

He wondered if Charlotte had been at that demonstration as he poured another cup. He folded the paper to read the rest of the article.

After an extensive investigation by both naval authorities and the city police, it was determined that the navy driver was not at fault for striking the protestor with the car he was driving. No charges were filed against the protestors, although they were engaged in unlawful assembly and had in fact threatened violent assault on the persons inside the car. No one from the navy base would comment or answer questions. A spokesman for the police confirmed no charges would be filed regarding this incident.

The article continued on page 3.

The deceased protestor has been identified as Charlotte Wilkins.

Part 2



Hours and hours of boredom

Amos knew Charlotte died. Some dipshit sailor had been driving a navy captain, the base CO. Dipshit Driver had panicked and ran over Charlotte.

Amos didn't remember walking to the base CO's office. He found himself there, in front of a desk, with a woman behind it. She was Mom's age, dressed nicely, the way people did to make themselves look like other people should think they are somebody. It registered on Amos the woman was afraid of him. She pressed a button on the side of her phone. A buzzer sounded behind the closed door to Amos's right, Executive Officer in gold letters on the door. She had a phone to her ear, and she asked the exec to come out right away, please.

The door jerked open, and a man in a white shirt, black tie, no rank insignia without the coat, stood in the doorway, taking stock. Amos figured he was a commander.

"He demanded to know who the CO's driver was when the woman was killed," Mom's Age said.

The XO scowled. "Who the hell are you?"

Amos caught up to where his legs had taken him.

"Amos Kane. Sir. I'm a JG."

"What're you doing here? Why do you want to know about the driver?"

“He killed my fiancée!”

The XO had been leaning forward in a *put the pissant JG in his place posture*, Amos thought. The disclosure set him back. He recovered, charged out, and grabbed Amos’s arm, dragged him into the office, and closed the door.

“I’m sorry, what’s your name? Kane, right?”

“Kane.”

“I’m sorry about your fiancée. Sit down, why don’t you?”

Amos sat and then bolted up again.

“I want to talk to that driver.”

“Look, Mr. Kane. I know this is a bitch, but there is no way I’m going to let you talk to that kid. He’s not even here anymore.”

“That son of a bitch killed Charlotte.”

“Okay, I’m trying to have a little sympathy here,” the XO said. “But I have to ask. Did you know your fiancée is—was a fugitive? She skipped bail in Pennsylvania. Unlawful assembly and assault on a police officer. Did you know?”

“What?”

“So,” the XO said. “You didn’t know. How the hell’d you get engaged to that little commie bitch? Hah. No mystery there, eh?”

As quickly as his anger had deflated, it blew up again. Amos clenched his fists. Hitting the asshole became an overwhelming occupying force in his brain.

“Hey! Hey, Kane. Get a goddamned grip. You’re close to a trip to the brig.”

Amos tore out of there. Back at the BOQ, he stuffed his clothes into his suitcase and left. Driving, with no destination or direction in mind, he came to a freeway. A ramp led south. He had to go to San Diego. San Diego was south. He had almost two weeks to get there before his leave expired. Getting away from the base, though, was all that mattered.

That afternoon, he came to an oasis, a spot with a restaurant, a

liquor store, and a motel. He didn't want anything to eat. Normally, Amos didn't drink hard stuff. He didn't like beer. He liked wine. His dad drank Dewar's.

Days passed drinking scotch, followed by blackness, followed by total-body misery and puking, followed by drinking, blackness, and misery. One day, there was so much misery he didn't want to drink whiskey ever again. Nothing but empties in the damned room, anyway. He sat in the tub, the shower running hot on him. Eventually, the water turned cold, and cold to freezing. He got out of the tub shivering ferociously. He found blankets on a shelf in the closet behind the accordion doors.

He woke, hot under the blankets, opened his eyes, and shut them again. His head ached. Nails had been driven in his eyes, through his brain, and into the back of his skull. That's how he felt. After a time, he could keep his eyes open without feeling spikes in them. Later, he got up, showered again. A day passed with his body relearning how to take food without puking. In the afternoon, he drove an hour to get away from the motel he'd been in. The next day, he and his body learned how scotch could fit into his days without the necessity of encountering misery and puking. Before dinner, he drank a double. After, a triple. He slept until check-out time, rose, and drove an hour or two, moving steadily south a little each day.

He arrived in San Diego on a Saturday. On Monday, his leave expired and his school began. He woke at 0500, didn't pay attention to how he felt, swallowed a slug of Dewar's, completed his business in the head, ate a piece of toast, and drank coffee. After class, he had two drinks, ate, had three drinks, and flopped onto his BOQ bed. It was his routine until, five weeks into his eight-week school, he was called to the base CO's office.

Amos had hoped he could complete this last dose of training without drawing any attention to himself. Slither through the program like the other faceless numbers and move on. The call to

the base CO's office worried him. He parked in a visitor spot, entered the building, and climbed stairs to the second floor.

The CO's secretary knocked on the captain's office, opened the door, and announced Lieutenant JG Kane.

The young-looking captain picked up his phone and dialed. Amos watched him dial a nine to get an outside line, wait for the new dial tone, and then dial a long-distance number.

The captain had the physique of an athlete and close-cropped blond hair with a bit of curl. No wings, so he was a surface navy type. A Shoe, a pilot would call him in a voice dripping with disdain. But this guy, he was a "with it"-looking Shoe, Amos thought.

He said, "Good morning. This is Captain Chamberlain. I have him."

The captain extended the phone. "Take it," he said.

"Who is it? Sir."

He held the phone steady toward Amos and stared into his eyes.

"Hello?"

Mom. She was the last person he wanted to talk to. But Amos didn't have to talk for a while.

Mom always cut straight to the heart of a matter. Why hadn't he told her he'd turned in his wings? Why hadn't he phoned for almost two months? Did he have any idea how hard it was to track him down even after she got one of the state's representatives to push on the navy? She had talked to navy officers in Florida, Georgia, and two places in California, and she knew what happened and what he was doing. He quit flying, which he loved, and he chased after Charlotte like a dog in heat and lost her. "You've fallen into a bottle, haven't you?" she asked.

Before he could fumble an answer out of his mouth, she was speaking again.

"Just like your father. I was pregnant with you. A government contract his company expected to win, well, they lost and fired him.

It took me a week to find the motel he holed up in and a week to get him sober. If I have to come out there, I will. Captain Chamberlain assured me he could handle this. Now you listen to him, Amos. Give him his phone back.”

“Yes, Mother,” Amos said.

He handed the phone back to the captain. The captain listened, said, “Not at all, Mrs. Kane. I’m glad you brought this to my attention,” hung up, and pointed at a chair for Amos.

The captain pumped questions at him, and, at first, Amos responded with half-truths and partial answers. The captain, however, bored in, and finally, Amos caved. After a while, he felt like he had no secrets left. He tried another evasion.

“Captain, I feel like I’m wasting a lot of your time.”

“Mr. Kane, I get calls from mothers, of sailors mostly, and a lot more recently than used to be the case. It seems we’re scraping the bottom of the barrel to find enough people to man our ships for the damned war in Vietnam. I usually do not get mothers calling me about officers. Most sailor problems can be solved with a kick in the ass and an order to ‘Write your mother.’ You, Mr. Kane, have a drinking problem, which, now that your mother brought it to my attention, I can see in your face. We need to get you some help, to get you straightened out again.”

“I’ve only been drunk once in my life.”

“Yeah. I believe you, Mr. Kane. See, the problem is the drunk has lasted for a couple of months. I’m going to get you some help.”

“I don’t need any help. As of right now, I quit. I will not drink booze ever again.” The captain frowned. “Sir,” Amos said.

Amos could see the captain did not believe he could turn it off, just like that.

“Captain,” Amos said, “I’m sure you’ve heard others say they could cold-turkey quit. But they weren’t me. I quit.”

The captain studied him for a moment. “Okay, Mr. Kane. You’re

going to have to show me, right here, 0730, every morning. If I think you are handling it, fine, but if you backslide on me, even once, even a little bit, we do it my way.”

Amos shook his head. “I won’t backslide. Sir. Here, 0730. Okay to go to class now, sir?”

The captain stared at him and finally nodded, and then he stood and stared out his window at the piers crowded with destroyers. Amos figured he was dismissed, and he hustled toward his class, distressed at Mom for tracking him down, for calling the base CO, for thinking he needed her help. Amos Kane did not need her help. He didn’t need anyone’s help. Amos Kane was only drunk once in his life. They could write that on a tombstone and save it for him. Put it next to Mom’s pile-of-rocks fountain in the backyard, maybe.

Leaving Teresa and the kids was always a rip-your-heart-out affair, but it had to be done. There was the war, and he had to get to it. Getting to it wasn't all that simple, and it sure wasn't quick. First there'd been completing the pre-deployment training; then they had to cross the biggest puddle of water on earth, the Pacific Ocean. Throughout those weeks of plodding across the sea, he worried. What if right before the ship arrived in the Tonkin Gulf, the US Navy changed its mind again? Or what if the war ended? Wasn't that the way of things? Get close to what you want, then it is jerked away at the last minute.

But the month expired without that happening, and here he was, LT Jon Zachery, on the deck of the USS *Solomons* as it steamed in the waters off Vietnam and about to launch on his first combat mission. *On my first combat hop!*

Stretch was puckered. He had no qualms admitting to himself the pucker factor was high. Pucker factor. The high end of the scale was defined as a pilot got so scared so fast his sphincter muscles clenched with such force that the grommets in the ejection-seat padding were ripped out. The rest of the pucker-factor scale was of concern to earthbound mortals, not fighter-bomber pilots. The facts that he had set himself on the course to get to that precise point four years

prior, despaired over the endless string of obstacles encountered, and subordinated every other factor in his life to get there had no power to pull the needle off the high end of the pucker-factor scale. He'd been okay through the brief, through the walk across the flight deck, through preflighting his aircraft, but once he strapped in and waited for the starting cart to arrive in front of his plane, he became puckered. It was one of the things a carrier pilot had to deal with, the pucker factor. Just operating on a flight deck, catapult shots—those things were intense events, but atop that, his first flight into combat loomed.

When the deck crew removed the tie-down chains and removed the wheel chocks, and nothing held the plane on the deck but the brakes, Stretch pressed the pedals so hard his legs quivered. Then he started taxiing up the deck to the bow and the cats. As he moved, his anxiety ebbed a tweak. Then he moved onto the cat, and he followed the catapult officer's direction, ran the power up, checked his controls one last time, and saluted, signaling Stretch and his plane were ready for the shot.

Boom! Airborne, a second for his brain to recover from the shot, then he set the nose attitude to start the plane climbing, rolled into a slight bank, and raised the gear. These three actions came so quickly they were almost simultaneous. Flying. He smiled inside his oxygen mask. He forgot about his anxious moments. Flying!

After climbing and joining on his flight lead, Stretch was number two in a four plane. The lead, AB, had the formation at twenty thousand feet heading southwest. According to the briefing, the Warhorse flight would intersect the coast of South Vietnam twenty miles south of the DMZ (demilitarized zone). Ahead, Stretch saw four gnat-sized A-4s in close, fingertip formation, a division from one of the other Skyhawk squadrons from *Solomons*. The gnats turned right and spread out. Below them, blue sea gave over to a strip of white sand, and behind that, a swath of green. A shelf of white and

gray clouds chopped off the view of South Vietnam. To the right, totally shrouded in clouds rising from a couple of thousand feet to above their level, lay North Vietnam. They wouldn't get any closer to it than twenty miles. Still, Stretch felt sinister and hair-raising lethality radiate from it. Combat-experienced pilots spoke of the SAMs (surface-to-air missiles), the triple A, the North Vietnamese coolies lying on the ground and firing AK-47s straight up, filling the sky with lead. A ball of cold formed in Stretch's belly.

The day before, Butt Chin, the weapons and tactics training officer, had briefed the newbies. "Over South Vietnam and Laos, it's just like the saying 'Flying is hours and hours of boredom interspersed with moments of stark terror.' Thing is, the moments of stark terror are mostly landing on *Shitty Solomons* at night. I'm not saying you won't be shot at, but a couple of things to keep in mind, and they won't hit you.

"Pulling out after a dive-bomb run, get your nose above the horizon, stop pulling, roll a few degrees—one direction or another, no difference—and then turn a few degrees, and then climb back to altitude. Just change your vector a little to throw the gunners off. Don't do what Hack did last cruise. He'd been told to jink coming off his bomb runs, and, of course, the meaning was just the way I explained it. Hack was bombing a target just inside Laos, near the South Vietnamese border. He pulled out of his run, got his nose up to the horizon, and jinked left, and then right, and then left. He just kept jinking and staying down there at 2,500 feet. Altitude has more safety in it than jinking does. So do it the way I said."

Jink, Stretch reminded himself. The Butt Chin way, though. Not the Hack way.

Please, God, don't let me get shot down on my first hop.

They spread out as the gnats had. From AB's left wing, Stretch saw the clouds over North Vietnam behind Butt Chin's and Tuesday's A-4s. To him, the clouds masked the deadly threat spring-loaded to

kill him if he poked his nose above the DMZ, and he felt comforted that he wasn't as close to the North as Butt Chin and Tuesday were.

Please, God, don't let me get shot down on my first hop.

AB had turned right to a west heading. Butt Chin had anticipated the turn. Stretch hadn't noticed for a moment, worried about the North, about his prayer. Now he was behind. He'd have to waste gas to get back in position. AB would gig him for his mistake.

AB called the flight to switch to air force target control. Stretch worried he was closing too fast. He delayed switching frequencies as he concentrated on seeing the specific moment when he'd have to reduce power to avoid overshooting his position.

When he stabilized slightly aft of abeam lead's aircraft, he checked in. "Warhorse Two."

AB immediately keyed his mic and reported that he was a flight of four with six five-hundred-pound bombs each. Target control assigned a frequency to contact Covey 252, a FAC (forward air controller aircraft). Covey 252 told them he had a suspected truck park hidden in the trees. The target area was south of the DMZ and near the Laotian border.

During the briefing the day before, Butt Chin had explained that the North Vietnamese and Vietcong drove their trucks at night with the lights out and parked under dense jungle canopy during the day to avoid detection by the FACs. FACs called those daylight parking spots truck parks.

"Run in heading east to west," Covey 252 directed. "If you are hit, head south as far as you can go before bailing out. Target elevation is 350 feet. You have high terrain, two thousand feet, just north obscured by clouds. To the south, a little lower, 1,300 feet, also obscured. I'll mark the target with a smoke rocket after you call tallyho."

"Warhorse One, roger. Coupla' minutes out."

"Haven't had any triple A yet today," Covey said, "but expect it from all around, especially the high terrain to the north."

Stretch felt his heart thumping. His mouth was dry. He thought about taking a sip from his survival water bottle stuck in a pocket of his G suit, but he didn't want to be fumbling with his oxygen mask. The simple task of flying formation saturated him. By the background noise, he could tell AB had his oxygen mask clipped to the helmet by only one snap. Maybe he'd be that casual one day—tomorrow, maybe, if he lived through this day.

"Tallyho," AB called. "OV-10?"

Stretch kept his eyes on his lead, rather than look for the twin turboprop spotter plane. He didn't want to be surprised again by a sudden maneuver.

"Affirm. I'm in with smoke."

AB pushed his plane into a dive. To his right, Stretch saw Butt Chin and Tuesday remain at altitude. After AB and Stretch dropped their bombs, the other section would descend to twelve thousand feet and work the target. Ahead, he saw the twin-engine FAC in a steep dive. White rocket smoke streaked toward the dark green jungle below. A plume of white phosphorus smoke billowed next to a snaky thread of blue.

"Target's 150 yards west of my smoke, about fifty yards south of the stream. If you have me in sight, Warhorse, cleared hot."

"In sight. One's in," AB said. His plane rolled upside down, and the nose pulled down into a dive. Contrails spiraled off the wingtips. AB rolled upright and sped down into the canyon between walls of cloud to the north and south.

"Break left, Warhorse!" The FAC broke in. "Twenty-three mil's got you bracketed."

Stretch saw muzzle flashes coming from the top of the ridge to the north of the run-in heading.

"Warhorse Two is in on the gun," Stretch called. "FAC in sight."

"Abort, Two. Abort," AB called on the radio.

Stretch heard AB's call, but he wasn't about to abort. During the

preflight brief, AB told Stretch and Tuesday to do what they were told, to watch him and Butt Chin. “Do not try to think,” AB’d said. “Thinking’s the worst thing a newbie can do.” Stretch *was* thinking. The gun was a real target. It was obvious it had been positioned to defend the truck park the Warhorses were attacking. He saw the gun. He could take out the threat. And AB’s abort calls didn’t mean a thing.

Then he was wrapped up in flying, adjusting for the target. Elevation two thousand feet. He was too low for a forty-five-degree dive. Thirty, then. His switches were set to drop bombs one at a time. He selected pairs release, meaning he’d drop two bombs vice one with each push on the pickle, the bomb release button.

“Abort, Stretch. Abort, abort, abort.”

Again he heard the call, but he was bombing the gun.

Shallow dive. Airspeed good. Give it fifteen extra mils on the aiming dot. Pickle at 4,500. But it was more a matter for seat-of-the-pants flying than precision adjustments.

At 5,500 feet, a flock of red fireflies flew up at him from his aim point. Some went just above him, others just below. Five thousand. He mashed the pickle—the bomb-release button on the side of the control stick—three times, quickly, rammed the throttle to full forward, and pulled the nose to level, jinked right, then reversed and entered a cloud. He checked his attitude gyro. Ninety degrees of left bank. He leveled the wings and established a climb.

“Holy shit. Look at the secondaries.” It was the Covey. The drone of his turboprop engines hung as a backdrop to his transmissions.

“Two’s IFR, climbing on heading of 240, passing seven thousand feet,” Stretch radioed. Then he broke into the clear. He saw the OV-10 to his left and farther left and higher an A-4. He called tallyho.

“Damn, Two,” Covey said. “You set off the Fourth of July fireworks finale down there. They carted a lot of ammo to the top of that ridge. Still cooking off. Good job.”

“You got bombs left, Two?” AB did not sound happy.

“No, sir. Dumped ’em all.”

“Hold a thousand feet above Three and Four. Don’t run into them getting there. Break, break. Covey, Warhorse, you want me to work the original target?”

“Affirm, One. Good hit on your first pass. Go a hundred yards east from your hits.”

Stretch found Three and Four and climbed above them.

During the briefing that morning, AB emphasized a handful of points. “Watch me like a hawk. Don’t let your eyes roam all over the place checking out the scenic wonders of ’Nam. When we change radio frequencies, I want to hear a snappy Four, Three, Two in a couple of seconds. Ordnance switches. Have them set, except for Master Arm. That goes on when you roll in and off when you pull out. Don’t screw up the switches. Do not think. I will tell you what to do if it’s something other than what I just briefed.”

Stretch settled into an orbit, keeping the other planes in sight. He thought about AB’s final emphasis points. At least he didn’t screw up the ordnance switches. *Which is the only one of his dictums I didn’t violate. For sure, there’d be hell to pay.* Still, bombing the gun had been the right thing to do, no matter what AB would do to him.



Nearing the carrier, AB growled over the radio, “Stretch, don’t go into the debriefing room before I get there. This is one order you damned well better follow.”

Stretch landed first, went below, leaned against the bulkhead outside debriefing, and wiped his hands over his face.

Heck of a first combat hop, Stretch!

Leaving the target, the FAC had said, “Best BDA I’ve had in weeks. Good job.”

BDA, bomb-damage assessment. Stretch wished the guy hadn’t

been so effusive with the BDA report. AB disliked him more than Bear had. And that was before the hop.

AB stomped down the passageway toward him. Stretch pushed off the bulkhead. AB pushed a finger against Stretch's chest. "Stay," he snarled, and he entered debriefing.

He was in there awhile. Then the door jerked open. AB got in Stretch's face. "You're in hack," he growled.

"I have a tanker hop this afternoon," Stretch said.

"No." AB leaned over, his face close to Stretch's. Again, "Hack," with a finger jabbing his chest. AB leaned back and pointed forward. "JO bunkroom. Now."

Stretch had been in hack during his destroyer tour. On the destroyer, a steward had brought him his meals on a tray. AB probably wouldn't care if Stretch got anything to eat or not. One of the residents of the JO bunkroom, Lieutenant JG Simon Stokes, was called Hack. He acquired the name on the previous cruise. In a liberty port, he had tried to sneak two bottles of bourbon aboard the carrier. Crossing the quarterdeck, the bottles clinked. The squadron CO put him in hack, not for smuggling booze but for not packing the bottles better.

The bunkroom was empty. Everyone else was out flying, briefing, doing division officer duties. Stretch could only sit. He tried reading. He read half a page and couldn't remember any of it. He tried writing to Teresa. He wrote, "Dearest Teresa," and his ballpoint didn't know what came next.

Ever since that day back in their quarters on Naval Air Station Lemoore when Teresa had placed her letter next to his scotch, he worked to keep dark, soul-clouding thoughts out of his head. During his trip to the war on the destroyer, all he'd done was to defend against North Vietnamese and Vietcong attacks. By joining the aviation community, he could attack them. That was the whole point of the effort to get back to the war. Finally, he was there in the war, and he'd attacked the Vietcong. Because of that, he was in hack.

He recalled the visit with Rose Herbert and how she'd sneered at his *high purpose*.

Rose was right. How many times, Zachery, do you have to commit felonious stupidity before you get it?

Keeping the self-loathing at bay was like a physical struggle, a job for muscles of the mind, and it took all the strength he had to see that thought at the doorway to his mind and to keep it out.

Currently, he was reading a history book about the Korean War. He started reading the same chapter three times, but he couldn't concentrate. The facts from the page had nothing to stick to. He picked up a Louis L'Amour book, *Fallon*. He'd bought it because the title reminded him the squadron had deployed to Fallon, Nevada, for bombing practice. He also started that novel three times before, finally, his mind agreed to go with the cowboy hero of the story.

At 1107, a steward entered the room, a skinny young Filipino. "Morning, *sor*," he said, and he pitched into the business of making the beds. He worked quickly and efficiently, dumped the trash can contents into a garbage bag, and left without another word.

Noises from the flight deck penetrated the three levels above the JO bunkroom. It took a lot of special equipment to handle the airplanes on a carrier. Tie-down chains, tow bars, ladders, aircraft oil, and hydraulic fluid reservoir-servicing units. All of it designed to endure the treatment of nineteen-year-olds working sixteen-hour days goaded on by hard-assed, ready-with-a-boot-to-the-ass supervisors. Sailors didn't place pieces of equipment on the deck. They dropped them. Designed to handle such treatment, the equipment was heavy and sturdy, and it made noise.

From above and all around came thumps and scrapes, hums, and buzzes. Stretch sat at the desk. The desk was against the bulkhead walling off the room from the passageway. Next to the desk, lockers for six residents. A set of double bunks on the aft bulkhead, another against the forward, and a third set at the port-side edge of the flat

deck space. Outboard of the bunks opposite the desk, the bulkhead sloped at a forty-five-degree angle to the overhead. The JO bunkroom was situated where the hull of the carrier sloped from narrow near the water to broad under the flight deck. There was a porthole in the bulkhead.

Home sweet home.

Stretch listened to the noise. Everett Alvarez, the first pilot shot down in the Vietnam War, popped into his mind. Alvarez, shot down on that raid against the North Vietnamese PT boat base, Jesus, six years ago. That raid, in many ways, started the war. Stretch had been in college then. Everett had been a JG then. He couldn't remember which ship he'd flown the mission from. He wondered if Alvarez had lived in a JO bunkroom. Probably did. Alvarez flew an A-4 on that mission. Alvarez had been in a North Vietnamese prison for a long, long time.

As if hack compared to prison, Stretch chided himself.

That evening, the junior officers convened in the bunkroom for a first-night-on-the-line party. The porthole made the room an ideal party room. Empties could be tossed out the porthole. Jack Daniels quickly enlivened the celebration. As the third round was being poured, Tuesday infected the JO bunkroom with his indignation.

"Stretch killed a gun. Goddamned AB put Butt Chin in for a medal for killing the gun. Because Butt Chin hadn't gotten a medal the previous cruise. AB put Stretch in hack. Only the CO can put an officer in hack."

Stretch hadn't touched the booze. "Let it alone, Tuesday. It doesn't matter."

Tuesday capped the bottle. "It does matter," he said. He brushed his teeth at the sink in the room and charged out. Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang.

The CO wanted to speak to Stretch. "You're not in hack. You're flying tomorrow. Nice job today with that twenty-three millimeter."

Tuesday came back grinning. "The protective association takes care of junior officers," he said. "I told AB he was more concerned with ruling JOs with his iron fist than winning the war. I told him I was going to the CO. You might say he got a wee bit angry, but I went." Tuesday sat and said to Stretch, "You owe JOPA."

The next day, in one respect, it was as if nothing untoward had happened. But the CO had changed. After Bear had been hurt, AB took over Ops and Bear's demeanor. Now, the CO found his assertiveness and prodded some deference into AB.

"Hubris," Tuesday proclaimed. "The eighth deadly sin. AB crossed the CO's double-dare-ya line."

The XO, too, emerged as if he'd suddenly discovered he had a job to do. In a way, RT seemed to rise to the surface. Not that he'd changed, but something had, and he was visibly and actively a member of the group the JOs called the heavies, the officers senior to lieutenant. Stretch recalled the despondent atmosphere in the Raiders prior to the decommissioning. With the Warhorse CO acting like a CO, the spirit in the ready room improved markedly. It was how things were supposed to be.

At the end of the third day of flight Ops in the combat zone, a JOPA party was under way in the bunkroom. The next day, the carrier would shift from all daylight ops to the midnight-to-noon schedule.

"Why the hell is it," Tuesday proffered, "there are no toothpicks in the wardroom, when all we've done for three days is to turn Southeast Asian trees into toothpicks?"

Most of the targets assigned to the Warhorse pilots by the FACs had been suspected truck parks. To that date, not one truck park had had a truck in it.

"That's the way it was last cruise too," Hack said. "Most of us flew more than a hundred missions and had one decent target. The rest of the time, we blew up trees looking for one."

“Stretch got that gun,” Botch said. “Maybe it’ll be different this cruise.”

“Don’t count on it,” Red said. “Expect ninety-nine make-toothpicks missions and one where you blow up a truck or supply cache. Then you get a medal, and we can go home.”

Butt Chin jumped up. His face was red. He dumped his plastic cup out in the sink and left.

“Don’t let the doorknob hit you,” Tuesday said.

“Ease up on him,” Stretch said. “He didn’t want the damned medal. AB gave it to him so he could gig me. It’s not Butt Chin’s fault.”

“He shoulda’ turned it down.”

The door pulled open. Greg Haywood stood in the doorway.

“Let’s say hello to the F-8 pilot,” Tuesday said.

“Hello, asshole,” they bellowed.

“You guys know how much noise you’re making? Hold it down, for Christ’s sake.”

“Come on in,” Tuesday said. “Have a drink, Tiny.”

During the transit from Hawaii, Greg had been awarded his call sign. The largest pilot in the air wing was Tiny.

Stretch lay on his bunk, writing a letter.

“Say hi to Teresa,” Tiny said.

To Tuesday, “Hold it down.”

“Goodbye, asshole,” Tuesday said.

Tiny closed the door.

“What?” Tuesday asked Stretch. “You don’t think I should call your friend *asshole*?”

“Tiny can take care of himself. It’s Butt Chin I’m worried about.”

“Butt Chin has no honor.”

“He does,” Stretch said. “Look at him. What happened bothers him more than you ragging on him. Let him alone.”

Someone, it seemed, had let the air out of the party. The lieutenants, except for Stretch, finished drinks and left.

Jon Zachery, Stretch, had seen it happen during his destroyer tour. Intense personality clashes fired up, but then combat operations, dealing with a typhoon, or even managing a minor equipment repair shoved animosity into a corner; and for a time, observing how the antagonistic parties worked together, the animus appeared to have been totally forgotten.

On the *Solomons*, settling into flight operations pushed Stretch's differences with AB aside. By the third day of the midnight-to-noon schedule, routine settled over and into the carrier. Catapults fired twenty planes into the air eight times a day. An hour and a half later, another twenty launched, and the first wave landed. Over the beach, the ordnance was dumped on either South Vietnam or Laos. The missions were the same "suspected truck park," afternoon after afternoon, night after night. Flying half the missions at night produced the same result: toothpicks.

For Stretch, sleeping, eating, and flying comprised his days. Routine ruled. But it was aircraft carrier routine. Routine and boring are, in many endeavors, brothers. On the *Solomons*, the pilots had stored memories of destructive and deadly fires on other carriers, *Oriskany* and *Forrestal*. Stored too were the two F-8 pilots lost during training prior to arriving in the combat zone, one Stretch's first night

aboard the carrier and the second during night ops near Hawaii. Stretch had altered his man-up routine slightly. In addition to saying hello to his airplane, he said, “Hello, bombs,” to remind himself he had three tons of explosives latched to the bomb racks.

Routine did another thing, which Stretch didn’t notice for weeks. Routine, with days full of flying, ripped days off the calendar at a goodly clip.

Solomons flew from noon to midnight for two weeks and then flew midnight to noon and, after two weeks of that, switched back to noon to midnight. On an afternoon, a week into the latter schedule, Stretch was scheduled to fly with RT on a bomb mission to Laos.

In the prior-to-flight briefing, RT covered a formation he wanted to try. After they dropped their bombs, and during the flight back to the ship, he wanted Stretch to fly in front of his plane and above his altitude by a couple of hundred feet. Stretch had never heard of such a formation. Normally, a wingman flew slightly aft of the leader and slightly stepped down. In combat, all the senior officers wanted their wingman positioned abeam, not slightly aft.

Back in Lemoore during training flights, Bear had emphasized wingmen flying abeam, or even forward of abeam, but never aft of abeam on the lead aircraft. Bear had drawn the formation on a whiteboard.

→	→	→	↑↑Wingman 1
Lead →↑	→	→	↑↑Wingman 2
→	→	→	↑↑Wingman 3

Bear had said, “The flight’s mission is to attack a target. The lead’s job is to find the target and position the flight so we can bomb it. The wingman’s job is to watch for threats to the formation from aft and to lead’s opposite side. The lead has to watch his wingman. If you fly position 3, it is easy for you to keep track of me, but you make it hard for me to see you. I want you to fly position 1. If you are there,

keeping track of you is easier. I can spend more time finding the target and watching for threats in front of us. It's harder to fly up there, no question, but it contributes to mission accomplishment. Got it?"

Stretch begrudgingly admitted that Bear made sense.

Prior to the flight into Laos, RT sounded an awful lot like Bear as he explained the formation he wanted to try.

"I don't understand what you want me to do," Stretch said.

"You weave back and forth across my nose. You'll be blind for a few seconds when you have to reverse course."

RT demonstrated with his hands.

"I'll have to use a lot more power than you. I'll burn more gas."

"Stretch, you're not as dumb as you look."

After thinking about it, Stretch concluded: If Bear's formation made sense, RT's made more sense. It was taking the benefits from flying wingman position 1 and moving it a notch further.

It wouldn't be easy to fly, but he'd give it a try.

They launched, flew to Laos, and made toothpicks. On the return flight across South Vietnam, RT ordered the new formation. Stretch went to full power, pulled up, turned to the right away from RT to get some separation, and then he started weaving back and forth across his flight lead's path from five hundred feet above. Unnatural act was his first thought, but after a couple of weaves, he got the hang of it. Burning a lot of gas was his second thought. He was at full power, while he knew RT cruised at a more conservative fuel flow. Stretch pulled the power back to try to save some of his fuel, but then, as he pulled hard to reverse course, his plane buffeted as he came close to stalling. He eased back-stick pressure and went back to full power.

I hope like hell RT knows what he's doing to my gas.

RT used wing dips to signal turns in the direction of the dip. Stretch pulled hard to get inside of the turn and made himself blind on RT. Unlike flying with Bear, Stretch trusted RT. "I'll tell you when to reverse," RT'd said in the brief.

“Stretch, reverse.”

Stretch turned hard, and there was RT’s plane, perfectly positioned. They practiced a few more turns. Then RT pumped his nose up and down, the signal for Stretch to snuggle up, to join in close formation. Alongside, he used hand signals for his fuel state: 2.6 (2,600 pounds). RT signaled 3.8. The math was easy. RT had fuel to spare. Stretch would be below bingo fuel before landing time.

Stretch expected RT to lead them to a tanker, but he didn’t. Stretch bloated with an urgency to say something about his fuel state over the radio, about the risk RT was expecting him to carry. But he kept his mouth shut.

After landing and parking, he shut down with eight hundred pounds below bingo fuel. If he’d have had to divert to Da Nang, it would have been a near-run thing. He deplaned angry and in a hurry to confront RT.

Standing inside the island, Stretch waited for RT. “Why didn’t we tank? Jesus, you ran me low on gas. What the hell were you thinking?”

RT waited patiently until Stretch finished venting.

“The formation worked better than I thought it would,” RT said. “One of these days, Stretch, you and I are going to fly that formation over North Vietnam. Several times a month, we fly cover for photoreconnaissance flights. That’s what I want to use it for. I hope we get a chance to practice it a couple of more times before we head to Japan for Christmas.”

“Yeah, but the gas—”

“I knew how much gas you had.”

“Why didn’t we go to a tanker?”

“Somebody else might need the gas more. Plus, I wanted you to see that bingo fuel isn’t a magic number—that you don’t die if you get below it. You had gas for five stabs at landing.” RT flashed a rare smile. “You had a lot of gas left, Stretch.”

Stretch’s righteous indignation deflated. Still, he thought RT was

telling him the same thing Bear had tried to ram down his throat so many times. Safety margins are established, but sometimes a pilot has to ignore the margin to get the job done. Like the peacetime fuel safety margin could be another weapon in a combat pilot's quiver. RT—and Rose, he recalled—gave him things to think about.

“The important thing, Stretch, the formation, you picked it up quickly. With you in front of me, I don't have to take time to look for you. I am always looking where we're going. I always have you in sight. I trust you to cover behind, to warn us of any threat from there. Trust me to take care of the front. And you. And your gas. When you came alongside after the practice, I thought you'd be 2.3.”

RT spun on his heel and stomped down the ladder.

Stretch frowned, and then he followed.

During three late December days, Amos spent short hours in US Air Force transport aircraft and long hours in passenger terminals between flights as he island hopped from California to Japan. The trip terminated on Christmas Eve with a six-hour bus ride from a Honshu US Air Force base to Yokosuka Naval Station and the bachelor officers' quarters. Amos's head buzzed like an overloaded transformer. He wanted to throw his clothes in the trash, brush his teeth, shower, and sleep for two days. Behind the BOQ check-in desk, a second-class petty officer, a Filipino, read the orders Amos had given him.

"Sorry, Lieutenant Kane. Carrier *Solomons* in port here. You check in there."

"Listen, Petty Officer"—Amos fought to keep his anger under control—"I haven't had any sleep for three days. Do you have a room available?"

"USS *Solomons* in port. You check in there." The Filipino petty officer wore a poker face, but Amos was sure the guy enjoyed the hell out of jerking an officer, an American officer, around. Amos considered pushing it but snatched his orders, wondering when the hell something had gone his way.

"I've got a seabag," Amos snapped. "Get me a car."

The petty officer hesitated for a moment, and then he picked up a phone, dialed, and arranged for a driver. Amos hoisted his seabag and settled the strap over a shoulder. The bag felt heavy. *Probably because I'm so damned tired*, he thought. Outside the Q, he waited for his ride to show up.

What he had wanted to do was to get a room for a couple of days and check in to the carrier at 0300 on December 26. Nobody would be up and around. Even the drunks would all be in bed. He wouldn't have to meet anybody but those on watch. No need to grip glad-hands and explain where he came from. He did not want to explain himself to anyone, but especially not to a bunch of damned pilots. After Christmas, people would come back from leave, and he'd be there. Established. A fixture. Well, Christmas Eve, how many people would be around?

One too damned many, it turned out. The battered navy passenger van deposited him at the foot of the forward officers' brow, and Amos climbed the steps with the burden of his bag and crossed to the quarterdeck. The officer of the deck checked his orders and directed the messenger to escort Amos, and carry his bag, to the Warhorse ready room. There, he found the squadron duty officer, an older lieutenant, probably ex-enlisted—Midlin, his name tag read. Also there, the guy who became Amos's boss the moment he checked aboard, Lieutenant Commander RT Fischer.

RT was glad to see Amos and wanted him to come with him to the O Club. All the officers were there, except Carl Midlin.

"Sir, if it's all the same—"

"No lame excuses, Amos. Come on. You'll be in the JO bunkroom. I'll show you. Then climb into civvies, and we'll head over to the club. We can talk on the way."

Deodorant, clean T-shirt, unwadded wadded-into-a-seabag shirt and pants, and they were ready to go.

"You been sick, Amos?" RT asked.

“No, sir. Why?”

“Your trousers have a lot of extra material at the waist.”

Amos hadn't paid attention before, but RT was right. The waist of his pants bunched as he tightened his belt. He hadn't been interested in eating since he found out about Charlotte.

“I haven't been sick.”

“You're not Naval Academy. No ring. So, OCS. Most JOs' trousers get tight after they leave Officer Candidate School.”

Amos didn't say anything. RT stared at him for a moment and then led the way to and across the quarterdeck and into chilly air clothes could not keep away from skin. As they walked, RT pumped questions at him like a defense attorney on a shaky witness. Amos shivered and concocted curt, dissuasive answers out of a brain fuzzy with fatigue and anger that, once again, he had no say in what was happening to him. His new boss wouldn't take the hint, though. The interrogation continued throughout their trek.

In the O Club dining room, RT introduced him to the CO, XO, the Ops O, and the admin officer, a lieutenant whose name was Skunk. He'd remember Skunk. His hair, at least, black with a large apostrophe of white over his left ear. The CO stood, welcomed Amos, and shook his hand. The XO said his name. The Ops O had eyes like a meat-eating bird's. Those eyes scanned Amos down and then back up. The lieutenant, Skunk, nodded. As admin O, he filled a lieutenant commander job. The navy was dicked up just then, trying to manage the war. Amos was exhausted, but he still noticed how uncomfortable Skunk was dining with the heavies.

“Come on, Amos,” RT said. “The JOs're next door.”

In the bar, only one table hosted occupants. A cheerful noise rose from it as if the drinkers performed, like a dress rehearsal, to an empty theater. Perhaps the Filipino bartender and the Japanese cocktail waitress counted as an audience. The dozen or so around the table were engrossed in a game. They didn't look up at RT and Amos.

A guy lifted a dice cup from the table. “Read ’em and weep.”

“Red’s out. Bring ’em out, Butt Chin.”

“Hold up a minute,” RT said. “This is Amos Kane, guys. He just checked in. Our new maintenance control officer. I’ll leave him with you.”

RT left silently over the carpeting as the circle of eyes studied, measured, judged.

“Say hello to the new guy!” a slender, sandy-haired guy enthused.

“Hello, asshole!” they responded faithfully to their cue.

For a moment, Amos entertained the notion that it felt so damned good to be included in something so familiar and where he belonged. As quickly as it came, a sense of exclusion oozed down out of his brain and ossified into something cold and black in his core. He wanted to fight those damned pilots and their exclusion, but out of the fog in his head, he couldn’t focus enough energy.

Amid insider jokes, hooting and laughing, naming themselves meandered around the table. The names were obvious: Butt Chin, Red, Hulk. Until, “Ah’m Fireball,” drawled a speed bump into the recitation. When it picked up again, he couldn’t recall a single nickname.

Then a beefy black-haired guy said he was Botch and, “This’s Tuesday. He’s the head of JOPA.”

Sandy Hair was Tuesday.

“JOPA?”

“Junior Officer—”

Amos cut Botch off. “I know what it stands for. But it’s not real, just a stupid thing JOs talk about.”

“In the Warhorses, it’s real,” Botch said. “Sit down, why don’cha? Beer’s a nickel.”

A short, stick-thin guy stood, grabbed Amos’s arm, and pulled him onto the chair he’d vacated. He dragged another from the next table. “Courtesy of your friendly neighborhood Hulk.”

Hulk? The little fart was called Hulk?

Tuesday took one of three beer bottles from in front of the guy next to Amos and slid it to him. Amos pushed it back to the center of the table.

“What’s your story?” Tuesday asked.

“Story?” Amos asked, thinking, *Arrogant prick!*

“Yeah. Most guys come to a maintenance job after either washing out or dropping out of flight training.”

“What’re you doing, Tuesday?” the one next to Amos, another short guy—Stretch, maybe—piped in.

Amos didn’t need him or anybody. “I was on my fifth night-carrier landing approach. Guy ahead of me was slow clearing the landing area. I got waved off. I was at bingo fuel. After landing at Cecil Field, I drove home. Drunk driver ran me off the road. I hit a tree. Banged my head. Ruined my depth perception. That’s my story, asshole.”

As Amos stood and walked away, he heard, “Don’t go away mad.” It was Tuesday. Only one person laughed.

“Wait up.”

The short guy caught up to Amos at the front door.

“I’ll walk back with you. In case you don’t remember, I’m Stretch.”

As they walked, they hunched into a biting wind. Amos stepped up the pace. Stretch practically trotted to keep up.

“Long haul crossing the Pacific. Military transports the whole way?”

Amos grunted. After another lame attempt, Stretch gave up. They got back to the ship, and Amos was glad, briefly, that Stretch was there. He couldn’t remember where the JO bunkroom was.

Dearest Teresa,

24 January 1971

In a way, days are all the same out here. One good thing about that is mail comes on Sundays, too, just like any other day of the week. Today, I got the first audiotape of you and the kids. Such a glorious thing to hear your voices, and Jennifer, our little talker, and Edgar Jon with his “Hi, Daddy,” and your “Say something else,” and his “No.” I hear you thinking, *The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree*, or some such wisdom. Anyway, good to hear your voices without the pressure of how many dollars a minute a phone call costs.

Our second-line period goes as the first went. We are busy. The days are full, or rather, the half days and half nights are full, since we are flying noon to midnight or the loathed and detested midnight to noon, where my body clock refuses to adapt itself to an upside-down day. Every day, or night, in my bunk, I think about priests and their vow of celibacy, and I wonder what goes through their minds when they are in bed. I asked

our chaplain. You're probably horrified. He said, "You think because we're priests we're not tempted?" Rose said something like, "Take sex and digestion out of a man, and there's not much left." I confess to lusting for you, of a sacramental kind, of course. But I miss you in many ways that have nothing to do with sex.

Changing the subject, sigh. I was so driven to get out here, to the war. Now that I'm here, it doesn't amount to much. We fly, drop bombs, come back and land. The next day, the same thing. Nothing we drop bombs on seem like real targets. Anyway, it seemed so important to get out here, but now that I'm here, it doesn't seem important anymore. When it's time to come home, I'll be happy. The Warhorses will decommission, and there'll be that prospect of a no-load job again for the rest of my service. *Whatever will be will be*, as Doris Day sings.

When he finished the letter, he thought, as he always did, of the things he didn't write about. The tracers rising from the dark jungle, the gut-twisting tension on the catapult at night with recognition of the fact that if something went wrong, a pilot had a second to recognize the problem and to react. At the start of the cruise, AB had briefed the pilots on Westpac rules, which had nothing to do with flying. There were three of them: Outside the twelve-mile limit of continental United States, whatever an officer does is his business, as long as it doesn't violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Do not write letters about what other officers do. Do not write about the war, flying combat missions, or anything about carrier flying being dangerous. Do not talk about those subjects during phone calls. "Even you, Botch, ought to be able to remember three things," AB had said.

“That doesn’t leave anything to write about,” Mike “Alice” Allison had said.

“Following the rules is important, but not writing at all is better than following the rules,” AB had replied.

Observing AB’s Westpac rules was okay with Jon, and he had one of his own. His job description, in his mind, began with “Kill the enemies of your country.” He couldn’t write or talk about that. He would always remember how appalled Teresa had been when she saw him fight the college guys the Night of the Dog Poop. But even with all the rules, Alice was wrong. There were still plenty of things to write about to Teresa. Actually, it was almost a Westpac rule to write to her every day.



“The squadron gets one or two photo escort missions a week over North Vietnam. Everybody has flown on those missions but Tuesday, Botch, and me,” Stretch said to RT.

“We’ve discussed the topic several times in department head meetings,” RT said. “AB says newbies ought to be excluded from those missions. For now, all of us—CO, XO, and me—agree. Later in the cruise, you’ll get to fly one of those.”

RT shook his head. “Good thing you don’t play poker, Stretch; what you’re thinking is written all over your face. If you stay in the navy, you might want to think about that. If a senior officer tells you something you don’t agree with, he’ll see it. Career limiting, not having a poker face.”

“I’m not staying in. I’m not worried about that.”

“In civilian life, you’ll have bosses too.”

Stretch had no argument for that thought. They sat across from each other in the dirty-shirt wardroom with their aluminum trays in front of them. “On our flight this afternoon,” he said, “I think we should try your formation with a full load of bombs and fuel. Other

times we've practiced, it was coming home with no bombs and light on fuel. If the formation doesn't work with weapons aboard, it won't be worth anything."

"It'll burn a lot of gas on the way to the target," RT said.

"What'd you tell me the first time you got me to fly your formation?" Stretch asked.

"AB says newbies ought to keep their mouths shut. He's got a point."



After coasting in over South Vietnam on the way to a target in Laos, Stretch moved forward, made two turns, and slid back into normal position on RT's wing.

"You try it," Stretch told him.

Stretch assumed the lead. RT flew the forward wingman position. After he reversed twice, he, too, quit.

After they returned to the ship and the ready room, RT admitted his great new formation was no good with a load of bombs. "Every time you reverse direction," he said, "all your speed bleeds off. Oh, well, I thought the formation was worth trying."

"I didn't believe in the idea at first," Stretch said. "Now, I get it. It's for photo escort, and the weapons load-out is different on that mission."

"Yes, two missiles and two bombs. Still, it's two thousand pounds of ordnance vice the three thousand you have with six bombs. That one thousand isn't going to make much difference."

"It's not just the weight, RT." Stretch opened an A-4 tactics manual. "Look at these drag numbers. The drag is a big part of making the plane fly like a pig. A big difference between our six-bomb configuration and what we'd get if we took the auxiliary bomb racks off the planes."

RT rubbed his chin.

“What the heck,” Stretch said. “Why don’t we try it? Configure two planes with four bombs, all on parent airplane stations, no auxiliary racks. I bet it’ll work. A couple of less bombs on one mission sure isn’t going to affect the war effort.”

“AB will be against it.”

“AB is against everything anybody else thinks of.”

“It’s not just that. Bear and he both pushed to get the airplanes configured for a mission and then don’t change them. Putting auxiliary racks on and pulling them off a number of times leads to bombs hanging up, duds. Problems. That’s what he’ll say.”

“Why—”

“I got it, Stretch. I know how to get this done. AB won’t like it, but I think the XO will. New subject. How would you like to be ordnance division officer? Time to rotate you into maintenance department, and as head ordie, your guys will be responsible for those configuration changes.”

As ordnance division officer, Stretch again worked for RT. He’d liked working for him before, and the ordnance job added new challenges. He liked that too.

Stretch met with his division chief petty officer in the ordnance office on the 01 level. He explained to the chief the configuration changes he wanted to do. He explained how difficult it was to fly the photoreconnaissance-protection mission in the high-drag weapon loadout. A configuration change could make a lot of difference.

“So, Chief,” Stretch said, “I know it’s tight just getting planes loaded with bombs from land time to the next launch. I know uploading auxiliary bomb racks adds more work into that tight window. But on the photo missions, the pilot will be a lot more effective, and it will reduce the chances he’ll get shot down. The question is, will the reconfiguring increase chances of hung bombs or duds?”

“Sure as shit, Mr. Z.,” Chief Leutkens said. “Dropping aux racks for one flight and then putting them back on again ...”

Sailors, maybe military people in general, had a natural tendency for shortening spoken words, shaving syllables. Stretch had been Mr. Z. before.

The chief stopped talking, stood up, walked around Lieutenant Zachery in the cramped space, and sat back down again. He studied his division officer. Lieutenant Zachery looked the chief in the eye.

Six foot, thirty-nine-year-old Chief Leutkens looked fifty-nine. Circles under his eyes, a puffy-cheeked face. Hefty, hard-looking shoulders. The soft belly bespoke supervision of, rather than engagement in, muscle-toning endeavors. Stretch already knew the hours his chief kept. He was on the flight deck during flight ops. After flying secured for the day, he stayed with the night shift long enough to ensure all scheduled repairs and maintenance would be completed prior to the first launch the next day. And he always showed up two hours before the end of night shift to check, again, on progress.

“It’s important?”

“Yeah, Chief. Mr. Fischer and I both think it’s important enough to try.”

“Okay. We’ll do it. We’ll do a second set of system checks to make sure we get those damned racks back on right. No friggin’ hung bombs, no friggin’ duds. Not on a Warhorse airplane, by God.”

They shook hands.

“Mr. Z., how’d you get the Ops O to go along with this?”

“He didn’t go along. Mr. Fischer went to the XO.”

“He’ll be pissed, the Ops O will. Each time you practice with this configuration of yours, you’ll carry two less bombs on each plane. Squadrons are judged on how many bombs they drop during a cruise, not if you destroy worthwhile targets. How a squadron does reflects directly on the operations officers—as if they had anything to do with loading the bombs or fixing airplanes to load bombs on. It’s a fucked-up war.”

“Yeah, some things, maybe a lot of things in this war are screwed

up, Chief. But look at our War of Independence. Tell me that wasn't a goat rope. Look at all our wars. In World War II, soldiers and sailors invented new words to describe how messed up things were so much of the time. SNAFU. Situation Normal, All Fouled Up. War is not a clean and orderly business. Lots of young people back home say we shouldn't be here, that the war is immoral. Our enemy said, 'We will bury you.' They tried to bury us by proxy in Korea, and they are trying the same thing with the North Vietnamese. That makes it okay by me to be here. That makes it okay to fight in the middle of all kinds of stupid and asinine policies. So what can we do? We work our butts off to make sure our part of the war is not dicked up."

Stretch stopped, embarrassed.

"Hell, Mr. Z., I said we'd reconfigure your airplanes."

"Thanks, Chief. I'd like to tell the troops about it."

"You think I won't sell your program right?"

"Not at all. If the troops should happen to think reconfiguring is a dicked-up idea, I want them to know it came from the newbie ordnance officer, not the got-his-stuff-in-one-sock chief petty officer. Tonight, right after the last recovery. Keep the day guys on for seven extra minutes so I can talk to both shifts."

Two days later, RT and Stretch flew together again, both their aircraft configured without auxiliary racks and loaded with four bombs. Stretch was in 503. When RT signaled him to commence, Stretch moved into the RT formation and began to maneuver the airplane. He was ecstatic. The reduction in drag made the formation idea workable.

They switched positions. RT flew the forward wingman position. He too was pleased with the performance of the airplane. After they landed, the ordies loaded auxiliary racks back onto the planes. AB flew 503 on the following launch.

Stretch and all the Warhorse ordies managed to be on the flight deck, including the night-shift crew, for AB's recovery. They all knew there'd be hell to pay if the Ops O brought bombs back. But his plane was clean. As AB climbed down the boarding ladder on his plane, Chief Leutkens asked, "Duds, sir?" AB shook his head. Chief Leutkens grinned, and he flashed a thumbs-up to his division officer.

That night, an F-8 hit the ramp. A lieutenant in Greg Haywood's squadron was killed. Immediately after the crash, Jon felt as if a spirit of gloom entered the ship forward, passed through the hull,

and touched him briefly, and then the spirit continued on its way and exited at the stern. After a second of pause, Jon went back to what he'd been doing, reviewing performance appraisals on the petty officers in his division. Later that night, as he was writing his letter to Teresa, he reflected for a moment on the matter-of-fact way he'd accepted the death of the F-8 pilot. It hadn't been Tiny. It hadn't been a Warhorse pilot, and there was work to do.

Fifteen airplanes diverted to Da Nang while the crew cleaned debris off the flight deck. An hour and a half later, the ship launched the next go. Back on schedule.

Two weeks later, again during night ops, *Solomons* was turning left to position the ship into the wind for a launch. Gusty winds drove rain in sheets across the flight deck, rendering the footing treacherous. If a crewman fell and slid, the rough nonskid on the deck would rip clothing and flay off skin. By the time they climbed into their cockpits, pilots were soaked. The deck crew was sodden.

Two A-4s in the stream of planes taxiing to the cats had come abeam the island when the bow of the carrier hit a wave. The ship heeled right. Many of the taxiing aircraft braked to a stop. The carrier rolled back to the left, tilting the deck the other direction.

An A-4, heading for the starboard cat, had not stopped with the first roll of the deck. At the second roll, the pilot jammed on his brakes. His plane started to slide to port, slid into another A-4, and both aircraft, brakes locked, skidded toward the edge of the flight deck. Crewmen rushed to the planes. Some tried to push against the wings to stop one of the planes. Others put chocks around the main wheels, but nothing arrested the two ungainly fourteen-ton machines' inexorable slide. The nosewheel of an A-4 dropped over the deck edge, and the pilot ejected with a bang and a bright flash. An instant later, another bang, another flash. A second A-4 had dropped off the deck and into the South China Sea.

Then the deck steadied, leveled. Pilots sat in their cockpits, bathed

in red light, waiting for something to come over the radio. The radio was silent except for a buzzing in the earphones when a ship radar antenna on the mast above the island swept through its circle. Stretch sat in his plane behind the starboard cat. He saw flight deck crewmen tossing life rings over the port side.

“Okay, boys and girls,” the air boss said over the radio. “Plane guard destroyer is picking our people up. Launch ’em.”

The plane on the starboard catapult ran its engine up. Behind the jet blast deflector, Stretch jammed his feet against the brake pedals. He felt as if he were skidding aft. The plane launched, the jet blast deflector dropped, and Stretch was surprised to see he hadn’t moved. He taxied onto the catapult.

Carrier aviation, Stretch thought, and he pulled his mind back to psyching himself for the cat shot.



On the flight deck, from behind the island, Amos had watched the planes sliding. As men started rushing to stop the sliding planes, an impulse almost goaded him into motion. But he stayed where he was until the cat fired. Then he worked his way aft, and he entered the ship from a starboard catwalk. There’d be an investigation. They’d want to talk to witnesses. Amos didn’t want to talk to them. He hadn’t seen a thing. He hadn’t even been up on the flight deck.



After he returned from his flight, Stretch learned that a destroyer recovered both pilots and two enlisted men. One, a plane captain who tried to save his plane had gone over the side with it. The other was a ship’s company safety petty officer blown over the side by the blast from the first ejection. Lucky, those two. Another enlisted crewman

from an F-8 squadron was missing and presumed lost at sea. No luck at all for the F-8 guys.

The next day, flight ops began again. Jon thought a visitor would have had no inkling that anything untoward had happened the day before. Going on that day, routine operations.



Just before the end-of-the-line period in February, a photo recce (photoreconnaissance) mission appeared on the schedule for the next day. Stretch asked Your, the schedule officer, if he could work him onto one of the four planes. Your, Lieutenant Steve Carson, wore a Your Name Goes Here name tag.

“Sorry,” Your said. “AB already picked the pilots.”

“How about the tanker on that launch, then?” Stretch asked.

The next day, as the mission tanker, Stretch briefed with the photo bird and his fighter escort, Greg Haywood. Stretch would accompany the four Warhorse A-4s and the two F-8s—one the photo, and the other Greg. The A-4s would provide surface-to-air missile protection for the photo mission. Stretch would tank the F-8s. They would fly the route fast with afterburners guzzling gas.

The photo bird was coasting in fifty miles north of a city called Vinh in North Vietnam. The photo-bird pilot would call out code name checkpoints as he proceeded south along a major highway. The A-4s could not keep up with the speedy fighters, so they positioned themselves along the route. When the right code word was called, the A-4s would know their mission—to cover a particular segment of the route—was complete, and they could return to the ship.

AB and Butt Chin had been scheduled to cover the northern part of the recce route. Butt Chin downed his plane, however, and Red, in the spare aircraft, had launched. The XO and RT flew the other two aircraft. RT intended to show the XO his formation idea. All four Warhorse aircraft flew the mission with the aux bomb racks removed.

After he completed his tanking mission, Stretch was supposed to return to the carrier. Instead, he flew south, about twenty miles off the coast, listening to the photo pilot call out his checkpoints. No question—the guy was going fast. Stretch knew the miles between the checkpoints. He knew how fast an A-4 could fly the route. The F-8s could scoot.

The checkpoint names ticked off. The mission was almost complete. An impulse goaded Stretch to turn right, push the power up, go as fast as the pig tanker configuration would permit, and fly at least a foot or two inside North Vietnam. The impulse was there, waiting, anticipating. But Stretch decided that impulse was too much like the Johnnie Walker had been. Like his honey-I'm-home drink. No. What he would do was to see if he could finagle a way to be the spare aircraft the next time the Warhorses got the photo protection mission. Especially if Butt Chin was scheduled to fly it again.

Something was going on with Butt Chin. More often than not, he downed his planes on night flights, and the pilot in the spare aircraft launched in his place. And then he downed his plane on that day's mission over the North. Since the start of the first-line period, none of the eight photo recce missions had been fired at. Still, the North was not Laos or South Vietnam. The guys who'd flown over North Vietnam before the bombing halt in '68 talked about the triple A and SAMs. A lot of both up there, up north.

After one more day on the line, *Solomons* would head for the Philippines and a week in port in Subic Bay. The mood throughout the ship rose to near body-levitating levels. On the first night recovery, however, an F-8 hit the ramp, not as catastrophically as the previous crashes had been. The pilot got his plane into the air, and he was last seen climbing in a slight left turn. There'd been no radio transmissions, and the carrier never picked the plane up on radar. Another fighter guy lost, everyone assumed. On the last recovery of the line period, however, the Warhorse CO was approaching the

THE JUNIOR OFFICER BUNKROOM

ship when he saw a survival flare fired just to the right of his flight path. He radioed the ship, and the rescue helicopter was vectored and recovered the F-8 pilot.

Prodigal became his new call sign.

Teresa did not drink coffee. Amy Allison, from next door, managed the coffeepot for the three of them who did. Teresa, Amy, Karen Carson, and Rita Nelson ate breakfast together at Teresa's quarters every Saturday morning. They took turns bringing groceries and cooking. Karen's son, Steve Junior—call sign JR—slept in Teresa's playpen in the living room. Rita had no children. Edgar Jon played with a fire engine on the rug. Jennifer, on the sofa, paged through a book.

The ladies sat at the table drinking coffee and reading pages from letters Jon had sent to Teresa.

"I told Mike," Amy said, "that we compare letters. That it was obvious that he, Steve, and Red take turns writing each week. I told him I suspected Steve scheduled their times to write letters on the flight schedule. Of course, it took a month to get an answer to my letter. He just said there's nothing to write about. Every day, it's the same boring routine. Fly to Laos, bomb trees, and come back to the boat."

"Thank God Jon writes every day," Karen said.

"And that Teresa shares." Rita raised her cup from the saucer in salute.

"Shares some of it," Amy said.

“Such a pretty blush she has,” Rita said.

A regular part of the weekly breakfast was jabbing at Teresa about the unshared portions of Jon’s letters. She still blushed ferociously, though the joke had run for two months, ever since Amy had learned that Jon wrote daily.

“Last week, we had letters written on a knee-board card while he was flying a tanker,” Karen said. “Isn’t he afraid of running into another airplane when he’s writing?”

“Jon said he does it just like when he’s flying instruments. A pilot has to discipline his eyes to scan all the important instruments. When he’s writing a letter, he writes a line, and then he looks all around for other planes, and then he writes another line. It’s safer than just flying around in a circle over the carrier for more than an hour going brain-dead. That’s what he wrote last week. This week, I got one that I’m not sure I want to share.”

“Oh, get it,” Rita said. “Is it racy?”

“Well ...” The word was drawn and halved, syllabically.

“Get it. Get it.”

Which woke JR.

“Uh-oh,” Edgar Jon said, pointing at the playpen.

“My fault,” Rita said, and she lifted JR, wrinkled her nose, and carried him—arms extended out in front of her, head averted, and grimacing throughout the journey back to the dining room—to his mother.

“What?” Rita asked of the looks.

When Karen returned with a happy JR, Rita said, “Ah, the smell of baby powder in the morning.”

The ladies laughed. Rita wore an “Ah, the Smell of Jet Fuel in the Morning” T-shirt.

Teresa held up an envelope. “A perfect preamble to this letter.”

“Baby powder?” from Karen.

“No.” Teresa lifted the envelope flap.

Rita exclaimed, “Eeyew! Toilet paper.”

“Jon binged into Da Nang three mornings in a row. Really bad weather system stuck over the ship. In this letter, he said he landed at 0300, and it was the only paper he could find. Before he started the letter, the sirens went off, and everybody had to hustle to a bunker. The air wing sent forty planes to Da Nang that morning, so there were forty F-8 and A-4 pilots in nothing but skivvy drawers and flight boots packed together.”

Rita grinned. “There’s a picture.”

“The Vietcong fired three rockets at the base. The last one hit close enough to the bunker that dirt rained down on the guys. They didn’t think the rockets hit anything of value. When Jon got back to the Quonset hut BOQ, there was no water. A rocket took out a pipe. That’s what’s in the letter.”

Silence settled over the women at the table. Jennifer looked over her shoulder at them. Edgar Jon was building something with Legos. JR was occupied, intently, with taking possession of his mother’s glasses.

As if by vestigial Neanderthal telepathy, each woman settled into introspection about plane crashes, aircraft sliding off the decks of aircraft carriers, rockets landing on air bases in Vietnam, and black cars visiting the family housing area in Lemoore.

Jennifer closed her book, ran to her mother, and scooted onto Teresa’s lap.

JR was about to vocalize his frustration over his inability to grab the glasses.

“Crap,” Rita said. “The cruise is half-over. It’s hump day. Where’d this mood come from?” She got up to start on the dishes.

At 0100, Amos figured all the sawdust heads in the bunkroom would be asleep. Tuesday'd said there'd be an off-the-line party that night. Amos wanted nothing to do with the party or the guys who'd be there. He especially didn't want to see that damned Stretch Zachery. Every night, he lay on his bunk and wrote a letter to his wife. He hated seeing that, seeing what Stretch had. And the asshole, everyone else would be asleep, but there he'd be, his bunk light on and scribbling away. The bunkroom belonged to Amos as much as it did to the others, but there were only a couple of hours each day when all of them were either asleep or gone. Tuesday was another asshole. He never missed an opportunity to dig at Amos. Stretch and Tuesday, the two of them set his teeth to grinding. The pilots had come off two weeks of midnight-to-noon flying. That schedule always exhausted them. The party had gotten under way around 1900. Surely they'd all be passed out or asleep. And Amos was tired as hell.

Climbing the familiar ladder leading up a level from the forward port corner of the hangar bay, from behind him, came sounds that made him smile. The cacophony of grinders, teeth-rattling rivet guns, the whine of hydraulic power units as sailors tested the landing gear functioning of an A-4. *Whine, clunk*, gear up. *Whine, clunk*, gear down. *Whine, clunk*.

Those noises had nothing to do with his job,: ensure spare parts were ordered, tracked, and delivered and to oversee completion of aircraft records. The records, somewhat like a health record, listed all the maintenance actions on each of the squadron's airplanes. Sailors working for Amos did the actual work. He spent fifteen minutes a couple of times a day on the job. The rest of each day, he did what he wanted to do, which was to be among all those activities keeping the birds flying. He put in long days on the flight deck and the hangar bay. The sailors liked him because he helped them. He didn't care about their affection, and he didn't care about gaining RT's approval for all the above-and-beyond-the-call-of-duty things he did to make the maintenance department hum.

The only thing he cared about was the airplanes. The airplanes' purpose was to fly. He helped them fly. The fact that a pilot sat in the cockpit barely registered. The airplanes themselves, though, were fascinating creations. The strength of the machines, which absorbed the violence of the cat shots, the energy of the arrested landings, which people talked about as a controlled crash, and still being light enough to soar up miles above the earth and reach six hundred miles an hour. He hadn't appreciated the technical marvel airplanes were before. He'd taken them for granted.

When thoughts of flying and Cool Hand Duke tried to enter the center of his mind, he stiff-armed them, and by an act of will, he locked those things out, kept them in the periphery, and away from where important things were decided. Charlotte was in one of those outside rooms, next to the one labeled Scotch whiskey. By an act of will, he kept the doors on those things shut tight.

He had stopped at the top of the ladder, listening especially to the landing gear on 507, one of his airplanes, cycling up and down. The landing gear had a lot of switches and locks, which were hard to adjust just so, and hard to keep in place through the carrier ops' regimen of violence. But his A-4s could handle it. His aircraft were marvels.

Amos started walking down the passageway in the dim red light. He passed a couple of staterooms, and he heard it. Party noise. Standing at the door to the JO bunkroom, the celebration was a long way from winding down. He turned away and walked back to the ready room, intending to sleep in a chair.

Just inside the door, Petty Officer Morris was behind the three-and-a-half-foot-high counter where the pilots signed for aircraft.

"Thought you were hitting the sack, Mr. Kane."

Amos shrugged.

"Oh," Morris said. "Off-the-line party."

Sometimes it seemed like the enlisted men knew more about what was going on than the officers did.

"What do you have planned for the in port time? Leave to Manila?"

Amos shrugged again.

"Chaplain Sampson has organized a trip to an orphanage. Fix-up work, butcher a couple of pigs. He's taking a bunch of canned food for them. If you don't have anything else to do, want to come along?"

Amos was not looking forward to Subic Bay. There wouldn't be much work on the airplanes. He did not want to hang around with pilots. He didn't think he'd want to do something with an enlisted man, not if it didn't have anything to do with airplanes.

"I don't know," Amos said. "Maybe."

"If you decide to go, sir, be on the hangar bay at 0800. We're supposed to tie up at seven."



Amos woke in a rear-row ready-room chair at 0500. His neck and back ached. The underside of his eyelids felt like sandpaper. It was quiet in the ready room. That's what was wrong. Throughout the morning hours, people came in. Every time, they slammed the door.

They talked, left, and slammed the damned door again. They stopped coming, talking, slamming. The damned quiet was unnatural.

Amos went forward and up to the JO bunkroom. Inside, it smelled like sweat socks and whiskey. He opened his locker, grabbed clean skivvies and his toiletries kit, and slammed the door shut. The locker door sprang back open. Amos slammed it again.

“Hey!”

In the light from the desk lamp, Amos saw Stretch on his bottom bunk against the aft bulkhead of the space.

“Go to hell,” Amos said as he rattled his lock against the locker door.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Stretch bolt out of his bed and come for him. Amos backed away and cocked his right fist with the lock in it. He swung a roundhouse at Stretch’s head. Stretch parried and grabbed Amos’s throat with his right. The next thing Amos knew, he was on his back. He couldn’t breathe. Stretch had a knee on his chest. Stretch’s face wore the mask he’d seen on linebackers. It meant the linebacker was going to blitz with homicidal intent.

In his high school football games, he’d laughed at that linebacker look. In college, however, the linebackers got to him and leaned over him as Stretch was. That’s why Amos switched his college sport to baseball.

Stretch lifted his knee off Amos’s chest and settled into his bunk, his back to Amos.

Amos pushed himself up, rubbed his throat, rubbed his chest, stood, rubbed the back of his head. Botch had purchased a rug for the JO bunkroom in Japan. The rug and the dirty clothes carpeting the deck might have saved him from a concussion. Stretch was lying on his bunk, his back to Amos as if Amos were nothing to be afraid of. He considered grabbing the little twerp, jerking him out of bed, and punching the crap out of him. *It doesn’t matter*, he told himself.

Amos gathered his things from the deck and went to the head. He shaved, and in the shower, he decided he'd go with Petty Officer Morris to the orphanage. He needed to get away from the ship. He needed to get away from the JO bunkroom.



Amos heavy-legged it across the scoured-of-grass, packed-clay orphanage parking area and up the steps of the gray navy school bus, exhausted after a long day of hard labor under a hot sun. He stumbled halfway to the rear and slumped onto a seat. Both palms, painless as long as nothing touched them, were red and blistered. His hands reflected the fire in his shoulders and arms, which felt like dangling burning deadwood.

"Mr. Kane."

Petty Officer Morris stood in the bus aisle, a dark-haired, short, skinny guy next to him.

"Mr. Kane, this is Mr. Walters. He wanted to meet you."

Amos eyed the guy. About five-seven. He needed a haircut. Civilian clothes dirty and his shirttail half-tucked in, half-hanging out. Dark-brown hair covered the tops of his ears. The guy looked like a sailor who'd been nabbed by the shore patrol after being AWOL for three weeks. Next to him, enlisted man Morris looked like an officer. Even after a day of hard labor, the tail of Morris's civilian shirt was tucked neatly into his blue jeans. The sailor's short black hair was neatly trimmed. Even a trip to the barbershop and clean clothes wouldn't help the guy look like as squared away as Morris.

"Name's Walt," the ratty-haired guy said. "Mind if I sit?"

Amos scooted, reluctantly, against the side of the bus.

"Walt Walters," the guy said.

Walt Walters reminded him of his Ops O back in Cecil, Willie Williamson. The navy seemed to attract double-name guys. Amos

had run into Tom Tompson and Rob Roberts in flight training. "Walt Walters?"

"Yeah. I'm the third," Walt replied. "You applied for conscientious objector status, right?"

"What?"

"Objector. I was told you applied."

"Who the hell are you?" Amos asked.

"Walt Walters, the third. I'm a JG. Ship's company. In aviation supply. You applied for objector, right?"

Amos weighed telling the guy to get away from him or stepping past him and leaving the bench to him.

"Okay. Listen, your petty officer Morris is friends with a guy in my division, Petty Officer Mullins," Walter said.

Morris affirmed the relationship.

"So, okay if I call you Amos?" Walt asked, but he ran on. "Mullins was in VA-43 back in Jacksonville. When the navy decided to send the *Solomons* back to the war one more time, he got swept up in the scramble to fill billets. Turns out your guy Morris and Mullins grew up together in Nebraska. They were talking in my office one day, and Mullins said he'd been in VA-43. Morris said his division officer came from there too. Mullins said you'd turned your wings in and applied for objector, but your CO turned you down. That's how I know. Okay?"

Amos felt betrayed, as if the clean, compact world he'd built for him and *his* airplanes had been violated. He spun around and glared at Petty Officer Morris on the bench behind him.

"Hey, Amos," Walt said. "You wanna be pissed at somebody, take it out on me. Morris and my guy were just talking."

Walt began relating his college experience as the bus moved over the dirt lot and past the orphanage, a needing-paint, erstwhile-white, two-story mansion with a red-tile mansard roof. The bus rocked side to side as it climbed onto the macadam road leading back to

the base. Walt babbled about his aspirations to land a job with his business degree, but the draft board sent him a notice a week before graduation. He did not want to go to Vietnam as a soldier and fight in the immoral, undeclared war.

Amos sat up straight. Those words could have come from Charlotte.

Walt had marched, immediately, into the navy recruiter office. Being a supply officer, he'd originally thought, would keep his conscience clear. After serving on the carrier, though, he appreciated that every sailor aboard fought the war. The pilots were the ones dropping the bombs, but they couldn't fly if it weren't for the cooks, the guys in the laundry, and the supply people getting them their spare parts. When he realized that, Walt decided he had to do something about the US involvement in Vietnam. He found five other ensigns and JGs in the ship's company who felt as he did. They called themselves the Junior Officer Protest Assembly.

"Wait, like JOPA?" Amos asked.

Walter nodded, and Amos laughed.

"Yeah, that's why we picked the name," Walt said. "But the air wing guys call us the Dirty Half Dozen."

"I never heard that," Amos said.

"I've heard it, sir," Morris said from behind him.

Amos asked, "How do you get away with protesting on-board a carrier?"

"We're not getting away with much of anything right now," Walt said. "We all have written warnings in our records. Court-martial proceedings will be initiated on charges of conduct unbecoming an officer, dereliction of duty, and mutiny. They watch us like hawks, pardon the expression. Far as I know, there's none of the Gestapo on this orphanage trip."

"What'd you guys do to get the warnings?" Amos asked.

"The worst thing, from their point of view, was that Norman—one

of the Protest Assembly guys—and me joined in this protest outside the gate at Alameda in our uniforms.”

“Protest outside Alameda?”

“Yeah. We probably would’ve been court-martialed, but a girl got run over by a navy car—”

The second morning of the *Solomons*'s scheduled week in port, Stretch and Amos were the only two awake in the JO bunkroom at 0545. Both were getting dressed with the aid of illumination from their bunk lights. Stretch was scheduled to fly a postmaintenance check flight ashore. He pulled on a flight suit. Amos donned khakis. The two had not spoken since Stretch put Amos on the deck. Amos rarely spoke to the others in the bunkroom, but Stretch expected something. "I'll get even with you," or the like. It was uncomfortable turning his back to Amos too, but Stretch made a point of doing that, even when he felt most vulnerable, standing on one leg and pulling on his flight suit.

The ship's announcing system blared a sudden, "Reveille, reveille. All hands heave out and trice up. The smoking lamp is lighted in all authorized spaces. Stand by for word from the executive officer."

The announcement startled Stretch, and he almost fell as he hopped and pulled on the second leg of his flight suit. Normally, reveille was called at 0600.

"This is the executive officer. We just received a message directing us back to the Tonkin Gulf. All leave and liberty, all shore excursions are canceled. The ship will get under way at 1000."

Stretch sat on his bunk to tie the laces of his flight boots. He

looked up, and Amos was gone. The door to the bunkroom stood open. From the passageway, the trample of boots, but no one spoke. Snores continued to emanate from the bunks. He headed aft for the ready room. Halfway there, it dawned on him. He hadn't called Teresa. The first night in port, the phone center was always swamped. He'd intended to call that night.

His heart felt as if it hardened and chilled. He felt as if the rest of him lost substance, and the hard, cold thing dropped out of what was left of his body.

Instead of continuing to the ready room, he walked all the way aft and over to the starboard side. In the rear corner of the hangar bay, there was a speed bag mounted to the bulkhead. He worked the bag a couple of times a week. Outboard of the bag was a sponson, a balcony-like area furnished with a winch for handling mooring lines and two bitts. There were a couple of sponsons on the starboard side. At least one, he knew, had facilities to plug hoses into from an oiler so the carrier could refuel at sea. There were more sponsons on the port side. He didn't know the purpose of those, and the only one he cared about was the one aft and starboard. The bitts, steel posts, were there so that forearm-thick mooring lines wound around them on the carrier and around bollards on the pier, securing the ship to land. The bitts were also the perfect height to sit on.

Stretch sat on a bitt, looking out at the end of the pier and the built-up dirt and rock supporting the runway of Naval Air Station Cubi Point. He wasn't seeing the militarized tropical scene, however. His head was filled with Teresa's letters and his to her, as well, and how those letters anchored him. But he wanted ten minutes on the phone with her, something in the present, not ten days old. It would be a kick in the stomach if he didn't get to make a call.



Stretch walked into the ready room. On the front of chairs, the CO, the XO, and RT were huddled together. In the left rear corner, from behind the counter, Petty Officer Morris greeted Stretch and showed him the front page of the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper.

The top half of the page showed a US UH-1 helicopter lifting off a hilltop with a South Vietnamese soldier hanging on a skid.

“So much for Operation Lam Son 719, eh, Mr. Z.?” Morris asked.

Stretch flipped the paper to read the article. Operation Lam Son 719, the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, had turned into a debacle. The first paragraph nailed that pretty well.

The previous year, the planning for the operation had begun under the highest levels of classification. The pilots on the *Solomons* had not been read in. They had no idea that, as they flew missions over the northern part of South Vietnam and into Laos, below them, the ARVN, the army of their South Vietnamese ally, was staging to invade Laos. Once the stories began appearing in the *Stars*, none of them regretted or were concerned they hadn’t been told what was going on. “Need to know” governed access to classified information. They knew that made sense. And wasn’t it a kick in the butt to find out, finally, the South Vietnamese were doing something. They were attacking into Laos, cutting off The Hos Chi Minh Trail. At long last, one damned thing the United States did in the totally screwed-up damned war made sense.

The security screen had been lifted, and for three, maybe four days, the GI newspaper ran stories that pumped up the *Solomons’s* pilots like nothing else could. The war, at long last, made sense.

Morris said, “Coupla days ago, we thought, *Holy shit, the ARVN invaded Laos. The ARVN are kicking ass.*”

Stretch flipped the folded paper back to the top half view to the photo of the ARVN soldier who’d thrown his weapons away and just wanted to go home. The picture depressed him. Stretch looked

up and found Morris staring at him. Petty Officer Morris was a good sailor. He was intelligent, always wore squared away uniforms, and he worked hard. Stretch thought Morris expected him to say something. As if being an officer and a gentleman gave him a way to put that picture into perspective. That picture in the paper was a kick in the stomach.

“Well, Petty Officer Morris,” Stretch said. “I’ve got a post-maintenance test hop to fly.”

“That picture doesn’t bother you, sir?”

“Oh, it bothers me, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You mean,” Morris said, “like, ‘Lord, help me change the things I can and accept the things I can’t?’”

“I don’t put it that way. The world is going to hell in a handbasket, but the little bit I can control, it is *not* going to hell.”

The door to the ready room opened, and Amos Kane walked in and stood next to Stretch. He handed Morris a piece of paper.

“Morris,” Amos said, “aircraft maintenance logbook entries to make. Scheduled maintenance on the planes listed there is being deferred due to operational necessity.”

“Routine maintenance probably doesn’t matter, Mr. Kane,” Morris said. “Coupla months, and we’ll be decommissioned, and the airplanes will all be stuck in that air force base in the desert like mothballed ships.”

“Make the entries,” Kane said and left.

Morris stared at the closed ready room door.

“Probably my fault,” Stretch said. “I had a disagreement with him the other day.”

Morris tweaked a little smile onto one side of his face. “Not to worry. Just don’t let my little corner of the world go to hell, right, Mr. Z.?”

Stretch handed the newspaper back to Petty Officer Morris with thanks and a nod. Then he walked forward and took a seat behind the CO.

"It may be a couple of days before AB makes it back to us," the XO said. "He and his wife are on the way to a resort in the northern part of Luzon. I left a message for him. Not a good time to be down a pilot. Every one of us will be flying at least twice a day."

"Butt Chin agreed to stick with it, right, XO?" RT asked.

Butt Chin!

He must have talked to the CO or XO about turning his wings in. Thinking about it, he regularly downed planes at night. Since the first-line period, he'd been bothered by the stupid medal. Still, turn his wings in over that?

"Had to talk to him awhile, but he agreed to give it another go," the CO said. "We'll be doing day-only ops. Maybe that'll help him get back into it."

"We can take pilots off squadron duty officer watches," the XO said. "Carl Midlin and Amos Kane can cover SDO. How are we on airplanes, though, RT?"

"I have a half dozen on the beach. Five of them need maintenance. One's up for a test flight. Stretch is going to fly that this morning. Hopefully, it'll check out good. He can fly it aboard this afternoon. We can get two more up by tomorrow. Another the day after."

"Okay," the CO said. "XO, you're the operations officer. You and RT work out who to leave ashore to get our planes back out to the ship. After we pull out, the ship is going to steam at high speed back to the combat zone. When the South Vietnamese hauled ass out of Laos, they abandoned armored personnel carriers, howitzers, even tanks. We gotta go back and blow all that shit up before the North Vietnamese get their hands on it."

"Finally, we get to blow up decent targets, and it's our own stuff," the XO said.

"Heck of a war," RT said.

"But the only one we got," the CO said.

Night, at least early night, had become, for Teresa, sanctuary. The children slept, and aside from occasional fevers and bad dreams, they didn't need her with the intense dependence so manifest in sunlight. And early night, after dishes, after the house was in order, she wrote to Jon. In a recent letter, he'd written:

I feel as if our letters connect us at the *soulular* level. Lying on my bunk, my light on in the dark, snores all around, as I write, I find the things in my soul that drew me to you so powerfully in high school, and now draw more powerfully with each new day. I see that painting of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine reaching a finger to the finger of God to get the spark of life. For us, I see His finger nudging us together, and on my soul is His fingerprint, or knuckle print, maybe.

It was such a joyful thing, when the mail slot rattled, and Jennifer got up from wherever she was and ran to pick up the mail and bring it to her. And then, reading his letters a second time in the early night, and finding one or more of his thoughts to key off in her answering letter. She wrote pages and always hated to seal it "With all my love." That meant there was the late night to deal with.

As she readied for bed, she employed her logic against her sense of malevolence and threat slithering unseeable in blackness toward her babies and her, and each night found the logic powerless. At night,

women were vulnerable to evil that could only lust for fulfillment in sunlight. Night provided the cover for evil to act. Their months in Meridian, Mississippi, had reinforced that notion.

On their first Sunday in Meridian, at Mass, they sat in a pew with a colored girl sitting in the white Catholic service. The rest of the congregation had avoided the girl's pew even though the church had been packed. The KKK noticed and nailed a warning on their door. Klansmen had done other things to remind the Zacherys that they were being watched in the night.

And now, late night was when she worried about Jon. After she checked doors and windows locked for the third time, she worried and prayed for Jon's safety. It wasn't triple-A guns or the surface-to-air missiles she worried about. In his letters, he'd written there were no SAMs where they flew. Those were only in the North. And the triple A, they flew high above where those posed a danger. She knew he stretched—ha, Stretch—the truth. And even if he never really stated it, she gathered the sense that it was the aircraft carrier, USS *Solomons*, which threatened her husband. Planes crashed against the steel cliff at the rear of the ship trying to land. At least, to that point, it had been only F-8s, not Jon's plane, the A-4. But there had been the two A-4s that slid into the water that night as the ship turned and the flight deck tilted.

At least, she told herself, as she took her rosary from the nightstand, the carrier was tied to the pier in the Philippines for a week. For a week, she, the *Solomons*, wouldn't be able to kill any more men. At least, Teresa told herself, Jon would call that afternoon.

She prayed until sleep took her.



The phone blasted sleep to eyes wide open to blackness, heart pounding, head throbbing. It rang again and again. She picked it up but had no voice.

“Teresa?”

It was Jon.

Then he told her the *Solomons* had been ordered back to the Tonkin Gulf that day. The South Vietnamese attack into Laos had turned into a fiasco.

How many ways can my heart be ripped apart?

The carrier was not going to be in port for a week. The South Vietnamese army wasn’t taking over the war as the papers seemed to say. There was no light at the end of that tunnel.

It took such effort to swing her legs out of bed, to sit up. It took such effort to put her heart back together, to find something to relish in the sound of his voice, his living voice, in the right here and right now.

Amos walked into the main officers' wardroom on the second deck at 0620. He'd never eaten there before. Officers ate in one of two dining rooms on *Solomons*. Mostly, ship's company officers used the main wardroom. Air wing officers used the facility on the 02 level, where flight suits were authorized. It was called the dirty-shirt dining room. The two dining rooms were separated by four decks and by half the length of the ship. Attitudinally, the separation between the ship's company and the air wing officers was akin to the gulf between two wolf packs finding themselves, inadvertently, occupying the same hunting ground.

Amos walked to the table all the way against the rear bulkhead. No one else was at the table, but Walt had told him that's where he and his friends ate. He took a seat and poured the individual serving-sized box of Wheaties into his bowl. In port, they had fresh milk. About three days after they left port, the fresh milk would be gone, and all they'd get was the UHT crap.

"Amos."

Walt placed his tray on the table across from him. Five other guys arranged themselves on both sides of the table.

"I told the guys about you, Amos. That's Adam," Walt said,

pointing, and then he named the others. "Gerald, Mason, Norman, and Ralph. And this is Amos, guys."

They hi-ed and howdy-ed him. Amos missed the "Hello, asshole" greeting typical among aviators, almost.

"Do I have to grow long hair to eat with you guys?" Amos asked.

"Let your conscience be your guide," Walt said. "Nobody bugs us about our hair or uniforms. I think we give them enough things that are just over the edge they get tired of pinging on us."

"Trip back to the orphanage is off, I guess," Amos said. "According to what the XO said."

"It's off," Walt said.

"Damned shame too," Ralph said. "We finally get to do something worthwhile, and we have to go back to the goddamned war."

"Walt told me it was your fiancée got run over outside the gate," Norman said, his face as earnest as his voice. "Hard thing to see. Sorry, man."

Amos nodded. Norman and the others looked alike, mostly. All were skinny, about Walt's height or an inch or two taller. Hair brown to dirty blond and uncombed as well as long. Uniforms wrinkled. Brass belt buckles, nasty with green corrosion.

They all mumbled, "Sorry," and then they all started eating.

Amos didn't know how he felt about their sympathy. In a way, it was as off-putting as their appearance. In another way, though, it brought something comforting with it. It was the first time anyone had expressed any feeling for what had happened to Charlotte.

Looking at them huddled together at their pariah table, they chatted, bantered, and ate. Amos glanced around the wardroom, and at several tables, he encountered hostile stares. He figured during their workdays, the Dirty Half Dozen absorbed a lot of animosity from the other *Solomons* officers. Only when they assembled at their table could they shield each other from the hostility. He glanced around the wardroom again, at the other junior officers seated at the rows of

rectangular tables in that part of the dining area and at the section to the starboard side where the more senior officers sat at round tables. Amos realized the Dirty Half Dozen was doing more than comforting each other by being together. They were also thumbing a collective nose at the US Navy, its customs, and its traditions. They were thumbing their noses at the US Navy mainstream.

Amos wasn't a joiner. He wouldn't join their sloppy appearance, even though he could see how that would get to the guys in the junior officer bunkroom. Walt sat next to him.

"Okay if I join you guys, regularly, I mean?" Amos asked.

Walt grinned. "Sure. 0630, 1130, and 1730."

"Woo-hoo!" Norman exulted but not very loudly. "The Junior Officer Protest Assembly's enrollment is skyrocketing."

Walt nudged Amos's elbow. "Look around the room. If they could kill us with pooled hate, we'd all be dead right now. You sure you want to be part of this?"

Amos looked and found some fifty sets of eyes glaring at the pariah table. The looks, the palpable animosity didn't cow him, though. His spirits soared, and he felt better than he had in a very long time.

"Why don't we flip them the bird?" Amos asked.

"We don't want to do that," Walt said. "We pushed it enough with Norm hooting."

"That was pushing it?" Amos asked.

"That was pushing it. We've all been threatened. 'Cut your balls off.' 'Tie an aircraft tie-down chain around your neck and toss your worthless ass overboard.' Stuff like that."

"That's just school-yard bullshitting," Amos said.

"No, no, it's not. Out here on deployment, it's closer to the Wild West than to civilized behavior. One of the reasons we meet regularly for chow is to take muster, to make sure we're all still here."

Amos looked at his tablemates. They were all worried he was going to do something.

“We’re happy to have you with us,” Walt said, “but not if you’re going to act stupid.”

Amos slid his chair back and stood. “I’ll think about it,” he said.

He did think about it, all morning. The ship got under way at 0900, an hour earlier than the XO had said. It was important to get back to the Tonkin Gulf, apparently. There was a lot of work to be done on the Warhorse airplanes, and he spent all morning on the flight deck pitching in wherever help was needed. The airplanes, his airplanes, were marvels. He enjoyed the hell out of working on them. That’s what he’d do. He’d work on his airplanes. Walt and his band of sissies could huddle together at their table and concentrate on not making waves. Amos would not join them. At 1120, he walked into the dirty-shirt dining room, looked around, and changed his mind.

At 1131, he joined the Dirty Half Dozen at the pariah table in the wardroom.

In the bunkroom, the junior officers felt the vibrations thrumming through the hull as the *Solomons* steamed at twenty-three knots toward the Tonkin Gulf. Tuesday held up a *Stars and Stripes* for the others. The front page featured a photo of a healthy-looking South Vietnamese soldier clinging to the skid of a medevac helicopter. In the background of the photo, the top of a hill had been cleared of jungle.

"Back home," Tuesday said, "people were upset by that picture of the South Vietnamese general executing a VC with his pistol."

"The one with the naked girl running away from the burning village too," said Hack. "Those two photos define the war for lots of people ... back home, like you said."

"Anti-America, hippie, Commie assholes," Botch said.

"The naked girl pic," Tuesday said. "Nobody says how many GIs were killed by VC hiding in that village. Nobody asks what that gomer did before the general smoked him."

Botch poured whiskey into paper cups, and he said, "Anti-America, hippie, Commie asshole reporters." He offered a cup to Stretch.

Stretch shook his head and went back to his letter. He read over the half page he'd written for Teresa, crumpled it, and started over. Writing to her had always been easy. After "Dearest Teresa," words spilled out of him. But not that night.



The next morning, RT was scheduled to lead Hack, Stretch, and Botch on the 1000 go. When the four sat in the briefing corner of the ready room, RT asked, “Stretch, you want to lead?”

Stretch had been cleared to lead two plane flights the last-line period. He hoped he’d get a four-plane clearance before the cruise ended.

“Sure, RT. Thanks.”

“Don’t screw it up.”

They launched, rendezvoused, and headed for the coast-in point south of the DMZ. Stretch switched to air force target control frequency, call sign Hillsboro.

“Hillsboro, Warhorse. Four A-4s. Six five-hundred-pounders each.”

“Roger, Warhorse. Proceed to forty miles east of Tchepone. Contact Carlisle on three four eight point eight.”

Tchepone, a dot on the map, may have been a Laotian village. From the air, it looked like two red dirt roads had meandered to an inadvertent intersection. Stretch checked in with Carlisle and reported twenty-five minutes of playtime.

“Hold at twenty-seven thousand, Warhorse. I have fighters stacked below you all the way down to fifteen. I may not be able to get you in.”

Stretch climbed the flight, found air force F-4s holding a thousand feet below him, throttled back to save gas, and began to orbit.

The FAC was working planes one at time, asking for multiple bomb runs from each. The target area was obvious. A cleared hilltop. It was probably a firebase established to support South Vietnamese soldiers. The guns transported to the hill by helicopter, most likely. There wasn’t going to be time to get half the flights on target the way Carlisle was controlling. After ten minutes of holding, the FAC was still working the same two F-4s. Stretch ground his teeth.

“Carlisle, Warhorse. Any friendlies in the area?” Stretch radioed.

“Not now. I’m working a target,” Carlisle responded.

“You’re wasting time. Any friendlies?”

“No friendlies. Stay off the radio till I call you, Warhorse.”

“Negative. This is Warhorse. I have the target.” Stretch pumped the nose of his aircraft up and down, signaling join up. “I’m making a four-plane roll in from south to north.” Stretch started descending. “We’ll dump all bombs on one run. Get out of the way, Carlisle.”

“This is Carlisle. Abort, Warhorse. Abort.”

“This is Warhorse. I’ve got Carlisle in sight, plus two F-4s. In hot.”

“Blade is at fifteen.” Blade was the call sign of a flight of two US Air Force F-4s. “I’m rolling in behind the navy.”

“I’m at sixteen,” another air force flight lead called. “I’m next.”

“This is Carlisle. Abort. Abort.”

“Go home, Carlisle,” another radio voice said.

A part of Stretch’s brain registered the radio voices as the flights left orbits and lined up to make their own bomb runs out of the daisy chain that was forming behind him. Stretch followed the aiming dot in his gun sight as it tracked toward a circular sandbag revetment around a howitzer on top of the cleared hilltop. At five thousand feet, he pickled and pulled back on the stick. “Warhorse off the target,” he radioed.

“Blade’s in behind Warhorse,” Blade flight lead called.

Stretch jinked left and looked back. A massive secondary flashed white and then boiled up a yellow-and-orange ball of fire. Stretch turned back to the right and climbed.

“Blade’s aiming left of the navy’s hit.”

“Sixteen Thousand is in, and I’ll go right of navy’s hit.”

Stretch smiled in his oxygen mask. The leaders of all the stacked flights must have realized that if they used the altitudes they were holding at as their call sign, it would enable everyone to keep track of the other flights.

“Seventeen will go short.”

“Me too. I’m Eighteen.”

The flights were peeling out of the stack from the bottom. It couldn’t have been planned better.

Stretch pumped his nose, signaling the other three Warhorses to join up in close formation. Using fingers, he switched his flight to a new radio frequency. He could have used the radio but didn’t want to risk jamming the frequency the other flights were using back at the target.

Stretch expected RT to say something over the radio about what he’d done, but except for normal check-in calls with air traffic control agents over South Vietnam and with the carrier, the radio was silent.

After they landed on the *Solomons*, RT took Stretch directly to the CO’s stateroom.

“Stretch did a good job, Skipper,” RT said. “Our FAC would have wasted half the bombs he had to work with, but Stretch told him to get out of the way and rolled in with us in formation. Blew the hell out of the target. There were a lot of air force guys stacked up over the target too. They saw it the same way we did, I think. That the FAC was screwing it up. They followed Stretch in and used their holding altitudes as call signs. It worked out slick. Using the altitude call signs made it simple to keep track of all the planes out there. The only thing is, it’s the air force, you know? I just wanted to make sure you didn’t get surprised in case the boys in light blue want Stretch’s hide nailed to the bulkhead.”

The phone rang. Next to the black phone, Stretch saw a set of US Navy pilot wings.

“Skipper,” Commander Franks said into the handset.

He listened, swiveled his chair so his back was to the desk. He looked at Stretch, then RT, and then at the door to his stateroom and

listened some more. He spun around, cradled the phone, and spun again completing a circle.

“That was the ship’s XO. The ship received two messages from air force fighter squadrons based in Thailand. One said, ‘Sierra Hotel, Warhorse.’”

Sierra Hotel meant *shit hot*, which meant the air force sender of the message thought what Stretch had done was really cool.

“The other message,” the CO continued, “said the junior service found a reason to appreciate the senior, finally. It was signed Twenty-Six.”

The skipper’s blue eyes made Stretch fidget on his chair.

“Thanks, Stretch,” the skipper said as he picked up the wings from his desk. “Makes up some for this.”

Outside the CO’s room, Stretch asked RT, “Butt Chin?”

“Yeah,” RT said. “Near the end of last-line period, he was afraid to fly at night. He thought everybody considered him a shithead for taking your medal that first day. It ate at him. He couldn’t seem to get his head onto flying. The skipper thought he could get over it, gut his way through. He talked Butt Chin into keeping his wings. He was supposed to go on the 0730 launch. They took the chains off his airplane, and his legs started shaking. Then he couldn’t make his feet lift off the brakes.”

“That stupid medal. I told him I didn’t care about it.”

“I know you did. Thing is, he’s one of those who cares too much about what people think of him. You know what worries me about you, Stretch?”

“I don’t care enough about what people think, maybe?”

“Stretch, you’re not as dumb as you look, maybe.”

RT led the way back to the ready room. He told Stretch to sit down.

“I’m going to put you in for a Navy Commendation Medal.”

“For blowing up American stuff? I won’t accept it,” Stretch said.

“It’s for your leadership on the flight, not blowing up a target,” RT said.

Stretch shook his head.

“Listen, I understand how you feel. I do. But I really believe—”

Stretch stood. “After what AB did on our first flight out here, after what it did to Butt Chin, no.” He walked away.

AB returned the third day on the line. He led a flight in the afternoon during which Alice blew up a tank after twelve planes tried unsuccessfully to kill it. Tanks were tough targets. Trucks could be killed by near misses. A tank required a direct hit. AB wanted to put Alice in for a medal, but Alice said he would not accept it. That night, Tuesday decreed that no Warhorse JOPA member would accept a medal for any action associated with Operation Lam Son 719.

Solomons pilots flew two and three missions a day. They destroyed guns, trucks, armored personnel carriers, and stacks of supplies and ammunition. Prior to Lam Son, destroying any target such as those would have caused an explosion of high spirits of every man on the flight. LS 719 missions, however, torpedoed morale.

“How much shit did we give South Vietnam?” Botch asked. “Two weeks of Operation Mop-Up, and there’s still stuff to bomb.”

“Who the hell said the South Vietnamese were good gomers?” Hack asked. “They’re more of an enemy than the VC.”

The greatest threat during that time was from midair collisions. All the US services in Southeast Asia diverted their planes to Lam Son missions. On one flight, Stretch flew wing on Skunk. As they orbited above another abandoned firebase, two US Air Force F-4s flew right in front of Skunk’s aircraft, almost hitting him. Stretch had been looking down at the target.

“Goddamn it, Stretch,” Skunk said over the radio for everyone to hear, “I’m lead. I watch the target. You watch out so the goddamned air force doesn’t fly into us.”

Three weeks after returning to the line and flying nothing but

day missions, Operation Mop-Up was declared complete. That night, all the Warhorse pilots assembled in the JO bunkroom for a party. The CO, XO, AB, and RT stayed for one drink and got up to leave as seconds were being poured.

“Okay, guys,” the CO said. “You can get away with a little partying. It’s a screwed-up war. Our senior officers know that and understand how we feel about Operation Mop-Up. But there are limits. Be careful. Keep the noise down. Skunk, you’re senior lieutenant. Stretch is not drinking. Sobriety trumps rank. So, Stretch, make sure this thing doesn’t get out of hand. And, all you God’s-gifts-to-naval-aviation JOs, keep enough brain cells alive to listen to Stretch.”

Tuesday sat on the lone chair at the lone desk. He said, “Let’s all say good-bye to the C—”

“No!” Stretch leaped out of his bunk and pointed a finger at Tuesday. Tuesday was going to invite everyone say good-bye to the CO. The JOs would all shout, “Good-bye, asshole.” “That’s a limit, Tuesday. Don’t bust it.”

A certain irreverence from junior officers toward heavies was okay. To get away with it, the irreverent saying had to be clever and funny and short of outright sacrilege. Calling one’s squadron CO asshole to his face? That was a step too far.

Stretch and Tuesday glared at each other.

The door to the bunkroom closed. Stretch glanced up. The CO had left.

Stretch met Tuesday’s glare again. The others in the bunkroom were silent. Stretch felt everyone watching to see what would happen.

Month by month, Stretch had watched Tuesday get pushier and pushier with his head-of-JOPA role. It was supposed to be something to laugh about, as if a band of junior officers could protect themselves from the navy and senior officers. Tuesday was taking it way too seriously. He was taking himself way too seriously. Stretch had ignored

Tuesday's rants and pontifications up to the point where the CO appointed Stretch adult supervisor of the party.

The two junior officers stared at each other. Stretch knew there was more to the confrontation with Tuesday than imposing restraint on a party. At stake was a question: who rules the junior officer bunkroom, the squadron CO or Lieutenant JG Tuesday?

"Hey," Botch said, his feet dangling over the edge of his top bunk. "Come on. We were the left-in-limbo Louies. We stick together."

Stretch watched Tuesday's face. A confrontation between the two of them had been contained in Tuesday as if inside a taut balloon. Tuesday shrugged. Not that day, then. Stretch went back to his letter.

Sometime later, Amos entered the bunkroom, shucked his clothes, climbed up onto his bunk, and pulled the pillow over his head.

Tuesday stretched his legs out in front of him. "Everyone agrees this is a fucked-up war." He sipped his drink. "Even the CO said so. It's fucked up because both LBJ and Nixon worried—worry—more about the goddamned protestors than winning. The war, it's lost, but we're not quitting. How could a war be more fucked up?"

Amos rolled over and propped himself on an elbow as he glared at Tuesday. Tuesday grinned back.

"I'll tell you what we're doing," Tuesday said as he locked eyes with Amos. "JOPA is declaring war on the North Vietnamese and VC. We'll do like Stretch on the first mission of the cruise. He attacked the gun when AB told him to abort. Stretch took control of that mission when the air force FAC would have wasted tons and tons of bombs."

Amos climbed down from his top bunk, pulled his pants on, and left with his shoes and shirt in his hands. The door slammed.

"Don't go away mad, Amos," Tuesday said.

"Yeah. Just go away," Botch said.

"Why don't you guys ease up on Amos?" Stretch said.

"He's taken up with the Dirty Half Dozen, Stretch," Botch said. Stretch hadn't heard that.

THE JUNIOR OFFICER BUNKROOM

“Gospel,” said Tuesday. “But you know, with him in the group, they need a new name. Ratty hair, dirty fingernails, wrinkled uniforms. How about Maggot-nificent Seven.”

“Cool,” Botch said.

A week later and prior to reveille, the phone rang and rang. Stretch flicked on his bunk light, got up, and grabbed the handset.

“Petty Officer Oswald, sir. Ops O ordered an all-pilots meeting at 0600 in the ready room.”

“What’s up? This is supposed to be a day off.”

“I don’t know, sir. I was told to make calls. That’s all I know.”

Stretch woke his roommates and gave them the news. The junior officers crawled out of their bunks groaning, scratching, and swearing. Amos, from his top bunk, clearly enjoyed the discomfit of his hungover roommates. Two names, Amos’s and the Supreme Being’s, were treated with equal irreverence. Stretch was the last to leave the bunkroom. He looked at Amos. Amos stared back coldly.

Stretch stopped by the head and herded the gaggle of zombies out and toward the ready room. Then he went down to the hangar bay where Tuesday and Botch were sitting in Warhorse airplanes, breathing oxygen. Stretch got them moving too. He entered the ready room at 0557.

“Nice of you to join us, Stretch,” AB said from behind the speaker’s stand. “We’ve been assigned a special mission. There’s a lot to cover. Launch time is 1130.”

AB scanned the rows of pilots and grimaced. “Air force tasking

came in at 0300. For the past several years, weekly photoreconnaissance missions have been flown over the major highways in North Vietnam leading to passes through the western mountains into Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Before, always, the missions were flown at 1600.

"During Operation Mop-Up, we had three carriers on the line. The other two left last night. We think the North Vietnamese will not expect anything significant with only one carrier out here. And as I said, we launch at 1130. We expect to surprise the hell out of them."

"So what's the big deal, Ops O?" Tuesday asked. "You got us up to tell us we are going to take pictures of North Vietnam?"

"No, wiseass, that's not why I got you up. *Solomons* will launch every up bomber we have, not just a six-plane photo package."

"For a photo mission?" someone asked.

"Knock off the stupid questions," AB snapped. "We are certain there will be enemy antiaircraft fire and maybe SAMs. By the rules of engagement, we can shoot back, but the response has to be immediate. We can't call back to the ship and say, 'They shot at us. Scramble some planes.' They wouldn't get to the target for forty minutes. Too late. The bomber package has to be just off the coast, so the response time will be a couple of minutes."

"So what happens if the gomers don't shoot?" Hulk asked.

"I'm leading part of the photo protection package," AB said. "If the North Viets don't shoot at us, we get our pictures, dump the bombs in the water, and come home."

Behind him, Stretch heard Tuesday whisper, "Bet ya twenty bucks to one AB says he gets shot at."

Botch replied, "Make it a thousand to one, and I'll put up a buck."

"The CO," AB said, "will lead four planes on the antiaircraft response mission. We are anticipating the necessity to recover the first launch planes, rearm, and launch them again. The XO and RT will lead the second go. Pilot assignments are on the board there."

AB gave everyone a moment to study the board. Every pilot in the squadron was listed except Stretch.

"Stretch." AB looked at him. "You'll be duty officer today. I talked with the CO. He agrees we need a mature pilot on the desk today." AB looked back over the room. "First-launch guys, you need to get down to strike planning. The photo-recce route, expected threat sites, and other mission details need to be understood to a gnat's ass. As soon as first-go pilots finish, the space will be turned over to the second launch."

"Air force tasking, he said. Did you tell the air force JOPA declared war on North Vietnam?" Botch whispered to Tuesday.

"I'm on the first go, Botch. See if you can figure it out."

The first launch pilots filed out. The door closed on the excited chatter, which departed with them.

The XO and RT stood up from the front row chairs to the right of the aisle.

Stretch didn't pay much attention to them. He was thinking what his previous CO had said during the Raider's decommissioning: "Sometimes what our superiors tell us to do doesn't feel like service to our country. It feels like a screw job." Stretch wanted to fly on that mission. Just like all the rest of them did.

"Stretch. Hey, Stretch." It was the XO.

"RT and I are going to get some breakfast. Wanna come?"

"Come on," RT said. "It's going to get intense pretty quickly. You might not get another chance for a while."

Light operations secured at 1600. Amos and the Dirty Half Dozen had eaten dinner at their table in the wardroom. The dishes had been cleared. A few of them had coffee cups on saucers. There were still a number of officers seated at the other tables. The movie would begin at 1900.

“Anybody know what the movie is?” Walt asked. “Judging by the number of people staying, it must be a new one.”

“I think they’re all excited about the missions the ship flew today,” Adam said.

“Why the hell would these guys be excited about it?” Mason asked. “They didn’t fly the missions.”

“The pilots were sure as hell excited,” Walt said. “I was in a ready room talking to a maintenance officer when the guys came in from the first launch. The pilots were pumped. ‘Trucks burning on the highway for ten miles,’ one guy said. What’s that about? All we’re allowed to do over the North is photo missions. Take pictures, not drop bombs.”

Adam said, “The rules say if our guys get shot at during the photo mission, our guys can shoot back.”

“First place, Adam,” Walt said. “They are not *our* guys. Second,

the rules say the pilots can bomb the guns that shoot at them, not blow the hell out of trucks, which don't have any guns on them."

"So, Amos," Gerald said. "You hear the Warhorse pilots talking?"

Amos wanted to tell them about Tuesday declaring war from the JO bunkroom. There'd been whiskey, but Amos thought Tuesday had been serious. If he tried to relate the incident, it would sound like standard junior pilot braggadocio. And he, Amos, would sound like a whiny second grader tattling on a classmate.

"What'd you hear, Amos?"

Amos hesitated but finally answered. "The Ops officer in my squadron led the flight assigned to protect the photo bird. Before the flight took off, the pilots knew the Ops O was going to report taking antiaircraft fire whether he did or not. And that's just what happened. That's what I heard."

"The ship launched thirty, maybe forty airplanes before noon," the guy named Gerald said. "And all those planes just waited for the call that someone had taken fire. Then they all flew into North Vietnam and bombed whatever the hell they wanted to! We should write a letter to the ship's CO protesting this."

"It won't do any good," Amos said. "All I can say is I heard some guys talking. My Ops O and his wingman will swear they saw antiaircraft fire. Nobody will believe me."

"We won't mention you, Amos," Walt said. "We'll draft the letter up to say that we've been concerned about the US involvement in this illegal, undeclared war. Today, the way the photo protection mission proceeded causes us grave concern that new levels of illegality have, you know, et cetera."

"That's good, Walt," Gerald said. "And instead of sending it to the CO via division officer, department head, and XO, why don't we send it direct to the CO with a copy to the other guys? If we send it via the other links in the chain of command, it'll sit for weeks in each

in-box along the way. So we bypass the chain of command, sort of. We can say we're just dumb JGs and didn't know how to do it right."

"Good one, Gerald," Walt said, and to Amos, "You in?"

At first, Amos was reluctant, and then he thought about Tuesday, considering what he might say if he had to testify against him. "Lieutenant JG Monday," Amos would say. "Yes, sir, I know him pretty well. I room with him. My impression is he's a wild man, sir. He hates heavies and following rules. Just my humble opinion, sir. And, really, sir, he's pretty much like all the pilots." Amos looked at Walt across the table from him.

"In," Amos said.



Stretch sat at the desk in the JO bunkroom. AB had given him a tasker: fill out a medal application form for each squadron pilot, not for Stretch, himself, of course. AB had given him shorthand elements of each officer's award justification. Skunk and all the lieutenants and JGs were lumped together with wingmen, exposed to heavy thirty-seven-millimeter and twenty-three-millimeter fire, destroyed one twenty-three-millimeter gun emplacement and two trucks, numerous secondaries, NCM. NCM—Navy Commendation Medal—with a V for valor, signifying combat action. AB expected Stretch to work variations into the write-ups so it wouldn't look like copied grade-school homework.

AB wanted RT submitted for an Air Medal, AB, himself, and the XO for Distinguished Flying Crosses, and the CO for a Silver Star. Leadership and mission-planning responsibilities justified the higher-level awards, according to the Ops O.

From AB's half sheet of terse scribble, he had fourteen sheets of paper to fill with mind-stultifying, inane drivel, fourteen navy award submission forms to complete, fourteen cover letters to write. Stretch

thought of his squadron mates in the ready room watching *Shane*. He liked that movie and never tired of watching it.

“Bellyaching makes a big job bigger,” his dad had told him. “Working makes it littler.”

Stretch was still scribbling away as the JOs entered the bunkroom chattering just after taps.

“Come back, Shane,” Hack said.

“Mother wants you.” That was Botch.

“Little Joey,” Hack said, “if Shane doesn’t want your mother, the JO bunkroom will take her.”

Alice filed in next. “None of you delinquents are thinking of partying, I hope.”

“Day off tomorrow,” Hack said.

“We know how you can count on those,” Tuesday said.

Botch and Hack crawled into their bunks directly. Tuesday and Alice brushed their teeth first. The JOs slipped quickly, deeply into sleep.

Stretch sat in a puddle of light at the desk. Behind him, the darkened room rumbled with pack snoring. He continued to write about what they had done in terms that, when he finally finished, would sour his sleep.

Part 3



**... Moments of
stark terror**

On a Tuesday morning, Helen Fischer called Teresa. For a moment, Teresa was intensely pleased. Helen had been so kind to her before the cruise had started. Since then, they'd seen each other only at squadron functions. There was never enough time to talk at those. Helen was married to a lieutenant commander—a heavy, as Jon would say. Helen's friends were wives of lieutenant commanders and commanders in other squadrons. She spent time with them. That was understandable.

Helen had not called for a pleasant chat, however. Clare Franks, the CO's wife, called a Warhorse Officers' Wives' Club meeting for 1000. It was important that everyone attend. Helen had no idea what was so important.

At the meeting, Clare related she had received a call from a reporter who wanted to know if her husband was being court-martialed.

"What are you talking about?" she'd asked.

The reporter knew the pilots from the USS *Solomons* had flown missions into North Vietnam that violated the rules of engagement. Since George was a squadron commanding officer, he must have been involved.

Clare hung up on the man and called the CO of the naval air station. She was passed through immediately. Other *Solomons*-based

squadron wives had been contacted by a reporter also. The base CO did not know for sure what was behind the calls. He did, however, speculate that reporters had to have been tipped or overheard someone in the USAF headquarters in Saigon. It was the only explanation for how quickly news of the operation got out. Clare was to refer any further inquiries from reporters to the base public affairs office.

Clare told the worried wives assembled in her living room what she knew, which wasn't much.

"If you get a call, expect the reporter to try to trick you into divulging something. Make sure you know who is on the line before you answer any question. If it's a reporter, tell him to call the base PAO, and then hang up."

Karen Carson, Rita Nelson, and Amy Allison had been working and unable to attend Clare's meeting. That afternoon, Teresa told the three about the meeting and that she didn't know anything else, and she invited them for dinner. Teresa and Karen ate in front of Teresa's TV watching the NBC news. Amy and Rita watched CBS at Amy's quarters next door. After the news, they reconvened at Teresa's table.

"Nothing. Not a peep on either broadcast," Karen said.

"That reporter who called Clare, he must have known something," Amy said.

Teresa said, "The base PAO told Clare some freelance reporter must have overheard a snippet of conversation in a Saigon bar. He probably tried to confirm what he heard through channels and struck out. Now he, or a cohort, is fishing. What he heard may not even be true."

"The My Lai massacre," Rita said. "It took a year and a half for that story to break."



When her friends left, Teresa got out her letter-writing material. She took up her pen but had no words for it to write. Rita's comment about

My Lai tormented her. She put aside her stationery. Although she was exhausted, the moment she lay in bed, worry about Jon roiled in her head. She couldn't stay in bed. In the kitchen, she looked through the window above her sink, but Amy was not across the way, looking back at her.

Why did Rita have to mention My Lai?

Well over three billion people lived on earth. Teresa wanted just one to talk to, to talk to *right now*.

After a day of no flying, *Solomons* was scheduled to begin noon-to-midnight operations, but at 0600, flight ops were canceled. Pilots were summoned to the ready rooms for briefings at 0700. An inquiry team would land aboard at 1000. All the pilots who'd flown on the first or second go for the photo mission would be interviewed. There was concern, apparently at high US government levels, that rules of engagement violations had been committed during the photo mission.

The same question was asked in all the ready rooms: "What do we say to them?"

"Tell 'em the truth"—the universal response.

Nobody briefed Amos and the Dirty Half Dozen before they were called to the interview room. And they weren't called until 2100. Probably, they were the last ones on the interviewers' list.

They were interviewed one at a time, and after, they went below, got cups of coffee, and sat at their table in the wardroom. The last one to arrive was Amos.

"How'd it go?" Walt asked.

"Horseshit," Amos said, plopping onto a chair. "That's how it went."

"We were thinking this inquiry team was going to amount to something," Adam said. "Finally."

"What I got from it," Amos said, "was that they talked to us because we wrote the letter. But because we wrote the letter, they were sure we didn't have anything worthwhile to say. They had to talk to us, though, because we wrote the letter. A circle of horseshit."

"Pretty clear they programmed me for about ninety seconds," Adam said. Adam had nervous fingers. The fingers drummed a string of ruffles on the tabletop. "I was number three in order, and they were bored with me before they asked a question."

"Who went first?" Amos asked.

Walt held up his hand. "They did not want to hear what I thought. They wanted to know if I directly heard anyone say specifically they were doing something in violation of the ROE. They hammered the point a couple of times before they would let me talk. Well, I hadn't heard anything direct. As soon as I said that, they thanked me and said that was all. I started asking a question, and this air force colonel cut me off. 'We got a lotta people to talk to,' he said."

"That interview depressed the hell out of me," Adam said. "I gotta tell you, Walt. That Abe Fortas pamphlet you had us read, about protesting within the constraints of the law, it just doesn't cut it."

"That's exactly what I wanted you to get from reading it," Walt said. "Because that's what you guys are doing. You worry more about staying within the *law* than getting your point across."

"What do you expect us to do?" Adam asked. "We all have warnings in our records. They are just waiting for us to do something to court-martial us."

Amos stared into Adam's eyes. Adam looked away.

"I don't expect you to do anything," Amos said.

Adam pushed back his chair and departed. The others left too, leaving Walt and Amos.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have expected so much out of this,” Walt said.

“We shouldn’t have expected anything,” Amos said.

Amos stood up and looked down at Walt for a moment. Walt sat shoulders hunched forward. He stared at his cup as he rotated it on the saucer round and round.

Charlotte had given the Fortas piece to Amos. After he read it, she said, “See? The establishment. Each crooked part of it covers for the other crooked parts.” He’d given it to Walt. Walt sort of got it, he’d thought. The others wouldn’t have gotten it at all.

The Dirty Half Dozen. That’s all they are: dirty.

Amos walked up to the hangar bay and out onto a covered porch-like area, called a sponson, starboard side aft. If no one was there, he liked to sit and watch the ocean or the sky.

Two sailors sat on bitts and talked and smoked. Amos considered leaving, but then he went onto the sponson and stood beside one of the sailors. He stared at the slice of star-studded sky and listened to the rush of water sliding by, a sound loud enough to overpower the ubiquitous drone of ventilation fan motors. There was enough starlight to light up a frothy wake thrown off from the side of the ship. With peripheral vision and red light from the hangar, Amos saw the sailors look up at him. He imagined them noting he was an officer. They flicked their cigarettes over the side and departed. Amos took over a bitt. He needed the spot more than they did.

He sat with his eyes open, but he didn’t see the night or the rectangle of stars framed by the sides and overhanging deck above the sponson. He was seeing Charlotte.

He’d shoved her into one of those rooms around the sides of his mind and closed the door on her, but now that door had sprung open, as it did occasionally. He felt her in his chest and belly.

Back in Florida, after he ripped his wings off and headed for

home, he needed her as he had never needed anything before. If she hadn't been there, he'd have gone spinning off the earth into space.

He thought about seeing her that first time, at the high school, about their first date. She was one self-possessed, independent woman. He thought about wanting to get away from her, and that had taken resolution. She'd gotten hooks into him. He'd felt her pulling him in. He'd resisted, because it would have been surrendering. Amos Kane did not surrender to a woman. But then he'd thrown his wings away. He'd stormed out to his car and started the engine, and it hit him. Amos Kane, good-stick navy pilot, football jock, had transmogrified into an eggshell encasing black emptiness, nothingness. Resisting her after that was impossible. He'd needed Charlotte then. He needed for them to pound their flesh together, to prove he was still something, still a body of flesh and bone, and not fragile, a fingernail flick away from destruction. He thought about taking from her what he desperately needed, and it occurred then, she took from him too. A hint of a smile curled his lips. He was glad he could give her— No. He didn't give her anything. She took. He'd opened himself, and she took what she wanted. And that's what he'd done with her. They'd both opened themselves so the other could take what they wanted. All those other times she'd offered, it had not been right to take then.

Charlotte. He shook his head, admiring her, admiring her independence, admiring how she defined morality for herself, and the rest of the world be damned.

Amos sighed. The woman had chewed a hole in him that nothing would ever fill. He had tried to keep her locked in that room outside the center of his brain, but Charlotte would not stay locked away. In a lot of ways, that moment of frantic lust was the only moment that seemed real since his wings bounced off the desk.

He thought of his mother and how he found her often staring at her pile-of-rocks fountain in the backyard. She never needed anyone

or anything. That's how he'd always remembered her. His dad was strong. She was invincible. Thinking about her pile of rocks, though, it occurred maybe she wasn't all powerful. Maybe she too had doubts, needed some moments of quiet reflection to ground herself. Maybe the way forward for her wasn't any easier to see than for other mortal beings. Maybe. Maybe Amos Kane just needed a moment of quiet, sorting jumbled thoughts to find the path to the future. He noticed the stars then and saw them as patiently waiting for him to notice their strength to burn holes through billions of miles of darkness and their fires burning from now clear to eternity. Maybe the stars were telling him he was just as strong as his mother. Maybe Amos goddamned Kane was stronger.

The Dirty Half Dozen, they were nothing without Walt. They—a couple of them, anyway—had done a courageous thing demonstrating in uniform. The day Charlotte had been killed. Since then, the half dozen and the *Solomons* had effected a sort of *détente*. Since then, the half dozen hadn't done a thing. Except for the letter they'd written. But the letter had accomplished nothing. It was as if the heavies expected something like that. The letter had been just what the Abe Fortas pamphlet called for, protest in a form that could be rejected as easily as sweeping it from desktop to trash can.

He saw it then, as clearly as he saw the stars. The Dirty Half Dozen needed a leader, a real one.

They wanted him to be a part of their protest assembly, but not if he was going to do something stupid.

Amos Kane did not do stupid.

He recalled something Walt had said. It was to the effect that everybody aboard had a hand on the bomber control sticks and helped push the bomb release button. The planes wouldn't fly without the efforts of the barbers, the cooks, the guys who cleaned the commodes, and every bomb dropped, the barber, the cook, the commode cleaner helped drop it. The Dirty Half Dozen contributed to the war also,

but they protested in the limited ways available to them to offset the contribution part of what they did.

Another realization jolted Amos. He worked on his airplanes. That supported the war a lot more than cleaning a commode and ordering parts. But he did nothing to offset his war supportive activity.

Amos stood up, took a last look at the stars, and walked forward to the JO bunkroom. Tuesday sat at the desk, with Hack, Alice, and Botch on their bunks. They stopped talking when Amos entered.

"You and your Dirty Half Dozen buds got called in for interviews too, I heard," Tuesday said to Amos. "That right?"

"Yeah," Amos said as he started pulling his clothes off.

"So, what'd they ask you?"

"They wanted to know," Amos said, standing in his skivvies and staring at Tuesday, "if there was any substance to the rumors that all the pilots in the Warhorse JO bunkroom swilled whiskey every night. I told them it's not rumor. It's fact."

Botch stopped a plastic cup halfway to his mouth.

"Always knew, Amos," Tuesday said. "Besides being a washed-out pilot, you're a reformed drunk."

A flush of embarrassment heated his face and armpits. He wasn't about to let Tuesday drive him from the JO bunkroom. It was his room too. He climbed up onto his bunk.

"You're not leaving?" Botch asked.

After confrontations like that, Amos usually left the room. Amos willed his heart rate to coast down. He willed his voice to not betray his agitation.

"Why would I leave? I just got here to my home sweet home."

"Hey, Tuesday," Hack said. "I want to know what the inquiry guys asked you."

Amos opened a paperback in front of his face.

"They wanted to know if I'd seen any triple A or had any SAM

warnings,” Tuesday said. “I was on the first go. I told them I heard AB call a SAM warning, and our flight entered the North when AB called us in. AB told us to attack a bunch of trucks stopped on the road and to watch out for thirty-seven millimeter. He said he’d taken fire from the side of the road with the trucks on it. The CO and I had to work under a 3,500-foot overcast. We used shallow dive angles and got low enough on the pull out to see what I think were AK-47 tracers. As we left the North, I saw ten, fifteen miles of trucks burning on the highway. All of them heading south. Lot of secondaries, so there was plenty of ammo in the trucks.”

“Which is what I told them,” Hack said. “Skunk flew on AB’s wing. Anybody talk to him?”

“I did,” Red said. “It happened the way AB said. That’s all Skunk would say.”

“I can’t believe we ran all those previous photo reconnaissance missions on the same days of the week at the same time of day,” Alice said.

“Yeah,” Hack said. “Just another of the countless ways this war is fucked up.”

“If we’re not trying to win it, why the hell don’t we just quit?” Botch asked.

“Stretch told us,” Hack said, “the words SNAFU and FUBAR had to be invented in WWII to describe the indescribable fucked-up-edness they encountered.”

“If you’re saying ’Nam is no more fucked up than the Second World War,” Alice said, “I think you’re wrong. They were trying to win that war. After months of making toothpicks, we blow up hundreds of trucks carrying supplies south, and the heavies sic an inquiry team on us.”

“Nobody from the ship is in trouble,” Tuesday said. “AB and Skunk told the same story. They detected and saw threats, called the photo plane to abort. The rest of us responded to AB’s call.”

“Well, for my money,” Alice said, “I came back from the hop pumped. A worthwhile hop, finally, after 150 useless ones. I gotta admit, though, I was nervous as hell going into that interview room. I’m wondering if we heard the last of this inquiry business.”

Everybody in the room was waiting for Tuesday to say something. Amos kept his book up in front of his face.

Tuesday poured some whiskey into his cup and lifted it. “To Alice’s worthwhile hop.”

Amos turned a page in his book, not that he was reading. He seethed as the others responded to the toast.

Then Alice said, “It’s 0100. Let’s wrap this up and get to sleep.”

“No-fly day tomorrow,” Botch said.

“We’ve heard that before,” Alice said.

“I’ve had enough,” Hack said.

They all finished drinks and turned off the lights, and soon, Hack was snoring.

Amos turned off his reading light and rolled onto his side. It took a while before his head shut up.



The next morning, Amos climbed down from his bunk at 0545. He reached for his uniform shirt and held it as if he were going to fasten wings over the left pocket. Where had that impulse come from? How could his mind have betrayed him like that? Since he’d ripped the wings off, he’d never experienced any sense of regret or longing to go back to that, that pilot stuff. At least he didn’t think he did. He did do what his father told him. Look back long enough to learn from your mistakes, and then keep going forward. That’s what he’d done.

As he buttoned his shirt, without the wings, he realized that was not what he’d done. The airplanes, he’d clung to them rather than

moving forward. Pulling his pants on, he determined to break with the airplanes. He didn't know how he would make the break, but he'd do it. And he'd do it that day. And he wouldn't tell Walt or the others. They were too worried he'd do something stupid.

Dearest Teresa,

I doubt you'll hear about this, but, just in case, we had an inquiry team fly aboard this morning. There was concern that *Solomons'* pilots had violated rules of engagement. The ROE say we can bomb the North only if they shoot at our planes. Senior navy and air force officers thought we bombed North Vietnam without being fired at. And it didn't involve me. I had the duty. Anyway, the inquiry team came, asked questions, and left. Tomorrow, we start flying again. So, hopefully, the inquiry team got what they wanted and this is the last we hear about it. I thought you should know about this, in case someone else writes home about it. You'll know it was nothing to worry about.

Three days later, Jon and the rest of the Warhorse pilots were called to the ready room at 1000. When everyone was seated, the CO stood up and faced his pilots.

"At this point in a cruise," the CO said, "it's easy to think of cat shots and carrier landings as a piece of cake. You do it twice a day.

No different from riding a bike at home, right? Wrong! This is the time when all of us need to kick ourselves in the seat of the pants and refocus our brains on how dangerous our business is. We need to be mindful that when something goes wrong, we will have a second to decide the proper course of action.”

Jon listened and thought about how long ago the inquiry and the worthwhile hop seemed to have happened. The pilots manned up, catapulted, flew a mission, landed, and debriefed once or twice a day. Just as they had after the aircraft accidents, everyone slipped back into the routine, which was worrying the CO.

“Thinking of carrier ops as *routine*,” Commander Franks told the Warhorse ready room, “has killed a lot of navy pilots.”

The next morning, at 0100, after flight ops secured at midnight, Tuesday addressed the JO bunkroom on the subject. “Listen, guys, the skipper and all the heavies harp about complacency. And for once, they’re right. But so many of them have pimped the subject, a person can get complacent about complacency. If you’re like me, the message isn’t penetrating the dura mater.”

“What the hell’s that?” Botch asked. “*Duramayter?*”

“It’s like a Saran Wrap lining around your brain,” Tuesday said.

“Well, that explains a lot about Botch,” Hack said.

“Shut up, Hack,” Tuesday said. “The point is we need to go back to what we heard from our instructors during the carrier qual phase of flight training. Navy pilots need some fear of death to keep them alive. It’s easy to get too comfortable with the dangers around you in carrier ops. The real point is nobody else can keep us from getting complacent. We have to do that ourselves. We have to push the message down in to the center of our brains, not let it sit on the Saran-Wrapped surface.”

No one had a thing to say to that.

The future schedule for the *Solomons* finally jelled. The ship would fly from noon to midnight for two weeks. Then the USS

Constellation would return to the Tonkin Gulf. *Solomons* would switch to flying the hated midnight-to-noon for a week. After that, the ship would get a week of R&R in Hong Kong. After that, there'd be one more period on the line, and the ship would return to the United States, where *Solomons* and the embarked squadrons were all slated to decommission.

Stretch looked to a nearer-term future. He had just landed after flying with RT and practicing his formation.

"I have a request, RT," Stretch said, after debriefing in the ready room. "If we get another mission over the North, in our last-line period, can you get me on it?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"I'm the only Warhorse pilot who hasn't flown there."

"I'll see what I can do. By the way, you flew the special formation good."

"You never told me how it went when you flew the formation for CO and the XO."

"They get it," RT said. "AB thinks it's stupid. None of the other JOs appreciate it. They are so worried about flying the position, they don't do any watching out for threats."

"Which is the main purpose of flying the formation," Stretch said.

"Like I said, I'll see what I can do."

"I know I'm asking you to go around AB."

"In the meantime, Stretch, we still have this line period to complete."



Three days into the midnight-to-noon, Stretch flew lead on an afternoon bomb mission into Laos. Hack was his wingman. They dropped their ordnance through trees under an FAC's control. A make-toothpicks mission. Over South Vietnam on the way back to the ship, Stretch received a call from an air force mission controller.

“Warhorse, this is Overstreet. Do you have any ordnance aboard?”

“Affirmative. Both aircraft have twenty-millimeter machine-gun ammo.”

“Do you have play time?”

“Affirmative, Overstreet. Warhorse can give you ten minutes.”

Overstreet directed the flight to contact a FAC with the call sign Quail. Stretch checked in with the FAC.

“Target is troops in the open, Warhorse. Need you to hustle. They’ll get to cover in a couple of minutes,” Quail radioed.

A spike of adrenaline shot through Stretch. He pushed the throttle up and dumped his nose, converting twenty-five thousand feet into speed. He found the FAC and called, “Tallyho.”

“Okay, Warhorse, the open field is right below me. I have you in sight. You have a good setup. As soon as you see the gomers, cleared to fire.”

Stretch checked his gun sight for the proper setting. He checked his gun switch on and Master Arm on. He was at two thousand feet and didn’t see anything. Then at fifteen hundred, he saw them and corrected his dive. There’d only be time for a one-second burst. He saw six black-clad men running through the gun sight. He squeezed the trigger.

The guns didn’t fire.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

He jerked back on the stick and loosed another string of expletives. He’d pulled out low.

Hack called, “Two’s in,” and Stretch turned left.

A moment later, “Nice pass, Warhorse Two,” the FAC said. “You got a couple of ’em. One, fire to the left of Two’s dust. A couple of them went to ground there.”

If a pilot pulled the trigger and the guns didn’t fire, the procedure was to turn all switches to *SAFE* and go home. In the flight manual, a warning forbade turning the gun switch off and back on again.

Doing so risked ramming an explosive round on top of one already in the gun chamber causing an explosion, catastrophic to the plane, fatal to the idiot who ignored the warning.

“One, you coming in again?” Quail called.

Stretch had a worthwhile target. He shouldn’t do something stupid and risk his life and his plane. But he decided and cycled his gun switch off, felt the clunk as the round loading mechanism retracted, and back to on, to another clunk.

“One’s in,” Stretch called.

From Quail: “New aim point, One. To the right of Two’s dust, and 150 yards beyond. A pair of them running. Cleared hot.”

Stretch called in and established his shallow dive. The ground rose toward him, and he saw them, two men in black. He had to push the nose down a tweak to get the aiming dot on the target and squeezed the trigger. Nothing.

He pulled off with, “Guns jammed.”

Hack completed his second run.

“We have one more run to give you, Quail,” Stretch radioed.

“Okay, I see one gomer left. He’s just beyond Two’s last dust,” Quail called.

Stretch descended to a hundred feet and then reset his radar altimeter to fifty. He picked up the running man, descended a few more feet with the altimeter warning sounding in his ears. He glanced at his altimeter. Thirty feet. With his target still some distance in front of him, he had no idea how many yards it might be or if it would work. Nobody practiced trying to bomb something with a drop tank and auxiliary bomb racks; it was strictly seat-of-the-pants flying. *Now*, he thought and jettisoned his drop tank and auxiliary bomb racks.

“What’d you do, Warhorse One?” Quail asked. “I can’t see anything for all the dust. I don’t see any more gomers running though.”

“You done with us, Quail?” Stretch asked.

“Yeah. Nice shooting. I’m giving you four KIA and two probable KIA. Thanks, Navy.”

“Warhorse, roger. Two, switch to ship frequency.”

As Stretch climbed, Hack joined on his left wing, slid underneath checking his plane for damage, flew up Stretch’s right side. Stretch passed him the lead and checked out his airplane. Stretch gave Hack a thumbs-up. Hack signaled passing the lead back to him. Stretch shook his head and pointed at Hack. Hack patted his helmet, signaling, “I got it.” Then he unsnapped one side of his oxygen mask. Stretch saw him grin, shake his head, and mouth, *You dumb shit*. Hack knew what he’d done. Dumb shit didn’t half cover what he’d done. The closer they got to the ship, the more it ate at Stretch. He had to continually talk his mind back onto the business of landing aboard the carrier. Complacency wasn’t his worry.

How the hell did I become a homicidal maniac?



Stretch hesitated by his commanding officer’s door. He raised his hand to knock. *Wham!* Pause, and then he felt the jolt. It took a second for the catapult shock to transmit through the tons of aircraft carrier steel. *Wham*. Shooting the next launch.

Before, when he heard and felt a cat shot, he wanted to be the lucky bastard who got to fly. Even on a black-assed night in crappy weather when no sane man volunteered and everyone stayed clear of the ready room because the schedule officer might need a pilot for a pop-up flight, he had the Pavlovian reaction.

That was before.

For years, he’d been watching his fellow junior officers, watching them in the threshing process of flight training where the instructors often seemed to be wielding flails, beating a crop of students looking for kernels of good grain, and the students worried they might not measure up. He’d watched them swagger and act and talk rough at

work, and when they had finally become fleet pilots, it seemed to confirm in them that they were in fact tough bastards. Many of them swore, belched, farted, and talked about turning enemies, gomers, into *crispy critters*. But it was as if they had two moralities. Before going home, they unzipped their work morality like a flight suit and hung it on a hook in a locker.

He'd seen them at home. There his squadron mates became "Darling, take the garbage out, please," and "Daddy, Daddy, look at my drawing."

It won't happen to me. That's what he'd thought. Navy fighter-bomber pilot Stretch and Stretch the husband of Teresa and father of five-year-old Jennifer and three-year-old Edgar Jon were the same person, with one set of morals to rule behavior at work and at home. If he couldn't cuss at home, he would not cuss at work. He thought he'd done what he set out to do, lived by the same code of conduct, the same set of morals at work as he did at home. Now he wished he had two moralities. Because if he really only had one, it was a heartless, reptilian, soulless, homicidal son-of-a-bitch one. And how could a soul like that love Teresa and their children?

The cats continued to fire.

He always knew war was an ugly business. *But I made it uglier.*

Stretch gritted his teeth, muscled control over his emotions, took a breath, and knocked.

"Minute!" the CO hollered.

The door jerked open. A smile bloomed. "Str—what's the matter?"

A lump of emotion, the one he'd been fighting hard to contain, and it was as big and hard as a baseball, stuck in Stretch's throat. He clamped his teeth on the sissy noise attempting escape, thrust out his left hand, and opened his fist.

The CO looked down at the wings on Stretch's palm.

"What happened?"

He cleared his throat. "Just take it, sir, please."

The CO reached out a paw, grabbed the front of Stretch's flight suit, hauled him into the room, and slammed the door so hard it felt like another cat shot. He leaned down, inches from Stretch's face.

"I do not have the patience for one of these goddamned junior officer conversations where extracting information is like pulling molars with goddamned eyebrow-plucking tweezers. Talk!"

Stretch tried to step back. He was against the door. "I was leading a two plane."

"See? Mouth works fine." The CO backed off, nodded for him to continue.

"We dumped our bombs in Laos. Uprooted trees. Made toothpicks. Halfway back across 'Nam, a FAC called. He had enemy troops in the open. We had our twenty-millimeter machine-gun bullets left. 'Hustle,' he said.

"We zorched low. I saw them. Bunch of VC hauling ... running across an open field. I rolled in. Squeezed the trigger. Guns didn't fire. Number Two rolled in. He got a couple."

The CO hissed. "Half the damned guns jam. Typical. Then what?"

"I came around again. A few bad guys left. I turned my gun switch off and back on again. I wanted to kill those bastards."

"Jesus," the CO said and flopped onto his desk chair.

They both weighed the confession of his violation of the commandment: never, never turn the gun switch off and back on again.

"That it?"

Stretch shook his head. "Two made a second run and killed all but one guy. I went in on a third run."

"You recycled the gun switch again?"

"No, sir. I went low, leveled about thirty feet, lined up on the last gomer, and jettisoned the drop tank and aux bomb racks. I wanted to kill that guy so bad—"

“Goddamn.” The CO stood, rubbed his hand over his face, and sat back down.

“You get him, that last gomer?”

“I think so, sir. The FAC didn’t see any more targets.”

“Okay, here’s what I want you—”

“No, sir. Just take them.” He held out the wings again.

“Listen to me—”

Stretch dropped his wings on the corner of the bigger man’s desk. “Sorry, CO,” he said. He wanted to say more, to say, “Sorry I let you down,” but there wasn’t enough control in all the world for him to get those words out. He just walked out.

Standing in the passageway, he knew he’d done the right thing. The times he’d been in combat before, the times on the destroyer, that AAA gun on his first combat hop, that flight during Operation Mop-Up after Lam Son 719, he’d known what to do without thinking about it. He just knew what to do and did it. It was like an autopilot. But after what had just happened, he couldn’t trust that autopilot anymore. He couldn’t trust himself with bombs and bullets, not when his moral autopilot could fill his belly with kill lust.



Furiously, Stretch flailed at the speed bag. Sweat, tears, and snot ran down his face, but he kept punching, making the bag say *whappety, whappety, whappety*.

“Hey, Stretch!” Tiny shouted over the ever-present hangar bay cacophony of airplane repair noise. Stretch hadn’t even been aware of the air-driven grinders, rivet guns, and whistles from people moving planes. Next to the bag, a crew was working on the flight controls of an A-4. A technician in the cockpit moved the control stick, and the ailerons deflected as the hydraulic power unit whined.

Stretch glanced at Tiny but kept punching. His lips parted like an alpha male wolf showing his teeth to a challenger. Tiny grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the bag.

“Aw, man, look at your hands.” The knuckles were bloody. “Stay,” he said and walked over to a maintenance crew working on an airplane on jacks and got a handful of rags.

“Wipe your face.” Tiny handed him a rag.

He took Stretch by the arm and guided him to the balcony-like sponson outboard of the speed bag. They sat on bitts.

“You’re upset with yourself for being stupid, cycling the gun switch?”

“Who told you that?” Stretch asked.

“Your boss RT told me. Your CO called him, and he called me. RT said you guys had another pilot turn his wings in this cruise. He said the heavies tried to talk him out of it, but the guy wouldn’t listen. RT knows we’re friends. He asked me to find you. He told me to look here first. Talk to me, Stretch,” Tiny said.

Another time, it would be funny. How many times had Teresa said that to him? “Talk to me.” It always muted him when she said it.

“Come on, Stretch. Tell me what happened.”

He told Tiny what he’d done, and his shoulders slumped. “The real thing is,” he said, “I wanted to kill those VC so bad. Even if I was going to blow myself up, it didn’t matter. I had to kill them.” Stretch rubbed his hands over his face. “What the hell kind of person am I?”

“You know the answer to that,” Tiny said. “You’re a good guy. You’ve seen more combat firsthand than any of us. Today, you had a mission: kill the VC troops. That’s what you did, even though your guns didn’t work, you found a way to get the job done. What’s the big deal with what you did?”

“The big deal is what I was thinking. Before, the other times, on the *Manfred* and ... What I did those times, it came out of cold, rational thinking.” Stretch leaned forward and placed his elbows

on his knees. "I don't know how to explain it. Except, those other times, I was okay with what I did. Didn't matter what other people thought. I was okay with it. This time, I can't believe ... actually, I don't want to believe what I did. And I am not okay with what I was thinking.

"Today, it didn't have anything to do with getting a mission done. It had to do with one thing only. That was to kill the guys in the black pajamas. That's all I was thinking, not about the war or the mission. I wanted to kill the men in the black pajamas."

"Okay," Tiny said, "so it happened to you once. I know you. You won't ever let that happen to you again."

"I know it won't happen again. I turned my wings in."

"Mind if I cut in here, Tiny?"

RT was standing behind them. Tiny stood and offered his seat to RT.

"All yours, Commander," he said. "You know he's one stubborn son of a bitch, right?"

"Oh yeah. I know. Stay, please."

Tiny shrugged and sat on the deck next to a winch.

The edge of the sun was about to touch the South China Sea. Stretch, RT, and Tiny watched as the sea began the process of eating away the orange cookie from the bottom.

With the orb half submerged, RT said, "Sometimes, just after the disk slips below the horizon, there's a flash of green. I saw it once in Hawaii. Of course, I don't take time to watch the sun set very often."

Stretch was surprised. The sun's descent was perceptible. He'd never sat down for no purpose other than to watch a sunset. Behind them, the noise from the hangar bay registered. At the same time, it felt quiet sitting on the sponson.

The sun sank without flashing a green farewell.

"So, Stretch, months and months of bombing trees, and is any of this doing any good?" RT asked.

Stretch shook his head, looked at his knuckles, and nodded.

RT put his hand on Stretch's shoulder. "How about if we find the chaplain, ask him to hear your confession?"

"No!" Stretch shouted, stood up, took a step forward, and put his hands on the waist-high lifelines.

RT joined him. "Why not?"

"Because he'd *forgive* me. If he forgives me, I'm afraid I'll do something like it again."

RT put his hand on Stretch's arm. "Come on. Sit down," he said.

"I quit."

The carrier, steaming at about ten knots, started a turn to port. Probably just keeping station. Flight ops had ended long ago.

"I turned my wings in to the CO."

RT reached into the breast pocket of his flight suit. "The CO said you dropped these by accident in his room."

RT held a set of wings in his hand.

"Here's the deal, Stretch," RT said. "We're losing this war. After it's lost, our navy and nation will have to put things back together again. You have an ability most of us don't. You take a problem, you take the tools you have to work with, and you see the best way to solve the problem with those tools. You did it with my formation. It wasn't going to work without your changes."

"The navy'll be better off without a stupid, amoral asshole like me."

RT slapped Stretch behind the head. "Your head won't let you commit moral stupidities in an airplane ever again. I know it. You know it. What you did ripped a hunk out of your heart. Your heart isn't going to let the beast from hell out of your belly ever again. You and I both know that too. And that's another reason you need to stay. So many people don't know they carry that beast in their belly. You do, and you know how to handle it now.

"The world keeps producing people you can't reason with, except

with a five-hundred-pound bomb. You know I'm getting out when we get back home. When I'm a civilian, I want pilots just like you out here, with your head and your heart in control of the trigger finger and the thumb above the bomb pickle. That's what I want for my navy and for my country. That's how I see it. I don't have anything else I can say."

RT extended his arm out over the water and opened his fist.

"What's it going to be, Stretch? Take them back, or I drop them."

Stretch looked at his wings cupped in his boss's palm.

Tiny pushed himself up, grabbed the wings, and shoved RT to the side.

"These are your goddamned wings, Stretch." Tiny pulled the locking tabs off the mounting posts of the wings and dropped those over the side. "You're going to wear them."

Tiny grabbed Stretch's arm and smacked the wings against Stretch's chest. Then Tiny held his hand open between them. The mounting posts were stuck in his palm. Trickle of blood puddled under the wings. Sometimes, military people stuck insignia mounting posts into a man's chest to show entry into an elite military unit and to prove exceptional toughness by not whimpering or wincing. To Stretch's knowledge, no one had ever done what Tiny had done.

"I'm just a dumb fighter pilot," Tiny said. "I got that bass ackward."

"Oh, goddamn, Tiny," Stretch said. Tears streamed. He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his flight suit.

Tiny pulled the wing mounting posts out of his palm and stuck the wings in Stretch's pocket.

"Tiny," RT said. "Come on. I'm taking you to sick bay for a tetanus shot."

Stretch sat on a bitt. He pulled the wings out of his pocket and looked at the blood on the back of them. *Tiny!* He rubbed his chest, feeling a whisper of the pain he'd have felt if Tiny had driven the nail-like attaching posts into his chest, which was the normal way people

did that. Stretch stood, and with a last look at the rectangle of starry sky he could see, he turned and headed for the chapel, forward, near the JO bunkroom. It was never locked. Sometimes he went there to sit in the solemnity and weighty silence of the place.

As he walked forward through the hangar bay, he tried to recapture what he'd been thinking during those strafing runs. In his recollection, he'd thought about the probabilities. If the guns failed to fire, cycling the gun switch resulted in a significant probability of an explosion in the aircraft and a very low probability of correcting the gun's problem. He knew it and cycled, anyway. "You won't let it happen again," RT'd said. He wanted to believe RT, but the wanting scared him as much as thinking about what he'd done. *Tiny*. If he hadn't stabbed himself, Stretch wouldn't have to be thinking about any of this. He'd have knocked those wings out of RT's hand, and it would be done.

He pushed open the door to the chapel, a space with room for two dozen folding chairs. Someone was there in the middle row of chairs against the right bulkhead. In the dim light, he could see the man wore a khaki shirt, an officer or chief. The man turned. It was Amos.

"Shit," Amos said. "I can't get away from you sons of bitches anywhere on this stinking ship." He stood up to leave.

"Stay," Stretch said. "I'll leave."

Amos pushed roughly past him.

Stretch entered, closed the door, and sat in the last row. He thought about Teresa and his children. He'd betrayed them, betrayed their notion of who he was. He was no different from Lieutenant Calley at My Lai.

He wanted to feel that atmosphere of peaceful silence and healing solemnity he'd found there before. Maybe Amos's animosity ruined it? Maybe he himself had contaminated the holy place?

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. It misted

down and over him, the chapel atmosphere he'd sensed as a palpable thing before. The next day was the last in the Tonkin Gulf before leaving for Hong Kong. He had a tanker on the 1030 go, the last launch. He had the wings in his hand. Still to be decided: was he keeping the wings and flying his hop?

He opened his eyes, half expecting the measure of peace he'd absorbed to evaporate. It didn't. Whatever he decided, it would turn out okay. He believed that.

He got up and left. Maybe, he thought, if he wrote it all out to Teresa, he'd see clearly what to do.

In the bunkroom, Stretch placed a pad of paper on the fold-down desk and laid the wings next to it. It had been a long time since he'd had a drink of whiskey. Just then, he wanted a cup next to the paper and wings. But he picked up his pen and began with his superlative in the salutation and thought about what to write, to explain how he wanted, maybe needed, to believe RT, but he was afraid to, believing RT might constitute self-delusional wallpapering over ugly truth.

He needed a drink.

The phone rang. He snatched it up and answered. It was the duty officer from the ready room.

"It's Fireball, Stretch. I'm duty officer. Radio central just delivered telegrams for you and Alice."

"What do they say?"

"They're sealed. You want me to open your envelope?"

"I'm coming to the ready room."

Telegram. It could not be good news. Out the door, down a ladder, and through the hangar bay. It would be bad, he knew. God hadn't wasted time punishing him.

In the ready room, he ripped open the envelope.

But it wasn't bad. Teresa and Amy Allison were coming to Hong Kong.

In a matter of days, he would see Teresa. Back in the bunkroom,

he sat on the chair by the desk, picked up the wings, and looked at them a long time. He would wait. He would see Teresa. He would talk to her. Then he'd decide.

The next day, Stretch flew his tanker hop.

The trip to Hong Kong had been every bit as tough on her, Teresa decided, as the hated midnight to noon was on Jon. She and Amy had had enough sense, thank you, God, to arrive a day early. They'd shared a hotel room that night and slept and ate and slept.

The following day, they both woke at three a.m. and had trouble getting back to sleep. But messed up body clocks didn't matter. Mike and Jon arriving that morning mattered a whole lot.

As the two of them prepared to meet their husbands, Teresa found herself chattering non-stop, practically giddy with excitement, with her roommate. Amy, too, seemed barely able to contain herself. Talking and breakfast and talking filled the morning until it was time to take a Star Ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong and a taxi from there to Fleet Landing to meet the guys.

Waiting on the pier for the boat from USS *Solomons*, their conversation rolled on unabated. For forty-five minutes.

"We don't even get a full seven days with them," Teresa said. "More like six and a half. Now maybe it'll only be six and a fourth."

Amy sighed. "I just hate wasting even one minute of time I could spend with Mike. And he's so close, yet unreachable."

Teresa remembered Clare Franks telling them things could go wrong with getting the men ashore. Weather, the boat operators could

strike, only small boats might be available, then it would take forever to get a thousand men ashore. Thinking, too, about what Amy had just said, Teresa ran out of words to speak.

Clare had said, “Things can go wrong with getting the men ashore, so be prepared to have your patience tested.”

Jon had been to Hong Kong on the USS Manfred, and the destroyer had tied up to a pier. Carriers however were too big for that.

Amy, beside her, had gone silent, too. Teresa took her hand and squeezed it and said, “Please, God.”

Amy squeezed back, “Please, God. Please, God. Please, God.”

Boats had been pulling up to either side of the docking pier. A crewman would jump onto the pier and secure a line. Passengers would disembark. A few men would board, and the vessel would back out into the harbor, and roar away again.

Finally, a floating conveyance larger than the ones they’d seen in an hour of waiting sidled against the pier. Men began filing off. They appeared to be American. Teresa tried to contain her hope, to be prepared to accept that Jon, and Mike, might not have been able to get on the first boat.

There were two gangways from the boat to the pier, and men streamed over both. Hundreds streamed over, stomped up the flight of steps to street level, and boarded taxis or buses or walked into the city.

Finally, Amy saw Mike and pointed and squeezed Teresa’s hand so hard it hurt. Jon was beside him.

Thank You, Father God of heaven and earth!

The waiting now for the line to carry her husband to her was something Teresa appreciated. She appreciated a few minutes for her eyes to drink him in, to present evidence that it really happened. She’d come to Hong Kong and was reuniting with Jon.

Then Jon was there. He took her by the arms, looked at her, kissed her, embraced her, and held her at arm’s length again to just look at her. With this big silly grin on his face. She kissed him.

“Uh, guys,” Mike said. “Maybe we should go.”

Teresa and Jon fell in behind their neighbors to the board-the-taxi place. The vehicles pulled up in four lines. *Solomons* sailors swarmed around the lines and climbed in and taxis sped off.

“If someone *tried* to organize a taxi-stand to work this well, they’d just screw it up,” Mike said.

“All these cabs are small,” Jon pointed out. “Separate cabs? Otherwise, Alice, we’ll strap you to the top.”

Mike didn’t bother to reply. He half pushed Amy into their ride, and she half pulled him in after her, and before Mike closed his door, the driver sped off.

In their own taxi, Jon leaned over and kissed Teresa, softly, tenderly. Jon had written to her about their ways of kissing. This one, he’d described as eating the icing off the cake. The good stuff, the heart of the matter, the real, the good kiss, it would come later.

“I not looking,” the driver chipped in.

Jon started pulling away. She knew he wanted to pop off some smart reply to the man, but Teresa grabbed him and laid a cake kiss on him. She hadn’t come all this way to listen to her husband engage in snappy rejoinder with a Hong Kongian taxi driver.



At the hotel, after they’d climbed into bed, she expected him to be frantic for her. She’d teased him that, at times, he was like a hungry nursing baby getting frantic at the touch of skin. They’d held each other, each contributing passion to the reunion, but at the point where she wanted him, he got out of bed, knelt, and said, “Talk to me.”

She’d been flabbergasted, and the first thought that entered her head was, *I can’t wait to tell Rose.*

He needed to know how she was handling the cruise, he’d said, and her heart melted. She reached out a hand and caressed his cheek.

They’d spoken on their last phone calls about her traveling

to Hong Kong, but they'd decided they couldn't afford it. It was possible, when the ship returned and both the *Solomons* and air wing decommissioned, Jon might be permitted to leave the navy without completing his obligation. If so, they'd need what money they had to live on while he searched for a job. They'd agreed Teresa would not come to Hong Kong. She had come, though. He was overjoyed that she had. Something, however, must have bothered her to change her mind.

"Talk to me."

She'd pulled him back into bed.

"After. If you stay awake," she'd said.

He did stay awake, which was just as amazing as "Talk to me" had been.

"Despite what we decided on the phone, I am so glad you changed your, our mind," he said. "It was the right thing to do. But what was it that changed your mind?"

"Oh," she said, taking his hand in hers, "it wasn't any one thing, or even a number of them. I just knew I should come. I just knew we should be together. At this time and right here."

Then Teresa levitated her left eyebrow.



Jon knew what the lifted eyebrow meant. *Is that enough talking for now?*

It was, but she didn't wait for an answer.

Afterward she rolled off him and flopped onto her back. Her arms were up, hands level with her ears. A tiny smile. Was she asleep?

She'd told him when she was with him, she felt safe, and sleep came to her as quickly as she closed her eyes. Her soft exhales went *phoo ... phoo ... phoo*.

He took a moment to memorize her; then he pulled the sheet up to her chin.

The obligation to tell her about the kill lust incident bubbled to the surface. But then, he knew if ... when he told her, it would ruin the week. Heck it would ruin their life together. She'd take the kids and go back to Missouri. She wouldn't want them growing up in a house with a homicidal maniac.

Like Popeye, I y'am what I am.

He got up, pulled on pants, went to the window, and peeked through the drawn drapes. *Interesting.* Bamboo scaffolding fronted the side of a high rise ... twelve stories from the street. Was bamboo that strong? Must be.

Teresa had the right to know.

Let's think about bamboo.

The longer he put off telling her, the further they got into this glorious reunion, the more devastating it would be when he delivered a dump truck full of ugly truth into her lap.

He had to tell her. He would. That night. After dinner.

There.

He went, removed the trousers, and slid back into bed.

Teresa went *mmmmmmmm*, and rolled over draping an arm across Jon's chest. Then she draped a leg over his. "There," she whispered, and in about a tick and a tock, she was *phoo*-ing again.



Jon awoke because Teresa did. He noted 1:15 on the clock and checked the window. Daylight streamed through the seam of the drapes. P.M. then.

They managed to get themselves put together by 3:45 and entered the hotel coffee shop. The restaurant opened at five.

"My body clock is so messed up," Teresa said. "It doesn't know whether I ought to eat breakfast or dinner."

"How about an omelet?" Jon said. "I'm coming off the midnight to noon schedule, so, breakfast food is the only thing I'm used to."

After they ate, they walked to the waterfront and entered the Star Ferry Terminal. Teresa had been advised to check out the shops in the terminal building. To Jon, shopping was okay, as long as he could shop with Teresa.

With the walking, holding hands when they could and parting when pedestrian traffic demanded and reconnecting as soon as they were able, and with the shopping, it was eight when they returned to their hotel room.

I'll tell her now, Jon thought, but as soon as the door closed, Teresa planted a cake kiss on him and launched them into a frantic, urgent taking and giving and wanting to be taken and wanting to give crescendo of passion that rose to just short of mind exploding heights. To diminuendo into exhausted limbs engaged in soft, tender caresses of deep and everlasting affection.

Teresa slept. Before he told her.

He'd intended to tell her about turning his guns off and back on, about the kill lust. He'd intended to tell her about Tiny, and when he stabbed the wings into his own hand, how it *almost* convinced him to keep his wings. But it hadn't quite, and he'd just decided to turn them in. But then her telegram had come, and knowing she was coming to Hong Kong, somehow, it made it okay to keep them. He intended to tell her before they made love. He had to be sure she'd still want him after he told her.

But she'd pulled him into bed and to her.

And now, they'd just consummated about six months' worth of conjugal affection in little more than six hours. Teresa was affectionate, but there was something extra in this reunion.

A little dimness filtered in through the curtains. Jon savored the feel of the woman all along his side, the smell of her hair, and of their lovemaking, the sound of her breathing.

It was the finest thing. And he thought it was such a shame that he'd so overused the superlative in the past. Finest. He should

have resisted the impulse to use it before, saved it to be used for this absolutely finest moment.

She slept so peacefully, so unburdened.

He thought about his wings and about telling her what he'd done and about the burden he carried because of it. He'd tell her, and then he could be just as she was, peaceful, not all weighted down. A little smile played with the corners of his mouth. His eyelids fluttered, and he began to sink into softness.

He jerked to full wakefulness. She moaned a little and snuggled tighter against him.

He would not tell her. The men he'd killed and the ways in which he'd killed them, those were his burdens to bear.

Maybe, he thought, I had to see her unburdened to see that I cannot be unburdened.

Lives mattered. Taking a life was a heavy thing. He would always bear the weight of those lives. If he ever forgot them, then he would be reptilian and soulless. Lines from a hymn came to him:

*Would you kiss a leper clean?
And do such things unseen?*

And do such things unseen. Some people saw what he had done. Others knew. Teresa had neither seen nor knew.

Being with a woman exactly like Teresa and being with her exactly as they were, it was exactly the finest thing.

If he told her, what would it do to her? What would it do to them? He was sure of one thing. What they had between them after the telling would not need a superlative to describe it.

And it would be shifting his burden to Teresa.

Father God in heaven, as best I can discern the way forward, it is better if I do not tell her. It is better to carry this burden myself to St. Peter.

Jon emptied himself, listening for the tiniest hint of something, either affirmation, or a thumbs down, but he received neither.

The Thinker did pop to mind. Rodin's model, after lifting heavy thoughts, didn't look tired or the least bit worn out. Jon Zachery, on the other hand, had hefted around some heavy thoughts, and he was one pooped puppy.

There'd have been more truth in your sculpture, Mr. Rodin, if I'd modeled for you.

He sucked in a big breath and Teresa draped over him, rose on the inhale, and settled on the exhale.

Amos and the Dirty Half Dozen, less Ralph, who had the duty, occupied a window table in Juno's revolving restaurant on Kowloon, across the harbor from Hong Kong Island. Gerald and Adam sat opposite each other next to the window and stared, open-mouthed. The restaurant presented, for their viewing pleasure, Hong Kong Island. Streetlights and lit-up high-rises ringed the base of the island's dark bulk. The harbor itself was every bit as busy at night as it had been all day.

Amos regretted the impulse he'd had to invite the guys to a place like Juno's. He should have taken them to Jimmie's Kitchen, which featured American food. Gerald and Adam were midwesterners and apparently easily impressed.

Looking at the others, Mason from Red Bluff, California, and Norman from someplace in Jersey, had both considered running away to Canada but had only enough courage to run to the navy instead.

He'd thought about it before, that five of them were moral lemmings following Walt. Moral lemming-hood is exactly what he'd wanted to talk to them about. He realized then, too, that he should have invited just Walt to dinner.

"Morally anesthetized, dehumanized killers," Amos said.

Their mouths still agape, Gerald and Adam turned from the

window. Mason paused, a piece of bread for sopping garlic butter above his *escargot* pan halfway to his mouth. Norman coughed a mouthful of old-fashioned back into his glass. Walt stopped a glass of red wine on the way to his lips for a second, sipped, and placed the glass on the table.

“That was a fart in church,” Walt—who’d claimed to have never been in a house of worship—said.

Amos started explaining what he’d gathered from living in the Warhorse junior officer bunkroom, but the main courses arrived. The commotion caused by two waiters clearing and placing plates, another delivering fresh drinks, and all under the hawk eyes of a tuxedoed supervisor ebbed after Amos nodded satisfaction. Immediately, knives and forks clicking on plates and ecstatic moans created a new commotion.

Amos looked around to see if other diners were looking at his table.

“Talk, Amos. We’re listening,” Walt said as he started chewing on a chunk of lobster tail.

All eyes of his tablemates were on him expectantly as they chewed.

“Go on,” Walt said.

“One of the pilots in the bunkroom is called Stretch. He’s a short little shit,” Amos said, thinking, *Like you guys*. “All the Warhorse junior officers admire Stretch. On his first combat hop, he disobeyed the orders of his flight leader to attack a Vietcong gun. During Lam Son 719 Operation Mop-Up, Stretch disobeyed the orders of an air force forward air controller. But it’s not only Stretch. The entire JO bunkroom operates to its own self-generated set of morals, or better, amorality.” Amos took a sip of his water. “And here’s the thing. Stretch and the JO bunkroom got me looking at things, and it’s the entire aircraft carrier operating that way. The proof was in that photo mission, which turned out to be a launch-every-bomber-aircraft on the *Solomons* to strike North Vietnam clearly in violation of the ROE.

Then the air force and the navy launched a go-through-the-motions inquiry and whitewashed the entire thing.”

Amos stopped and gazed around the table. They were eating but paying attention to him too.

“I used to think,” Amos said, “that the problem with this country was the mainstream.” He shook his head. “The mainstream is guilty of gross indifference. It’s what I saw in Mississippi in 1968. The KKK went on a rampage, and the mainstream didn’t even say, ‘Oh, dear.’ The root problem was the Klan, not mainstream indifference to the ugly things they did. On the *Solomons*, the pilots are just like the KKK in Mississippi.”

Walt pushed his plate away, but he stared at it as if wondering who ate his food.

“Another thing about Stretch,” Amos said. “He’s married and has two little kids. And he acts the way he does over here in the war zone. The navy turns the pilots into morally anesthetized, dehumanized killers. Yankee air pirates is way too polite a name for them.”

Amos passed out a typewritten sheet of paper, apologizing for the quality of carbon-papered copies.

“I drafted up this letter I’d like to send to San Francisco newspapers. I wondered if you guys would like to sign it with me?”

“Why Frisco papers?” Adam asked.

“*Solomons* is based there, or across the bay,” Amos said.

“Wow,” Walt said. “This is something. It needs some editing, though. You’ve got a few things in here that are stated as fact when we don’t have real evidence to back it up. We need to get these things characterized as opinion. Then I’ll sign it.”

None of the others expressed enthusiasm. But if Walt signed, Amos was sure the others would too.

Amos called the waiter over and asked for a new plate of food. His had gotten cold.

Teresa and Amy Allison stood side by side on the quay wall as the *Solomons* boat pulled away from the dock and out into Hong Kong's busy harbor where Star Ferries, water taxis, and junks strung short white wakes atop the choppy, green-tinged blackish water.

"I am so glad you're here. It would be so hard watching that boat take Mike back to the carrier if I were by myself."

"Sybil told us we should tell them good-bye at the hotel," Teresa said.

"I couldn't come all this way to see him and not squeeze every second out of it."

The *Solomons's* boat was well away from the pier. Teresa could no longer distinguish its grumble from the general din over the harbor. The boat cut a hard right turn, threaded through a couple of junks, and disappeared behind the edge of the Star Ferry terminal.

Amy snuffed a couple of sharp inhales, and Teresa squeezed her hand. She'd felt it too, something physical when the boat disappeared.

Riding scrunched together in the taxi from the hotel had been hard. Mike had babbled, trying to lighten the mood. Amy tried to help him, but the load was too much. Their effort was hollow. Then the four of them stood on the pier among a growing crowd waiting for the boat. Many of the sailors and pilots from other squadrons

appeared, to Teresa, to be pumped up. Perhaps they were elated over the adventures they'd had in Hong Kong. Perhaps they anticipated new adventures when they returned to the Tonkin Gulf. Either way, their bubbly enthusiasm injected another dose of pain over having to give Jon back to the navy, especially after the best week of their life together.

It had been a crazy, impulsive, expensive thing to come to Hong Kong on such short notice. But it had been the right thing to do. That was clear from their first night together. Jon had needed her, and she needed him, needed to see that he was okay. That was more important than the money. She had to see him, and it had been the right thing to do. But the days had gone by so incredibly fast.

Last night, in bed beside her, Jon said, "Don't cry, dearest Teresa. This has been a honeymoon, and the best one. I have to go away tomorrow. When I come home, we'll have another, even better than this."

Navy pilots were superstitious. To them, it invited disastrous bad luck to say things as he had. It frightened her. She didn't voice the cold fear she felt, just put her arms around him and squeezed him to her.

"They're gone, Teresa," Amy said, pulling her back to earth, to the quay, a few feet above the harbor with all its goings and comings, with Hong Kong rising dark green opposite the two of them.

Don't cry, she told herself. Oh, sure, she told herself.

Stretch and Tiny Greg Haywood sat across a table from each other in the *Solomons'* dirty-shirt dining room. A few of the tables were occupied with coffee drinkers. Several had ridden with the two of them on the boat from Kowloon.

Two nights before, Tiny had taken Stretch and Teresa to an Italian restaurant he'd discovered in a narrow, seedy alley in Kowloon. The place didn't look like much from the alley, and inside, it was filled with uninhabited tables. But the menu was extensive, the service attentive to the last detail. Stretch remarked on the restaurant and what extraordinary meals could be found in Kowloon at almost sinfully low prices. Stretch thanked him again for treating them to dinner.

"Did Teresa say anything when I used the head?" Stretch asked.

"I figured you did that on purpose," Tiny said. "Yeah. She asked how you were doing. I told her I thought you were doing just fine."

"You didn't mention the wings?"

"Course not."

"I didn't, either," Stretch said. "I was going to. It seemed important to tell her. Then we were together, and it wasn't important anymore."

"I did tell her I had been thinking about you and me being on the *Manfred* together, about how we both thought we had to get to

aviation, about all both of us did to get to the *Solomons*, and now I was wondering, was it worth it all? I told her I thought you were probably having similar thoughts.”

They sipped from their mugs.

“You know,” Tiny said, “Teresa sees and senses things that Neanderthals like you and I can’t. That first time she saw you deal violence to those college jerks, it surprised her. She had never seen or sensed that in you. But she knows you are a moral person, that you worry over things like that, that you do the right thing.”

“You try to do the right thing, and then you do one wrong thing, and it makes you wonder about all those things that used to be right. Were they really right?”

Hulking Tiny cradled a mug in his huge paws, stared into the black liquid, sipped, and looked up at his friend.

“They were right,” Tiny said. “All those other things were right. What makes me sure is I know how it ate at your guts.”

After a moment, Stretch asked, “How’s the hand?”

Tiny showed him his palm with two nicely healed wounds.

Tiny was back to staring at his coffee again.

“What’s eating you, Tiny?”

“Do you think about it all? I mean from USS *Manfred* in ’66 to here. In a way, it was yesterday. In another way, forever ago.”

“What’s bugging you?” Stretch asked.

“Going in to port, I used to look forward to it. Now, when we’re on the line, we don’t get much news. *Stars and Stripes* comes in every coupla days. But not much real news. Then we pull into Hong Kong, and the newspapers and TVs are full of stuff we just don’t hear when we’re flying. And all of it gets me down.”

“So what’re you saying?”

“Remember that book you gave me, Durant’s *The Story of Civilization, Volume VII*, the ‘To the Reader’ section in the front? The part about the Age of Reason beginning. Murderous theologies

declining. Murderous nationalism rising. Back home, God is dead, and people run away to Canada to avoid fighting for America. And we got Republicans and Democrats who barely stop short of murder to determine who will run the country.”

“There’s nothing worth fighting for. That’s what you’re saying?” Stretch asked.

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s what the damned *they* is saying.”

“You never worried about what other people thought.”

“Yeah. This *they* just seems like the voice of the whole damned country, though. And yeah, I never worried about what other people thought. Being out on that sponson with you that night, though, it made me think about things. I’ve always thought you had such a solid handle on right and wrong.”

Stretch shrugged. “Most of the time, I think I do. A couple of times over the last two years, though, I’ve wondered about being a navy pilot and about what kind of man I was becoming. I needed some help to see things. I’d expect it’s a rare person who doesn’t need a little help now and again.”

Tiny started to reach across the table to mess up Stretch’s hair, but Stretch parried, jumped up, reached over, and messed up Tiny’s.

Tiny laughed and raised his coffee mug. “The USS *Manfred*,” he said.

Stretch sat, and they clinked mugs.

Stretch asked, “If you could go back and do it over again, would you do it different?”

Tiny shook his head.

“Me, neither,” Stretch said.

“Hey, guess what? We fighter guys are going to drop bombs during the last-line period. I heard the first time we do it, we’ll go as mixed sections. One F-8 flying with an A-4, just so you air-to-mud guys can show us the ropes. Maybe we can fly together.”



The *Solomons* began its last line-period flying noon to midnight. And as Tiny predicted, F-8s flew bomber instead of fighter missions. The F-8s were configured with two one-thousand-pound bombs rather than the six five-hundred-pounders carried as a standard load on the A-4s.

Stretch appeared on the flight schedule as lead, Tiny as wingman. He briefed Tiny extensively on the communication procedures and what to expect from the FACs they might work with, and he told Tiny to lead the flight. As he expected, Tiny had no problem leading the two of them to a suspected truck park target in Laos and controlling the flight. They had one issue.

After they landed back aboard the *Solomons*, they debriefed in Tiny's ready room.

"I know I had the switches set properly for the first bomb," Tiny said. "I checked them. They were set right. After the first one duddeed, I turned the switches off and back on again. And I checked another time to make sure every one was set right. Still, both bombs were duds."

Stretch believed Tiny. Most of the other A-4 pilots aboard the *Solomons*, however, would be quick to fault the dumb fighter pilot for making a mistake.

"You guys haven't had the bomb racks on your planes the whole cruise," Stretch said. "I could have my guys come and see what they think. Maybe they'll find a problem with the racks. You want some help?"

Tiny checked with his maintenance officer. It turned out 50 percent of the bombs dropped by the Eagles, Tiny's squadron, on the afternoon flights had been duds. Tiny's maintenance officer welcomed help.

Stretch's chief petty officer took two men and reviewed the fighter squadron's bomb rack installation and testing procedures and found no problems. The Eagles dropped no more duds that afternoon and night.

The next afternoon, the other F-8 squadron, the Lions, dropped a number of dud bombs on the afternoon launches. On the night hops, all dropped bombs exploded properly. After a second day of dud-bomb problems in the two fighter squadrons, the ship's crew buzzed with speculation of a saboteur. Tuesday discussed the problem in the JO bunkroom. All the residents were there except Amos.

"It's crystal clear," Tuesday said. "We got a saboteur. The heavies are in a tizzy, but they won't do anything. What do you guys think? An ordie, maybe?"

"If it's an ordie," Stretch said, "he's not a Warhorse ordie."

"I talked to guys in the other squadrons," Tuesday said. "They all say the same thing. 'Not one of ours, man.'"

"What about those goddamned Dirty Half Dozen?" Botch asked.

"None of them know anything about ordnance or the flight deck," Hack said.

"Amos knows. He was a pilot," Botch said.

"Come on, guys. Amos?" Stretch asked.

"Amos," Tuesday said.

Stretch said, "Tuesday, you've been on him since Christmas Eve in the Yokosuka O Club."

"JOPA is going to keep an eye on him," Tuesday said.



The Warhorses flew a photo-protection mission one afternoon. The CO and AB flew section leads with Skunk and Fireball as their wingmen. RT told Stretch to hang tight. The next photo-protection mission, RT and the XO would fly section leads.

"I'll push to get you on that one," RT said.

After ten days of noon-to-midnight flying, the *Solomons* shifted to midnight-to-noon.

The first night of ops on the new schedule, the other two A-4 squadrons, the Diamonds and the Nickels, dropped a number of dud bombs. Stretch met with his division chief.

"We're the only squadron that hasn't had a problem with duds, Chief?" Stretch said.

"What's happening is sabotage, Mr. Z. Only way to explain this."

"No argument there, Chief. But why didn't it get us too? Is the guy one of ours?"

"It has to be someone who knows how bombs are armed, like an ordnanceman. I'd bet my life on my—our—kids, Mr. Z. You know them. You tell me. Which one could it be?"



At 1400, all the Warhorse JOs were in the bunkroom again, except Amos. Tuesday sat with his back to the desk, facing the room. The others sat or lay on their bunks.

"This is what JOPA is going to do about the saboteur," Tuesday said. "I've talked with the F-8 and the other A-4 junior officers. We're setting up a JOPA watch bill. During nonflying hours, we're patrolling the flight deck in two-man teams. I coordinated the JOPA watch bill with all the squadrons' scheduling officers."

"This is just closing the barn door," Hack said. "The horses are gone."

"No," Tuesday snapped. "It's preventive maintenance. The son of a bitch, or bitches, has a small window to work with to screw something up on the flight deck. It's the bombs on the planes on the first and second launches he, or they, are screwing with."

"You got too many people involved in this thing," Hack said. "The guy doing the deed knows what you're doing already."

“What I’ve told the other squadrons is, when we catch the Communist, we wrap him in aircraft tie-down chains and throw him over the side. If he knows about the watch bill, he knows what we’ll do to him too.”

“Right,” Botch said. “Catching the son of a bitch would be great, but that might not work out. We have another month of flying to get through. If we drive the guy back in his hole, that’s good enough.”

“Right,” Hack said. “What a surprise. Tuesday’s butt boy pipes in at just the right moment to seal the deal.”

Botch hopped down from his bunk, clenched his fists, and started across the room toward Hack. Alice got out of his bunk and stepped in front of Botch.

“Hack’s an ass, Botch,” Alice said. “Everybody knows that. He just wants to bitch. He’ll be on the watch bill with the rest of us.”

The door to the bunkroom pulled open, and Amos walked in.

“Watch bill?” Amos asked. “For the saboteur?”

“You listening at the door?” Botch asked.

“No,” Amos said. “But what else could it be? It’s all anyone’s talking about. So, Tuesday, I’ll help with your watch bill.”

“I thought you hated pilots,” Hack said.

“I don’t hate you. I don’t like what you’re doing, but I used to be a pilot. I don’t want to see any of you hurt by some sneaky sleaze screwing with your planes.”

Botch and Alice standing in the middle of the open space and Stretch and Hack from their bunks watched Tuesday and Amos glare at each other. They waited for Tuesday to respond.

“Watch bill’s covered,” Tuesday said.

“Change your mind,” Amos said, shrugging and starting to pulling off his clothes, “let me know. I’ll help you catch the bastard.”

Stretch thought about when kill lust drove him to recycle his

guns. He recalled thinking about pilots having a work morality and another they put on before going home. Amos, he thought, had put on a new Amos. The one climbing into his top bunk did not seem like the real Amos.

On Saturday, April 24, 1971, Amy Allison, Rita Nelson, and Karen Carson ate breakfast with Teresa Zachery. Throughout the morning, whenever one of the ladies went into the kitchen, her eyes automatically tracked to the calendar Teresa had pinned to her bulletin board. The day May 1, at the bottom of the April page, had been circled once in pencil. Teresa had erased the circle, but it was still easy to see a circle had been there.

Teresa hosted the April officers' wives' coffee, and Helen Fischer told her it was bad luck to circle the last day on the line for the entire cruise.

"It's a sure way to get the cruise extended," Helen told Teresa. "I know you're not superstitious. I'm not, either, not like the guys, anyway. Except this one thing."

Circled May 1, the last day on the line for USS *Solomons* in the Tonkin Gulf, each of the ladies had that thought in the forefront of her mind. Each of the ladies sensed the palpable mutual agreement suspended above Teresa's table that they should not mention May 1 or May 31. The latter the date *Solomons* was due to return to Alameda. The end of the cruise was out there ahead of them, and there were things to be discussed about futures.

After the carrier returned to the States, Karen's husband, Steve,

had tentative orders to a naval air station in San Diego, managing the division of sailors who worked the air traffic control radars serving the base. He was considering applying for a job as an FAA controller after his term of service expired.

"Red's filled out his BUPERS dream sheet," Rita Nelson said. "He put transfer to the new A-7, serve as an instructor in the training command, or ship's company tour on an aircraft carrier. He says he bets his third choice is the one they stick him with."

"Mike," Amy Allison said, "doesn't want to be an instructor pilot. He hates the thought of a ship's company tour. I don't think he's filled out his preference card yet."

"Teresa?" Karen Carson asked.

"Jon's thought about it. He's sure he doesn't have a future in the navy, and his chance of going to an A-7 job is zero. He is not cut out to be an instructor pilot. If they send him to a ship's company tour, he will be very low in flight time and carrier landings when he comes up for his next promotion. *'Que sera,'* he said."

"He's that casual about it?" Karen asked. "Steve said, as schedule officer, Jon is his favorite pilot. Any kind of pop-up flight requirement, Jon takes it. He seems to care about the job more than most junior officers."

"He cares," Teresa said. "But at the end of the day, sometimes you've got nothing to lean on but *In God we trust.*"

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," Rita offered.

"Jon says that too," Teresa said.

"The three of you have certainly helped me through this cruise," Karen said.

"We're like the Three Musketeers," Rita said. "Like them, there are four of us, but whoever counted the actual musketeers lost a couple of counting fingers in a sword fight."

"We can't be musketeers," Amy said. "The Pots and Pans Rattlers,

maybe. Mike always says that. ‘Woman, get out in that kitchen and rattle them pots and pans.’”

“More like the Three Serving Wenches,” Rita said.

“How did we get from *In God we trust* to the Three Serving Wenches?” Teresa asked.

“That’s easy,” Rita quipped. “The Lord works in mysterious ways.”

The other two wenches laughed. Teresa smiled as she thought how Rita always got the last word on a topic. But, too, her last word took the communal mood and lifted it, and took Teresa’s mind to her variation of *The Navy Hymn*:

*Lord, guard and guide our men who fly
Through the great spaces in Your sky.*

Stretch lay sprawled on his bunk with his letter-writing material in front of him. When Hulk entered the JO bunkroom, the other two bottom bunks each had two pilots sitting on them.

“How the hell about it, Stretch?” Hulk growled.

Hulk wasn’t all that big. His face, however, resembled the cartoon character in the enraged state. Black hair giving over to two fingers of forehead above scrunched together dark, woolly caterpillar eyebrows. Stretch smiled and sat up. Despite homicidal rage sculpted onto his stone face, Hulk was a softy, his hard-ass act a thing to smile at.

Stretch sat up.

Hulk plopped next to him. “The Eagles caught a goddamned saboteur,” he snarled, sounding genuinely pissed off.

“Well, Hulk, flop it out,” Tuesday said.

“The Eagles had two engines damaged the last two nights.” Hulk was division officer for the Warhorse engine mechanic division. “Sucked up a nut or bolt from the flight deck, everybody thought. Happens, right? Just before sunup this morning, the Eagles’ flight deck chief caught this kid duct-taping a nut inside the intake of a fighter. They got the kid in the brig with an extra marine guarding him.”

"Jesus!" Red shook his head. "Do they think he was the guy who screwed up the bombs?"

"I asked my chief that question," Hulk said. "Chief said no way. He talked to the Eagles' engine mechs. They said the kid was a dumb plane captain. Like most plane captains, he's a young kid who's learned enough to know how to tie a plane to the deck, check levels of hydraulic fluid and oil, but not smart enough to know how to screw up bombs so they wouldn't blow up. Second, he was a troublemaker. Gets in trouble every time we go into port. He'd just gotten punished for what he did in Hong Kong."

"Why'd it take the squadron so long to punish him for something he did in Hong Kong?" Tuesday asked. "We left there a month ago."

"It was a civilian police complaint. Took a while for it to get to the ship," Hulk said.

"Those sabotaged engines don't have a damned thing to do with dud bombs," Tuesday said. "That son of a bitch is still out there."

"Nothing's happened for quite a while," Red pointed out.

"The ordies in all the squadrons got together," Stretch said. "They figured the guy found a way to screw up the mechanical arming process. They figure the guy did it after the bombs were loaded. Before the duds, a crew would load bombs on a squadron plane and then move to the next plane. Now they leave an ordie guarding each loaded plane until the pilot starts the engine."

"The bastard is smart," Tuesday said. "He caused dud drops from every squadron's planes but ours. And he didn't get caught."

"You think he crawled into a hole?" Botch asked.

"The son of a bitch is out there. He's figuring some other way to screw us." Tuesday pressed his lips tight together. "He's figuring the end of the cruise is coming up, and he's got one more chance to take a whack at us."

"So the JOPA watch bill continues?" Botch asked.

“Bet your ass,” Tuesday said. “Ten more days. We ain’t quitting now and making it easier on him. Look at it this way. We got ten more days to catch him. And if we catch him, they won’t be able to protect him in the brig.”

Amos slammed the door to the JO bunkroom and stood in the passageway, pulling on his clothes and staring at the door. He was furious with himself. He'd allowed Tuesday to get to him. Before, Amos would enter the bunkroom and if Tuesday was there, the sniping would start immediately. That day, though, Amos had entered the room and found Tuesday on his bunk reading a book. Tuesday didn't even look up. Amos remained wary as he undressed, climbed up onto his bunk, got the covers arranged, sighed, and prepared to sink into sleep. That's when Tuesday said, "So, Amos, I got a letter today from a buddy on the East Coast. He told me how you really lost your wings."

Amos jumped to the deck and stood with his fists clenched as he considered pulling Tuesday out of his bunk.

"According to my buddy," Tuesday said, "everybody knew you for an arrogant, spoiled rich kid, and if it wasn't for your family money ..."

Amos grabbed his uniform and shoes and charged out.

As he tied his shoes, he knew he should have just ignored Tuesday. *Learn from your mistakes and move on.*

He stormed aft along the passageway and stomped down the ladder and onto the cavernous hangar bay stuffed with airplanes and

machinery. Around him, the ubiquitous noise of aircraft maintenance roared, clattered, and buzzed. He took the cacophony for granted. It was always there like the sun during the day and the stars at night. Amos moved fast along the open lane on the port-side edge of the hangar. He had no destination in mind, only getting away from the JO bunkroom.

“Mr. Kane. Hey, Mr. Kane” cut through the noise from behind him.

Amos stopped. Farrell, an electronics technician he’d helped a couple of times before, stood next to the nose of a parked A-4. Petty Officer Farrell, slender, five-ten or so, black horn-rim glasses, pleasant face, uniforms, even his work uniforms were always clean and pressed.

“Sorry, Mr. Kane,” Farrell said. “I was going to ask if you had time to help me. I shouldn’t have stopped you. You were going somewhere.”

The world crowded back into Amos’s head. Rivet guns hammered, auxiliary power units whined. He smelled hydraulic fluid and something fried from the galley a deck below—chicken, maybe—which triggered Pavlov-dog drool. Amos shook his head. He could eat later, if he remembered.

“What do you need, Petty Officer Farrell?”

“Sure, sir? I can get someone from the shop.”

“Tell me what you need.”

“I’m checking the radar homing and warning system in 507. I need someone to sit in the cockpit and check the display and listen for the warning tones while I run the test from the rear of the plane.”

Amos’s load of sullen resentment lifted. “No problem. I’ll help you.”

Farrell wove through the densely packed planes and support equipment to 507 in the center of the bay. Amos followed him and climbed up the ladder and into the cockpit as Farrell fired up the electrical power unit. Amos turned the warning system on. Farrell

handed Amos a helmet with wires to plug into the console on the left side of the cockpit.

Amos lifted the left ear cup as Farrell explained the procedure.

“Same as we’ve done the test before, Mr. Kane. I’ll inject three different signals into the system: AAA radar, surface-to-air-missile radar, and MiG radar. And we do each type of threat signal four times. First, you should see the AAA radar strobe on the display coming from the forward right side. The second one will be aft right side of the plane and on around the plane. And, of course, you need to hear the proper aural warning signal for each threat, as well. I’ll inject the signal, and you should see a strobe and hear a tone. Give me a thumbs-up if the strobe and tone are proper or down if there’s a problem. Anyway, thumbs-up or -down, we run through the whole test, and then we deal with any signals that fail the test. Okay?”

“Got it,” Amos said.

They ran through the test sequence. The equipment functioned perfectly.

“Thanks, Mr. Kane,” Farrell said. “Maintenance officer wanted all the threat warning systems checked out. Tomorrow is the last day on the line, and we have to put four planes on a photo-protection mission.”

Farrell turned off the auxiliary electrical unit, took the helmet from Amos, and headed for the electronics shop with a medium-suitcase-sized piece of test equipment. Amos stayed in the cockpit for a while, thinking about Tuesday, wishing he could come up with a way to get him. Then he remembered the test procedure checked the entire system except for the antennae. Farrell had left his tool belt on top of the wing.

Amos took a needle-nose pliers from Farrell’s belt and opened an access panel in the belly of the plane just forward of where the tailhook attach point was located. The panel opened an area called the

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hellhole. Amos stood up inside the hole. The tailpipe was above him. So were several electronic boxes. He was in there for three minutes; then he ducked out, secured the panel over the hellhole, stuck the needle nose in his pocket, and walked away.

When catapult one fired at midnight, the last day of combat operations began, finally. Rather than relief, a niggling uneasiness bubbled like an upset stomach through the carrier. To the pilots, getting shot down or killed in an accident on the boat was, of course, never a desired outcome. Getting shot down or killed on the last day on the line? That carried eternal stigma. Death indicted a pilot for lack of skill or luck. Death during a cruise preserved a deceased as “Yeah. That ’70/’71 cruise was a bitch. Lost six guys.” Anonymity in lumped statistics. But death on the last day on the line memorialized a specific man as “Remember Dog Lips, that poor, pathetic bastard who got bagged the last day on the ’71 cruise?”

Finally, on *that day*, Stretch made the schedule for a photo-escort mission over North Vietnam.

Better late than never.

It didn’t even seem trite. Stretch had set that very thing as a goal four years prior. Now, here it was, and he found two mutually exclusive emotions rising and falling in his head. A buoyant *Hot damn!* rose and *Please, God, don’t let me get shot down on the last hop of the cruise!*

He recalled praying, *Please, God, don’t let me get shot down on my first hop* on his first combat hop.

Nothing like a little pucker factor to make a man remember God.

He'd be RT's wingman on the 1030 launch, which was the last launch. At noon, the planes would recover, and the ship's schedule in the Tonkin Gulf would be complete.

At 0853, seven minutes early, Stretch stepped into the intelligence-area pilot briefing room. He was alone. He squinted as the substantive, caustic, stale cigarette smoke atmosphere irritated his eyes. He tasted the air. The deck tile was dull. The bulkheads were dingy. Overhead, darkness hovered above the two bare bulbs. All six sides of the box he was in pressed in on him.

Four rows of beat-up, gray folding metal chairs, six chairs to a row, with an aisle in the middle filled the deck space. Stretch sat against the left bulkhead in the second row, trying to breathe only sips.

He thought of Teresa, of Teresa in Hong Kong, of Teresa with Jennifer and Edgar Jon back in Lemoore. That's what he wanted to see, to see them at the table in the dining room, eating, living.

At thirty seconds past 0858, pilots crowded into the room. They babbled with effusive gaiety. Forced, Stretch judged it. They took seats. Not in the first row. Most lit cigarettes. With fifteen seconds to spare, the intelligence officer entered, strode to the front, stared at his watch, and began the brief at precisely 0900.



Stretch stepped from the island out onto the flight deck and into sulfurous smokestack gas. It happened when the carrier steamed with the wind. The fumes made the air something to chew. The dregs of it sat on his tongue as if he'd bit the head off a match.

A tow tractor pulled an A-4 aft. Hunched over with the weight of tie-down chains over both shoulders, a stick-thin, red-pimpled plane captain slogged along behind the plane. Near the end of a long day on the flight deck, near the end of a long period on the line, near the end of a long cruise, all that showed on the kid's sunken cheeks and dark circles under his eyes.

Stretch looked up at the sky. High, thin cirrus, like sheer curtains, subdued the blue.

“What?” Tiny, standing next to Stretch, looked up at the sky. “You’re doing that school kid trick, trying to get people to look up?”

Stretch said. “No. Checking the sky, making sure the weather guessers didn’t lie ... again. So, what are you flying?”

“I’m Kodak Two. Kodak One’s the photo bird. I’m his escort.”

Tiny hooked a thumb aft. They saw the plane guard destroyer a thousand yards astern.

“Reminds me of the *Manfred* every time I see a destroyer,” Stretch said.

“You keep track of her, the *Manfred*?” Tiny asked.

Stretch shook his head. “Wish I did.”

“Well, wherever she is”—Tiny messed up Stretch’s hair—“the junior officers can’t go fly.”

“Have a good one,” Stretch said.

“Good one,” the big guy echoed as he grinned and headed aft.

Stretch’s plane, 507, was spotted forward, just behind the jet blast deflector for catapult number 1. The plane captain was Billings. Like most of them, a high-end teenager and skinny. The kids burned a lot of calories during fourteen-hour days, much of it spent humping chains, chocks, boarding ladders, but all of them ready with, “Hey, Mr. Z.”

Billings took Stretch’s helmet and navigation bag, about the size to hold a sandwich and an apple, to the cockpit as Stretch began his preflight. He paid special attention to the arming wires on the two bombs and the umbilical cables on the radar homing Shrike missiles, not because he worried about sabotage. Over the North, if he needed the weapons, he wanted them to work. The rest of the preflight didn’t take long.

In the cockpit, he strapped in and ran through the prestart checklist, that procedure too familiar, completed too fast, he decided.

More deliberately a second time, he paid attention to each switch to the left, each above and each below the instrument panel and each on the right console.

From his seat in the tower, the air boss called the crew to don complete flight deck uniform. "Sleeves rolled down, helmets on, chin straps buckled. Start engines."

Ahead of Stretch on cat 1, the A-4 tanker plane cranked up. RT's plane was on cat two and started, as well. The jet exhaust from the tanker was hot and stung his eyes. Stretch closed his canopy. In his cockpit, he'd roast for ten minutes. No help for it, though.

He ran through his post engine-start checks. All systems operated properly, including the last one he tested, the radar homing and warning system. He stepped through the takeoff checklist and gave a thumbs-up to the Warhorse flight deck chief. *Ready.*

The tanker and RT both had their engines at full power. Despite the jet blast deflector, Stretch's plane vibrated, and he pressed the brake pedals hard.

Cat 1 fired. The jet blast deflector lowered to the deck, and Stretch was directed to taxi over it and into position. Cat 2 fired. Stretch was locked onto his director, following his signals, but he knew the tanker would have turned left as soon as he had his landing gear up. RT would follow him.

Amos stood between an A-4 and a hydraulic power unit on the hangar bay, staring at his watch, fixated on the second hand stepping, silently, tick, tick, tick toward 1025. He'd set the watch by the big clock on the bulkhead in the intel-spaces pilot briefing room. The clock was updated once an hour. On-board the *Solomons*, the almighty clock ruled.

The ship was catapulting RT and Stretch and a tanker five minutes ahead of the 1030 launch.

Fifty-seven seconds, fifty-eight, fifty-nine.

1025. The sound of cat one firing preceded the judder through the ship. Then cat two fired.

Amos continued marking progress of the second hand. Forty-five seconds later, another shot. Cat one again.

He'd been in the ready room when AB had briefed the flight. The launch sequence had been covered, the mission timing for both AB's flight and RT's, as well. AB would fly northwest from the carrier and hit point Xray, inside North Vietnam, at 1050. At the same time, RT—having launched earlier and flying southwest—would cross point Whiskey, demarking the other end of the recce route.

Amos planned to enter the ready room at 1035. That's where he'd wait to find out if it worked. Of course, the North Vietnamese

had to shoot at the mission. If they didn't shoot, there'd be no way to tell. Amos knew, most of the time, the North Vietnamese did not fire at the photo missions.

Fire! Fire SAMs. Shoot guns.

He hoped there was a god up there responsible for righteousness and justice and that he'd catch the prayer.

"Amos."

Walt. He didn't want to see Walt or anyone. Not then.

"Amos, how about eating dinner with us at our table tonight?"

"Okay. Sure."

Walt looked like he wanted to talk.

"I gotta go, Walt. See you tonight."

Amos hurried forward along the port bulkhead. There was a fairly clear path to walk there, but one had to duck under noses of densely parked A-4s.

He didn't want to go to the junior officer bunkroom, but he was headed in that direction. Fortunately, none of the other occupants were there. The only chair in the place he thought of as Tuesday's. He pulled the chair away from the desk and sat, defiantly.

He wanted a whiskey. Since that day in San Diego, in the base CO's office, he hadn't wanted a drink. He'd cold-turkey-ed it and stuffed booze into a deep unmarked grave. But booze rose again. Botch had a bottle in his locker. He kept his key on the angle iron shelf above his bunk. It would be so easy.

But no. It was not a time for indulgence. It was a time when he had to have his wits about him.

He thought about Charlotte. Regret washed through him and diluted his resolve. He wished he could look forward to telling her what he'd done. There was not another he *could* tell.

Botch's booze called to him, touched and awakened longing, powerful as Sirens.

Angry, he got into his flight deck gear and went to the flight

deck. The noise and roar of the engines always keyed him up, sharpened his wits. He only had a few minutes, but it only took a second for the howling jets moving close to him to get the adrenaline flowing.

Stretch's nose gear settled over the last bump. The cat officer signaled for full power. Stretch jammed the throttle forward and checked his engine instruments. *Good.* He stirred the stick around. Flight controls free, no binding. *Salute the cat officer. Press head back against the ejection seat.*

Bang!

Like being shot out of a cannon or as near as he could imagine it. The force of it pressed him back hard. Then it let go. For an instant, there was wonder. *Will I fly? Will I drop like a rock?*

Fly!

As if on autopilot, Stretch rolled slightly to the left, raised the gear handle, leveled the wings, watched the airspeed rise, raised the flaps, made sure he was not descending to the water a couple of hundred feet below, and looked left to pick up the tanker and RT. He saw them, turned to follow, unsnapped his oxygen mask, and dumped the sweat out of it.

The tanker and RT were dots climbing into the blue. Normally, RT would have orbited over the ship until Stretch joined on him, but there wasn't time for a rendezvous on this mission. He and RT had a long way to go to get to the mission start point on time. They had to fly at max speed the whole route, which was why they needed a

tanker. Stretch stayed low until his airspeed reached 450 knots, and then he pulled back on the stick. It'd take a while to catch them.

Off to his right, over both North and South Vietnam, the sky was clear. *Good*. Navigation checkpoints would be easier to spot, but more importantly, if the North Vietnamese fired surface-to-air missiles, a pilot had to see the missile to evade it. That was the word. The radar homing and warning system painted a strobe in the direction the SAM would come from, but then the pilot had to find the "telephone pole" missile and, in effect, beat it in a dogfight. The guys who got shot down by a SAM never saw it coming.

North Vietnam. Just thinking about the place bored a hole in his belly that filled with a queasy uneasiness. He shivered. He was sopping with sweat. The plane's air conditioner didn't work worth a hoot at idle power, but it worked like a champ at full throttle.

As he climbed, he reviewed the mission plan. RT would be navigating, but the wingman had to be ready to take over as flight lead.

The ship committed two groups to the mission.

AB led the northern group of two A-4s and two F-8s. Their route ran one hundred miles northwest from the carrier to point Xray in North Vietnam. Kodak One was a photoreconnaissance bird. Kodak Two, Tiny, the other F-8 provided MiG protection to the unarmed recce plane. From point Xray, Kodak One would fly southwest photographing a major supply infiltration route, to point Oscar, midway between Xray and Whiskey, where the northern recce mission terminated. AB and his wingman, Skunk, provided SAM protection for Kodak One and Two.

RT was leading an identical package southwest from the carrier to just south of the DMZ, then west to the Laotian border, and then north to point Whiskey. From Whiskey, Kodak Three and Four would fly northeast to the same point Oscar. RT and Stretch provided SAM protection.

Stretch caught up and joined on the tanker as RT backed out

and moved aside. Stretch plugged into the tanker basket. After he'd topped off, the two A-4s pushed the power up, resuming the high-speed run to point Whiskey.

Transiting south of the DMZ, Stretch checked his weapon switches several times. Screwing up weapons switches over the North would be the eighth deadly sin.

RT rocked his wings, the signal to turn on the guns and the Master Arm switch. Stretch counted to five, and as briefed, RT rolled into a hard right. After rolling out of the turn, sudden awareness of being over the North injected raw fear into Stretch. He wanted, even begged to be allowed to fly there. Finally, he was there, and he was afraid. *Stretch!* he chided himself, and then flying his position, clearing his lead's side and rear, became all-consuming tasks. Eyes out of the cockpit, that was the phrase. If a threat radar illuminated them, they'd get aural warning signals.

Stretch checked his engine instruments and fuel state. *Good.* Another wing rock. That meant assume the RT formation. Stretch pulled up and ahead as his lead turned right to line up with the mission track.

"Whiskey," RT called over the radio.

"Xray," AB reported.

Both flights, right on time.

Stretch whipped his plane back and forth across the mission track. No flak, no SAMs. Just like practice missions. Stretch kept track of time by his maneuvers. The photo birds were supposed to start their routes forty-five seconds behind the A-4s. *About time*, he thought.

"Xray" over the radio meant Kodak One and Kodak Two—the photo bird and escort following AB—had begun their mission track. "Whiskey." Kodak Three and Four—the photo and escort following RT and Stretch—hit their checkpoint right on time, as well.

Everything right on plan.

Stretch saw black puffs behind RT. *Clouds*, he thought. Then he saw a red burst collapse into one of those black puffs.

“RT, flak left eight.”

The nose of a plane was twelve o’clock.

“Big stuff, Kodak Three.” RT was telling the photo plane that the flak was either eighty-five or one hundred millimeter. Before the flight, he’d briefed, “Don’t sweat the big stuff. That’ll all be barrage fire. It’s not aimed or radar controlled. The shells’re set to go off at a particular altitude. The big stuff you recognize by black puffs. Gray puffs mean the smaller thirty-seven or fifty-seven millimeter. Those’ll be radar directed. Sweat the little stuff.”

Besides, the photo birds were flying lower than Stretch and RT, where the eighty-five and the one hundred millimeter were going off.

Stretch, in a left bank, looked down. Black puffs appeared in front of RT’s plane. He turned slightly to the right. *Don’t sweat the big stuff, he’d said.* Stretch sweated the black puffs, but he reversed, losing sight of his lead. He glanced inside at his radar warning scope. Blank. No warning signals in his earphones.

Over the radio: “Kodak Two, SAM launch.” That was Tiny with the northern group. He’d picked up a SAM launch warning.

“AB’s been hit!” Skunk, AB’s wingman, screamed. “AB, you’re on fire. Eject! Eject!”

Skunk kept his mic button pushed, kept up his frantic plea, clobbered the radio with panic. *Get off the radio!* Stretch thought. Skunk was jamming the radio more effectively than an enemy could.

Amos had a chair in the last row of ready room chairs against the left bulkhead. He stuffed his float coat, an inflatable vest required on the flight deck, and his helmet in the drawer under the seat. He sat. Waiting wasn't easy. The skin on his arms tingled, and the urge to get up, walk, do something was powerful. Waiting wasn't easy. He wished he'd thought to bring a book. It would have helped him look normal. He'd been thinking of other things in the bunkroom, though.

The duty officer, Red, was at his desk in front of the room. The XO sat in his chair in the first row next to the aisle speed-reading messages, initialing, and flipping to the next one. Behind the XO, the CO, Hulk, Tuesday, and Botch huddled together debriefing their flight on the previous go.

Watch check, 1045. Amos groaned. A minute since he'd last checked. He looked up to see if anyone had heard him. They were all occupied with their tasks.

Amos fidgeted, told himself, *Calm down, just wait, just sit.*

The magnitude of what he'd done tried to push into his head. He'd told himself it was like dudding the bombs and a logical follow-on, but it wasn't. It was more serious. What he needed at that moment was a cool head. Even if some of them suspected him, they wouldn't

be able to prove it. And too, maybe, the North Viets wouldn't shoot at the guys.

"Questions?" he heard the skipper asked.

The JOs shook their heads and in unison said, "Sir."

For a moment, a jolt of anger fired through Amos. *Damned navy*, he thought, where even a head nod needed a *sir* after it. Well, he wouldn't have to put up with it much longer. When the ship decommissioned, he planned to push for a discharge as hard as he could. Without asking Mom to pull some political strings. He wouldn't do that.

The duty officer's phone jangled. It startled Amos and brought him back to the Warhorse ready room. He knew he was too keyed up. His head filled itself with stupid rambling thoughts. He needed control and focus on the here and now, not the future, which wouldn't matter if he didn't get through the day. He told himself to get his shit together.

And keep it to-goddamned-gether!

The duty officer snatched up the phone. "Warhorse ready room," Red said and listened and said, "Holy shit," as he hung up. "Skipper, XO. It was Combat Information Center. They monitored the photo-mission frequency. AB was shot down."

Stretch, in a right bank, reacquired his lead visually. Consciously ignoring Skunk's radio rant, he scanned for threats. To the south, in the distance, there was a red cloud—dust, maybe—hanging in the air right above the jungle. Then Stretch got a SAM launch warning. He glanced at the scope. Blank. Eyes back outside. Calls from the northern flight still jammed the radio. But he saw it. He'd never seen one before, but there was no question about what it was. It was a SAM. And it did look like a telephone pole. It was coming right at him!

“RT, break right! SAM.”

RT didn't move his plane. Skunk still had the radio clobbered. But RT would follow him. RT would know what Stretch was doing.

Stretch rolled inverted and punched the chaff button, releasing bundles of aluminum fiber designed to generate false contacts on enemy radars. Stretch pulled hard to forty-five degrees nose down and rolled upright.

The SAM had been flying to a spot above him. Stretch saw the nose of the missile dip down, point right at him again. It had him locked. He punched out more chaff. The magic box, SAM jammer, he turned it on. He was about to pull hard right again when the nose of the SAM jerked upward. *The magic box worked!* Stretch tore his eyes away from the SAM. He needed to look for other threats.

There, near the original red dust cloud. Another SAM lifted off. Stretch pulled hard to fifteen degrees nose up and fired a Shrike missile at the site. Immediately, he rolled inverted, punched more chaff, and pulled hard to nose low.

He had no idea if RT was still with him.

"I got you, Stretch," RT radioed. Finally, Skunk had shut up.

Another SAM launch warning warbled in his earphones. He reacquired the second missile. It was not tracking him.

"RT," Stretch called, "SAM, my one o'clock. It'll pass above and behind. Kodak Three, SAM heading your way."

"Kodak Three, tally. Kodak Four, break right."

Desperate for more speed, Stretch jammed the throttle against the stop. It was tough, looking inside and focusing on switches while he was jerking the airplane around, but he did. He jettisoned his empty drop tank and empty Shrike rail. Dumping those meant a few extra knots.

Flying at seven thousand feet, tree-covered ridges up to about five thousand rimmed both sides of the valley below him. He called, "RT?" asking if he still had him in sight.

"You got the lead," RT said.

Suddenly, orange bursts flowered ahead and slightly below Stretch. In a second, a floor of gray flak puffs extended from one ridge to the other.

"Kodak Three, abort the mission. Abort," RT radioed.

"No shit!" Kodak Three responded.

Stretch saw a clearing hacked out of the jungle under the red dust cloud. It had to be the SAM site. He zoomed to ten thousand feet, pulled back down into a dive, rolled out, and picked up the clearing. *Shit!* Dive angle too shallow.

From RT: "SAM nine o'clock. Break left, Stretch!"

Stretch looked left, didn't see it, and then did. He had seconds, a few, and ignored the SAM. He forced his eyes back on the clearing,

his target. Tracer rounds rushed up at him. Five red tennis balls. Ducks in a row. Fifty-seven or thirty-seven millimeter. Then a cloud of red sparks rose, blew past. Above, below. Both sides. Twenty-three millimeter. He felt that missile boring in on him from his left. The nape of his neck tingled. He pressed on with his bomb run. *About right.*

“Break left, Stretch. Break, goddamn it!”

RT never swore.

Stretch punched the chaff button, hoped he still had some, mashed the bomb pickle, and pulled up hard. He slammed the plane into a ninety-degree left bank and jerked the stick back.

“Reverse, Stretch, reverse!”

The A-4 snapped right as if it was puckered too.

“Roll out, Stretch, and climb. Turn left,” RT radioed.

What the hell was he doing?

“Turn right.”

Then he knew. RT was directing him through S turns so he could catch up.

“Level. Turn left hard.” After a moment, “Got me?” RT asked.

“You have the lead,” Stretch called. “Clear at your six.”

RT rolled upside down. He was bombing the second SAM site. After dropping his bombs, RT might head south or east. The safety of the DMZ and the South China Sea were about equidistant.

RT had been heading east in the run. He pulled off and turned south. Stretch dove to catch him.

Stretch let out a held breath as if there was time for breathing again.

A voice over the radio: “This is Kodak One. Kodak Two punched out.”

Tiny!

Kodak One continued, “He’s in the water five miles off the coast,

forty-five miles south-southeast of Xray. I need a rescue package ASAP. Boats are launching from the beach.”

RT rolled into a hard left turn. Stretch did too, lost sight of his lead, and called, “Blind.”

“Got you,” RT radioed, and after a moment, “Roll out.”

As RT and Stretch flew toward Tiny, available rescue resources reported in. Four A-4s were returning from bombing missions in Laos. They had no bombs, only twenty millimeters, but were twenty minutes away from the scene. Two F-8s were heading south from their north Tonkin Gulf combat air patrol stations. They had Sidewinder missiles and twenty millimeters. They were twelve minutes away.

Amos sat in his chair and listened to reports and worked at containing a bubble of euphoria that struggled for expression against his restraint.

“Where?” the skipper asked. “Where did AB go down?”

“Combat Information Center figures it was about five to ten miles southwest of point Xray,” Red reported.

The skipper jumped to his feet. Amos almost jumped up too.

“Red,” the CO ordered, “find out where the air wing commander is. XO, go to maintenance and see if we have a tanker-configured plane on the hangar bay. Rescue missions always need tankers.”

The phone rang again. It was the air wing commander for the skipper. The XO spied Amos and sent him to find out about a tanker.

When Amos came back with the news that there was a Warhorse tanker on the hangar, only Red and the XO were there.

“Well?” the XO snapped.

“Yes, sir. There is a tanker, 512. It’s up and in the hangar.”

The XO picked up the phone and started dialing.

“Wait, XO. Wait,” Amos said.

The XO finished dialing, put the phone to his ear, faced Amos, and held up a finger. *No, you wait a minute*, the finger said.

Amos spoke, anyway. “They’re already working to move 512 up to the flight deck.”

The XO told a party on the phone that he wanted to get 512 to the flight deck ASAP and hung up. “Just trying to make sure nobody screws this up, Amos. When things get tense, sometimes you gotta say a thing twice.”

Botch tore into the ready room and hurried toward the front as the phone rang. Red snatched it up, answered, and listened a moment.

“Jesus,” Red said. “They think Skunk was shot down too. And a photo-escort pilot just ejected off the coast of North Vietnam.”

“The hits keep on coming,” the XO said.

Red cradled the phone, and it rang immediately. He listened and hung up.

“XO, Skipper wants you to report to Combat. The air wing commander is there. You’re to help him run the rescue effort.”

Botch told Red, “I’m supposed to take 512 and launch as soon as it gets to the flight deck.” Botch turned, stopped, and said, “CO is getting two planes configured with Shrike missiles. As soon as they’re loaded, he wants to launch with Tuesday as his wingman. And, Red, Skipper said round up any Warhorse pilots not on the schedule. Have them stand by in the ready room.”

Botch grabbed his helmet and left.

Admiration at how the skipper and the ship responded to the news of a downed plane blossomed in Amos, unbidden and surprising. Time, always critical on a carrier in a rescue situation; each second amounted to a chunk of salvation chiseled away.

A hiss escaped through Amos’s teeth. His mind had betrayed him, and he’d admired how the CO and XO—and even Botch—were responding. It made him angry. He was at war with those people.

“Goddamn it, Amos. You asleep on your feet?” the XO snapped.

“No, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Help Red with whatever he needs done. Got it?”

Amos said he did. "Sir."

The XO left. Red sent Amos to the dirty-shirt dining room to round up any squadron pilots there. "Then get your ass back here."

Amos almost said, "Yes, sir."

As he hurried forward toward the dirty-shirt dining room, it occurred to Amos that he'd done it. First, he messed up the bombs, and then he'd screwed up the warning systems. AB and Skunk had been shot down. Justifiable, especially since AB had been the one who'd lied about being shot at on that photo mission a month prior. Justifiable, too, because of Charlotte.

They hadn't heard anything about RT and Stretch. Amos wondered what that meant.

As they sped northeast, Stretch couldn't keep his eyes from returning frequently to the blank radar warning screen. Something was wrong with it. SAMs had been fired at them. The gray flak puffs had been thirty-seven or fifty-seven millimeter. That was often radar directed. But there had been no strobe and not a peep of aural warning. The SAM launch warning came from a different black box. That one worked.

"Kodak," RT called. "Two A-4s five minutes out. Call the carrier and have them scramble tankers. Tell them tankers are priority one. Otherwise, we'll have more planes in the water."

They crossed what appeared to be a major highway running north-south paralleling the coast, visible now. As far as he could see in both directions, along the sides of the roadway, was a swath of bomb craters. The bombing halt had been in effect for three years. Still the effects of all those mid-sixties explosions were visible from two miles up.

Hey! Stretch pulled his mind to what was important, living through the present.

RT abandoned the special formation and put his wingman abeam to his left. The SAM site that got AB, it had to be off to Stretch's left. The threat of that SAM site exerted a strong pull on him, but he had

to concentrate his scan to the right, covering his leader. RT would see a SAM if they fired one. He kept telling himself that.

"RT," Kodak One called. "How you guys doing? Three North Vietnamese boats are halfway to Kodak Two. I've been making runs, but they figured out I don't have ammo."

Photo bird armament: film.

"At the coast," RT called. "Pop a couple of flares."

The F-8s and A-4s carried flares, as well as chaff, to decoy heat-seeking missiles. Even in daylight, the flares burned with eyeball-singeing intensity.

"Tallyho," RT called. "What about the tanker?"

"They're working on ... uh ... I got a SAM strobe!"

"Where?"

"Due west," Kodak replied.

"Stretch, take the boats," RT called as he pulled up to fire a Shrike at the SAM site.

Whitecaps riffled the surface. Stretch was at eight thousand feet, descending and unable to detect the targets.

Kodak was above and ahead of him.

"You still above the boats, Kodak?" Stretch called.

"Uh," came over the radio.

Kodak was too worried about the SAM to talk. Stretch dumped his nose, dove lower. He didn't want to overshoot the boats. He leveled at two thousand feet and saw them. Three narrow, over-long-looking canoes in a V formation. He picked the lead boat, checked his gun sight, checked the Master Arm on, and pushed the nose over into a ten-degree dive. He noted 550 knots on his airspeed gauge. Too fast. The gun-sight setting was for 450 knots. He pulled the power back and felt vulnerable slowing down but concentrated on flying a precise profile. The aiming dot was tracking toward the boat nicely. He rolled left a bit, tracking the bow of his target. The dot was on the boat. He squeezed the trigger while pushing forward on the stick,

keeping the gun-sight aiming dot on the bow. A satisfying *brrrrrpp* came from the guns.

A *deedle-deedle* sound. The radar altimeter had been set at seven hundred feet. Off the trigger. Pull hard. Power full. Nose up. Ease the stick, roll left. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the bow of the boat was gone, and the motor was driving the rest of it underwater.

He reversed hard and lined up another boat. Both boats were still heading away from shore, toward Tiny. He selected the nearest boat and again aimed at the bow. The white-top-flecked water rose up at him. The boat grew until the aiming dot touched the bow. He squeezed the trigger. A short *brrp* and the guns stopped firing. He saw his rounds froth around the bow. Stretch pulled up and rolled. The boat was turning.

“Stretch, I’m above you,” RT called. “I see one boat turning back to the coast. Okay. It stopped. It’s sinking. The other boat is still heading for Kodak Two. Climb up and find Kodak One. If that SAM site comes up again, Shrike him. I’ll get the last boat.”

Passing through five thousand feet, Stretch saw the photo F-8. He was in a left bank. Stretch leveled at ten thousand inside Kodak’s turn. He checked his fuel. Nine hundred pounds. Comfortable landing fuel state was two thousand.

“Anything about a tanker, Kodak?” Stretch called.

Over the radio: “This is 512. I’m a tanker and fifty miles out from the carrier.”

It was Botch.

“This is Kodak. We’re at seventy-five miles.”

A rescue helicopter checked in over the radio. The F-8s from the northern fighter station, and the A-4s from the Laos bombing mission arrived. RT had them look for boats on the beach and strafe any they found.



Stretch and 507 slammed onto the deck of the *Solomons* and caught a wire. Clearing the landing area, he followed his taxi directors until he was parked on the starboard side of the bow. As the crew secured his plane to deck with tie-down chains, a wave of exhaustion swept through his body. He wasn't sure he had the strength to climb out of the cockpit. The plane captain signaled him to shut down his engine. He reached for the throttle but stopped.

The threat warning system. He was sure he'd run the BIT, the built-in test, before launch. The system had checked good. Over the beach, however, it failed. He held up a finger, signaling one minute to the plane captain and ran the warning system BIT. It checked good. He ran it again. Good.

The BIT checked the box, the chassis of electronics, but it did not check the connection from the box to the antennas.

Stretch *safed* his ejection seat, unbuckled, climbed out and descended the ladder, hustled to the rear of his aircraft, and opened the hell hole. The hell hole was an area under the tailpipe and housed a number of electronic boxes. As the A-4 evolved, and more and more electronic systems were added to the aircraft, the hell hole wound as the only place left on the aircraft to stick yet another electronic system.

Stretch stood up in the hell hole and reached up to undo the cable connected to the front of the box. Inside the thumb-thick cable were a number of wires, including those connecting the box to the fore and aft antennas. Then he remembered the cable would be safety wired. Most cables were. Otherwise, vibrations from the engine, cat shots and arrested landings, aircraft maneuvering, could cause the connector to come loose in flight. But this cable was not safety wired.

One of the technicians screwed up? He knew them, and they were all smart and meticulous. He undid the connection and saw it. There were multiple pins in the cable head, and four of them had been removed.

This wasn't a screw up. This was intentional. *Judas Priest!*
Sabotage!

RT's plane was tied down next to his. Stretch checked his antenna cable and found the same pins missing from the connector head.

Amos sat in the ready room listening as the reports came in. Three planes downed. Justice had visited the dehumanized killers. The Dirty Half Dozen hadn't done a thing. Amos Kane, however, had accomplished an enormous deed. Amos Kane had even done more than Charlotte had with her protests and buckets of blood. He felt giddy, but if he ever needed to be Cool Hand Duke, it was here, and it was now.

After the search for the guy responsible for the dud bombs got intense, Amos looked for another way to damage the war effort. Then the technician, Petty Officer Farley, asked him to help check out an airplane's RHAWS (radar homing and warning system). During the checks, he discovered his next weapon. The system had a test button, which a pilot pushed as part of his after-engine-start checks. The test checked the function of the black box, but it did not check the connection to an array of antennas. Amos knew the function of every box in the A-4, including the RHAWS, as well as the function of every wire in every cable. He knew what he'd do next. He'd break the connection between the black box and the antennas. The maintenance people were used to seeing Amos around the planes. No one ever asked him what he was doing. They'd never figure out what he'd done. As long as he stayed cool.

The XO entered the ready room and charged to the front row of chairs. “Amos,” he barked. “Grab a pad of paper and come up here.”

On the whiteboard on the front bulkhead, the XO wrote, “Report on Photo Recce Operation Kodak 71-23.” He filled the board with background on the mission, the track flown, the planes committed by the *Solomons*.

“Sit in my chair, Amos,” the XO said, “and copy down what I’ve written. Hustle it up. The air wing commander wants a draft report in fifteen minutes. After you write what’s on the whiteboard, copy my notes.” He handed Amos a pad of lined paper. “The first part is RT’s and Zachery’s statements. The second part I got from Kodak One. I’m going down to sick bay to talk to Kodak Two. The rescue helo just landed with him. I want this all written up by the time I get back here.”

Amos sat and stared at the XO as he stomped aft to leave. The XO stopped. “Write, goddamn it, Amos!”

Amos scratched words onto the paper. He copied the whiteboard and the statements and read the notes from RT and Stretch. *It worked!* Both hadn’t seen a strobe or gotten an aural warning over the radar homing and warning system.

“What the hell you got to grin about, Amos?” Red, the duty officer, snapped.

“Uh, well, they made it. RT and Stretch. Their warning systems failed, but they made it.”

“The warning systems failed in both planes?” Red asked.

Amos held up the XO’s notes. “What it says here.” He kept the smile off his face. He’d done it, pulled it off. Cool Hand Duke stepped in when he needed him. He went back to transcribing notes. He finished just as the XO entered the ready room, along with the CO and Tuesday.

“You didn’t find either airplane crash site or a peep of an emergency radio. That right?” the XO asked the skipper.

"I would have liked to search a little longer," the CO said.

"The air wing commander and the carrier CO talked about it," the XO said. "Nobody picked up the beeper that goes off when you eject. We got the beeper when Kodak Two ejected. The ship CO and the wing commander concluded neither AB nor Skunk made it out of their airplanes. It wasn't worth endangering more pilots to keep searching."

"Yeah. After the ship told us to come back, Tuesday tried to talk me into pressing on and looking for the SAM site that got AB and Skunk. I damned near listened to him."

Amos jumped up, and the CO dumped his helmet on his seat.

"Let me see what you've got, Amos," the XO said, taking the pad of paper and paging through it quickly.

Amos didn't think they'd figure out it was him; still, he wanted to get out of there, get away from them, but the narrow aisle between the rows of chairs was blocked.

"Good job, Amos," the XO said. To the CO, "I have to get this report to the air wing commander. I was on the way to talk to Kodak Two when I bumped into you in the passageway. I want to talk to him before I turn the report in. Be back as soon as I can."

In the back of the Ready Room, RT and Stretch filed in. RT stopped the departing XO. "You may want to hear this, sir."

RT went to the front of the Ready Room and told the Skipper what Stretch had found regarding the antenna connection to the RHAW system.

After RT finished his report, the CO wanted to know what he'd seen in the cockpit.

"We had two SAM sites fire at us," RT said. "We saw not one strobe. Heard not one audio alert, and besides the SAMs, we had a whole lot of radar-directed triple A. Again. Not one peep out of the warning system."

"Any other system problems, RT?" the CO asked.

“No, sir.”

“Me, either, Skipper,” Stretch said. “I am sure the jammer box worked. A SAM was tracking me. I turned the box on, and I could see the missile break lock.”

“But both airplanes had inop warning systems,” the CO said. “Wonder what worked in AB’s and Skunk’s planes?”

The XO invited Stretch to accompany him to see Tiny in sick bay.

“Skipper,” RT said, “we checked all the systems yesterday. Every airplane checked out. And Stretch and I both got good system tests after we started engines.”

Amos had been standing between the CO and duty officer desk. This wasn’t dud bombs. AB and Skunk were dead, probably. He had to get out of there, and he started squeezing between the CO and RT. RT grabbed his arm to stop him. It scared Amos.

“You okay, Amos?” RT asked.

“Um, sure. Why?”

“You just looked ... I don’t know, worried.”

“No. No problem. It’s just losing AB and Skunk. On the last hop, you know?”

“Okay,” RT said, “we need to look at all our airplanes for RHAW antenna connection. You understand what we need to look for?”

Amos said he did.

RT told him to get Carl Midlin on it.

Amos started walking toward the rear of the ready room. And, suddenly, he wasn’t so sure they would never figure it out. But they won’t be able to prove anything. He told himself, *Just let Cool Hand Duke handle this*. To Amos’s left, Tuesday was standing in front of his seat in the last row of chairs. Tuesday stared at him. And Tuesday knew. Amos could see that on his face.

Amos decided he wasn’t looking for Carl Midlin. He was getting out of there. He had to figure out what to do.

A hand grabbed his arm from behind, and Amos almost peed his pants. It was RT.

"Get moving, Amos," RT said. "I want to know if someone screwed with any more of our airplanes."



Tiny lay propped by a stack of pillows, his fingers laced behind his head. He might have been lounging on the beach.

"Damn, that was you strafing the boats," he said to Stretch.

Stretch grinned and shrugged.

"Shit," Tiny said. "Now I owe you."

The XO grabbed Stretch's bicep and stopped him from responding. "Tiny, I need your input on what happened. What do you know about what happened to AB and Skunk? Then I want to hear what happened to you."

"Yes, sir," Tiny said. "AB should have been seven miles ahead of us as we hit the first checkpoint. I got a SAM launch warning and called it."

Stretch confirmed hearing Tiny's call as the first indication they had trouble on the northern segment.

Tiny had SAM-launch warning but no strobe on his warning system, which would have indicated a SAM radar had locked onto to his aircraft.

"Damn," the XO said. "Maybe your warning system didn't work, either. Has to be sabotage."

"I don't know about that," Tiny said. "But my warning system worked. I didn't get a strobe at first, because I think the North Viets were locked onto AB and Skunk. We have a separate black box in the F-8 for the launch warning. You do too in the A-4, right?" Stretch nodded, and Tiny continued, "I think I was close enough that I picked up the launch warning as they were shooting at AB and Skunk. I didn't see AB's plane go down, but I think I saw Skunk's trailing

fire. That's when his radio transmissions stopped. I told Kodak One to abort, and I continued toward Skunk's fireball. That's when I got a strobe, and I saw a missile coming right at me. I turned hard left, turned on my jammer box, and punched out chaff, and I saw the missile break lock. Then I had two strobes on my warning system, and I saw two missiles, one at my one o'clock, another at three. I pulled a split-S maneuver and obviously didn't shake both of them. I felt the shrapnel hit my plane."

"Your warning system worked," the XO said. "Kodak One's, Three's, and Four's worked too."

The XO looked at Stretch. "Who saw the SAMs, you or RT?"

"I saw the first one and the second one. I probably wouldn't have seen either one if we weren't flying the RT formation. He showed it to you, right, XO?"

"He did. And you think that's what saved your bacon?"

"Near as I can figure it, it did," Stretch said.

"Back to the warning system," the XO said. "Your warning system didn't work, Stretch, and neither did RT's. And all the other systems worked in both your airplanes. That friggin' saboteur got us. AB and Skunk bought it because their warning systems didn't work. They didn't know where to look. Probably never initiated evasive maneuvers. Probably never saw the missiles that got 'em. Go back to the ready room and tell the CO. I have to get to the air wing commander."

The XO left. Stretch looked down at his friend, smiled, and messed his hair up.

"Corpsman," Tiny said. "Oh, corpsman, there's a guy in here abusing a wounded man."



Amos had been sent up to the flight deck to monitor the testing of the warning systems. RT gave him a radio and told him to report

step-by-step progress with the testing, not to wait for the conclusion. Tuesday had followed Amos to the flight deck and stayed next to him as technicians checked 500, and as the tests were running on 501, he stood behind him. Amos was about to tell Tuesday to stop hovering over him when RT called over the radio.

“What’s happening, Amos?”

“500. The RHAW system checked good, but the antenna cable has pins missing. The techs are testing 501 now.”

“Okay,” RT said. “But keep the reports coming.”

Amos said he would.

501 was in the exact condition as 500.

502 was on the hangar deck. 503 was in the middle of the flight deck abeam the island.

As the crew moved toward 503, Tuesday stayed next to Amos. Amos felt threatened. He knew then he’d deluded himself, thinking they wouldn’t be able to prove he did it. He had to get away from Tuesday. He wanted to talk to Walt. There were places to hide on the ship. Walt had told a story about one of his sailors who’d been declared missing. Everyone thought the kid had fallen overboard. Three weeks later, a master-at-arms petty officer found Walt’s missing sailor holed up in a void space called a torpedo blister, an empty just-behind-the-ship’s-skin compartment designed to absorb the blast from a torpedo outside vital interior spaces. Walt’s sailor had lived in the space. He came out at night and used the head and ate. Amos didn’t need three weeks, not even three days. Two would do. The ship would be in port in the Philippines then. There, he could find a way to sneak off. But he had to get rid of Tuesday. He had to shake him right away.

Amos said, “Tuesday, RT wants periodic reports. How about checking on our guys in the hangar. There’s another crew there running these same checks. I’ll stay with the flight deck crew.”

“Bullshit, Kane. I’m staying here.”

“Fine, Shithead,” Amos snarled. “Everybody else is pitching in to find the bastard who did this. Take the goddammed radio and keep the reports going to RT. I’m going to the hangar to check the crew there.”

Tuesday took the radio. Amos had been afraid he wouldn’t. That would have messed things up!

Amos stomped away. He was almost desperate to check behind to see if Tuesday was following him. Cool Hand Duke kept his head looking straight ahead. Inside the island, Amos latched the door behind him and waited a moment.

Tuesday hadn’t followed him.

Amos thundered down to the hangar and hustled forward to the JOB. At the door, he hesitated. Someone could be in there. But, there was no time. Inside, empty. He almost said, *Thank you, god*. He grabbed his overnight bag and stuffed skivvies and civvies and his dop kit in. And money. Not much time. He almost bolted, but then thought: *A suicide note*.

He grabbed a yellow pad of paper and wrote:

I did it because this is an immoral war.

But, I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.

Now, I can’t live with what I did.

He left the note on his pillow and grabbed his bag. It was time to hustle down to that void space down on the sixth deck. He ripped the door open, and Botch hit him hard on the chest. Amos fell back onto the rug. Botch rushed in, followed by Tuesday.

Amos smirked when Tuesday pointed that stupid little derringer he carried in his flight suit at him.

“Botch,” Tuesday said, “stand out in the passageway. Don’t let anyone in, not even the captain of the ship. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Botch left, and a spike of anger split Amos’s brain. Goddamned

Tuesday! Amos started pushing himself up when Tuesday cocked the pistol. Amos froze.

“You are a murdering traitor sack of shit,” Tuesday snarled. He kept the toy gun pointed at Amos.

“What are you going to do, shoot me?” Then Amos saw it in his eyes. “Tuesday, wa—”

Stretch entered the Warhorse ready room and found Carl Midlin behind the counter, a handheld radio up to the side of his face. “Thanks, Chief,” he said, and he laid the radio on the counter. Then he placed a checkmark on a sheet of lined paper with a spreadsheet penciled onto it. It was a list of the side numbers of the twelve remaining squadron airplanes. Carl shook his head. “Seven of our birds had those connector pins pulled. Seven!”

Normally, Carl’s face reminded Stretch of something Teresa was fond of saying: “Give it to the Lord.” Stretch had asked Carl once, “You never get excited. How do you manage that?”

“I’m an alcoholic,” Carl said. “I haven’t had a drink for nine years, but that’s only because I have a Higher Power, and I give Him everything that would stir me up.” But Carl was stirred up now.

“Carl,” Stretch said, concerned.

“I know, Stretch. Thanks.” Carl took a deep breath and let it out. “See, it’s all better now.” Carl’s face still portrayed an anger boiling in his belly.

“If I can help, let me know,” Stretch said.

Carl thanked him again, dialed a new channel on his radio, and reported the results on his spreadsheet to RT.

In front of the ready room, a clump of pilots huddled, talking

intently. To Stretch's right, three pilots knelt on the seats of their chairs, elbows on the backs, speaking with three others seated in the row behind them. Red was at his duty officer desk with the phone to his ear. Tuesday and Botch sat in the second-last row of chairs to the left, whispering to each other. "Channel fifteen," Tuesday said. Both of them twisted the dial atop the handheld radios the maintenance guys used. "Testing," Tuesday said. Botch nodded. Tuesday stood abruptly, turned, and brushed past Stretch.

"Tuesday, what are—"

Tuesday didn't stop and neither did Botch.

Stretch felt hard metal punch his shoulder from Tuesday's left arm. He knew what it was. Most pilots, through the course of the cruise, had settled on two water bottles, two handheld radios, a first-aid kit, a knife, and one or two .38-caliber pistols as personal survival equipment. Tuesday also carried a derringer in his left-arm sleeve pocket. He'd been warned by the CO and the XO to stash that pocket pistol in the squadron gun box as a first order of business after returning from a flight. Twice, Tuesday said he forgot. "You forget one more time," the CO'd told him a week prior, "and I'm taking that thing and tossing it over the side. Nobody wanders around the ship armed except marines and sentries."

"Hey, Stretch," Red called out, "RT wants you in the CO's cabin. Hop to it, he said."

Teresa sat at the dining room table writing. It was 2100. The children were in bed. She planned to write for an hour and then turn on the ten o'clock news.

Dearest Jon,

How I have longed to be able to write this letter. At noon your time, your line period was over. I know things can happen, schedules can change, but in this case, I just feel like I know. It's over, and you are on the way home. I hope I am not deluding myself with my feeling or misguided woman's intuition. Part of being so anxious to have you home is I want you and I to be pregnant together. I hope, I think you know what I mean. After Jeffrey, it is just so important to have you and with me. I will say I can't help but worry a little, but I am so happy for us, so happy I came to Hong Kong, so happy you are on the way home.

The phone rang, a shrill piercing of the night. She rose to answer it when Jennifer screamed from her bedroom, prickling the skin on the nape of Teresa's neck. Heart pounding, she hurried to her daughter.

Edgar Jon was howling too when she pulled open the bedroom door. Jennifer was sitting upright on her bed, quiet now, streams of tears running down her cheeks. Edgar Jon was on his back screaming at the ceiling.

Teresa gathered up Edgar Jon and sat on Jennifer's bed and pulled her daughter beside her as the boy snuffled and sucked in air in gasps as if he couldn't get his lungs full.

"Did you have a bad dream, dear?" Teresa asked.

Jennifer nodded.

"There, there," she said, and she rocked the boy on her lap back and forth.

A loud knocking on the rear door jolted Teresa. Carrying her son and leading Jennifer by the hand, she hurried down the hall as the knocking grew insistent. Opening the door, she found Amy Allison in a robe.

"What's wrong, Amy?"

"The black car just entered the family housing area."

Then Teresa remembered the phone had rung.

"I got a call from Maria," Amy said, "a teacher friend."

"Come in, Amy."

"The children," Amy said. "Is something wrong?"

"Jennifer had a bad dream. Come in."

"What if it comes to my house? I have to be there. I tried to call you, but there was no answer. I saw lights."

"Come in, Amy. We'll watch together at my front door."

"Do you mind if I pick you up, Jennifer?" Amy asked as she entered the house. Jennifer raised her arms, just as she had when she was two. Amy's eyes glistened. "The little ones, they know, they feel it, don't they?"

The phone rang again.

"Dear God, please," Amy said.

Teresa answered, listened, hung up, and turned to face Amy.

“That was Helen Fischer,” Teresa said. “AB and Charlie Tucker were shot down over North Vietnam.”

“AB and Skunk? Two of them?”

“Yes. Both are listed as MIA.”

“Dear God,” Amy said. “I am so happy it’s not Mike or Jon or ... And I feel so guilty that I am happy. Poor Bonnie Tucker and Sybil Clark.”

The phone rang again. It was Rita Nelson. Karen Carson and JR were with her. She wanted to know if Amy was with Teresa.

“I’m not going to be able to sleep tonight,” Rita said. “How about you, Teresa?”

“Not for a long time. Come over, why don’t you? You and Karen.”

“On the way. I’m bringing booze,” Rita said.



Tonight, the black car entered family housing just the way it did when the A-4s went over the side, and the phones started ringing. Amy came over, and we were together when we got the news about AB and Charlie Tucker. Then Rita and Karen came over. Rita made margaritas. She is sleeping on Amy’s couch, and Karen is on ours. JR is in a playpen in the living room. Our babies are asleep. I just had to write a little more before I go to bed. I needed to make this connection with you. It’s just a letter, just words on paper, but it feels like so much more. It makes it real that it was not you shot down. And of course Daniel is heavy on my mind this morning.

I can’t imagine what you are going through. I will pray for you that the Lord will be with you through it.

Stretch sat on the fold-down-bed couch next to RT and the XO in the CO's cabin. The CO was inspecting a multipin connector. RT had ordered his maintenance crew to cut one of the connectors out of the aircraft.

"Okay," the CO said. "We've agreed that whoever did this had to know what he was doing. I'm thinking it has to be a Warhorse, one of our own guys. The air wing commander had the other squadrons check their planes. Nobody else had this problem."

"One of our guys makes the most sense," the XO said.

"It might make sense," RT said, "but I sure can't tell you who it is. If it really is one of our maintenance guys, it will surprise the heck out of me."

"It has to be someone with detailed knowledge of the warning system," the CO said.

"And I know all our electronic techs pretty well. I just can't see one of them doing it," RT said.

"What about the chief petty officers?" the XO asked.

"I'd suspect you, XO, before one of them," RT said.

"Stretch," the CO said. "What about Butt Chin? Those pins could have been pulled some time ago if I understand this right. He turned

in his wings, and we got him off the ship two days later. Could he have done this?”

“Skipper, I don’t know,” Stretch said. “He seemed all beat up. I don’t know how to describe it.”

“He had no fire in his belly,” RT said. “He wasn’t angry. His spirit was deflated. I don’t see him doing it.”

“Amos?” the XO asked. “He’s got spirit. He looks pissed off most of the time. He’s always around on the flight deck and the hangar. What about him?”

“He is always around. The maintenance guys like him because he helps them work on the planes,” RT said.

“Stretch, what do you think about Amos?” the CO asked. “Could he have done this?”

Stretch fidgeted on the seat.

“What?” the CO asked. “You don’t want to rat on another JO?”

“No, sir,” Stretch said, and he looked his interrogator in the eye. “Amos and I had a disagreement. I’m worried about being objective.”

“Goddamn it, Stretch,” the CO said. “We don’t have time for this kind of crap. What do you think? Could Amos pull those pins?”

Stretch leaned his elbows on his knees and studied his hands for a moment. He sat up straight. “Yes, sir. I think Amos could do it.”

“Shit,” the CO said. “I see it now. He makes himself one of the guys with all the maintenance troops. They all like him because he helps them.”

“He’s smart,” RT said.

“Word is,” Stretch said, “he joined the Dirty Half Dozen.”

“That Communist son—” the XO began, but the phone cut him off.

The CO snatched it up and barked into it. He listened, said, “Thanks, Chief,” and hung up.

“That was Chief Edmonson. He said he finished questioning all his plane captains. After flight ops secured last night, one of them left

his plane on the flight deck to go to the head. When he got back, he found the hellhole door open. He says he knows it was closed when he left. It was 505. That's the only thing the chief got from his guys."

"Which ain't much," the XO said. "At first, I wondered how anyone could pull this off without somebody else noticing. But on the flight deck after flight ops secure, you see guys working on planes all the time. You never think a thing about it."

"When your guys do the warning system checks," the CO said, "somebody has to be in the cockpit to make sure the warning system shows the proper strobe on the display and that he hears the right warning signal. It has to be someone who knows that system."

"A technician or a pilot," the XO said. "Gotta be one of those."

"Or Amos," the skipper said. "This is what we're going to do. XO, you find Amos. Bring him here, and you and I will question him. RT, we're going to treat this like an aircraft mishap. We need a thorough investigation. Plow back over every guy the XO talked to, get transcripts of the radio frequencies the ship monitored during the flight. You and Stretch are our investigation board. Draft whatever help you need."

"Stretch, you start writing up the formal report and begin with the mission plan, the aircraft and pilots assigned. RT, get interview reports from all involved parties feed those to Stretch."

"Questions?"

"No, sir."

"Hop to it, then."

Outside the CO's room, Stretch said, "I'm going to stop by the JOB and pick up my cassette recorder. Somebody may be able to use it when re-interviewing guys."

"See you in the Ready Room," RT said.

Stretch hustled up the ladder from the hangar bay to the 01 level and the junior officer bunkroom to get his tape recorder. As Stretch topped the ladder, the ship's announcing system blared, "Now hear this, Lieutenant Junior Grade Kane, report to the Warhorse ready room. Lieutenant JG Kane, report to the Warhorse ready room."

Stretch twisted the doorknob and ran into the door. Locked. The door to the JOB was never locked at sea. Only in port. Stretch banged on the door. There was no answer. He had a key on his dog tag chain.

Stretch opened the door. First, he saw Botch sitting on Hack's bottom bunk against the side of the ship. Botch handed a gym bag to someone lying on the sloped side of the ship. Above the top bunk, Stretch saw that the porthole was open. The guy behind the bunks pushed the gym bag through the porthole. Then something small, shiny, and metallic went through the hole.

"What are you guys doing?" Stretch asked.

Botch looked up, hand-in-the-cookie-jar all over his face.

"What the hell are you guys doing?" Stretch repeated.

The porthole banged closed and was dogged. Botch stood up, and Tuesday climbed across the bunk.

"Stretch, get out of here." Tuesday glared at him.

"Not going to happen." Stretch looked down. The carpet was

gone. The ever-present pile of dirty clothes from Botch and Hack was gone. "Where's the carpet?"

"We threw it away," Tuesday said. "The XO said we had to."

"You were going to toss it after we stopped in Hawaii," Stretch said.

The ship's announcing system blared, "Lieutenant JG Kane, call the Warhorse ready room immediately."

Botch was a bit taller and much broader than Tuesday, but Stretch thought Botch was hiding behind his smaller companion.

"Amos," Stretch said. They'd, or Tuesday had, shot Amos. "You rolled him in the carpet and tossed it off the fantail. You carried it all the way aft through the hangar?"

"First sponson's just outboard of the ladder down to the hangar."

"Botch, goddamn it. Shut up." Tuesday's hands clenched. "Walk away, Stretch," Tuesday snarled.

"I'm not leaving." The left-arm pocket zipper on Tuesday's flight suit was open. Stretch stepped forward and grabbed Tuesday's arm. Tuesday slapped the hand aside, but not soon enough. "You tossed the derringer. You wish you still had it?"

"We wouldn't hurt you—"

"Shut up, Botch," Tuesday cut him off.

"You gonna rat on us?"

"Shut up, Botch. Shut. Up."

Stretch turned his back to Tuesday. "I wish you did still have your gun. Then you could shoot me too, and I wouldn't have to decide." Stretch turned to leave and saw the note leaning against Amos's pillow. He snatched it up, read, turned, and handed it to Tuesday.

Triumph bloomed over Tuesday's face. "That's it, then. We're in the clear."

Stretch hit Tuesday on the side of the face. He fell back. Botch caught him.

Tuesday wiped blood from the corner of his lip. Now his lower lip sported two splits. Tuesday stood up straight and shook off Botch's

hands. “How many times did you take the law into your own hands this cruise, Stretch? After what you did, you stand there and condemn me?”

Stretch walked out without looking at Tuesday. He took the athwartship passageway. The chapel was on the other side of the ship from the JO bunkroom. He entered, hoping unreasonably to find Amos as he had that once, but it was empty. He sat, closed his eyes, and soaked in the silence and solemnity of the place.

Teresa always said, when you get a heavy load, just give it to the Lord. But that didn’t seem right. It was such an ugly thing to give to Him.

He thought about the Bronze Star and the night with the marines. He was in an OP with a marine lieutenant. A sergeant and a private had sentry holes dug around the OP. Six Vietcong attacked the OP in the middle of the night. The lieutenant and the private were killed, and the sergeant was wounded. But the marines and Stretch killed or wounded all six attackers. After the firing around him stopped, Stretch heard the sounds of a major attack on the marine company located below the OP. He’d gone into the brush, found all six of the attackers, and fired two rounds into the heads of each one. He was going to call in supporting fire from his ship, USS *Manfred*, and he didn’t want to risk a wounded Vietcong rising and stopping him before he could bring support to the company. *You don’t shoot helpless wounded men*. But he had shot six downed men, and he knew at least two of them were not dead—until he found them. After the attack was repulsed, he explained to the wounded sergeant—Evans, his name was—what he’d done. He thought the marines might want to court-martial him.

“Jesus Christ, Ensign Zachery,” Sergeant Evans bellowed into the unnaturally silent Vietnamese early morning darkness, “ain’t nobody gonna court-martial you. Hell, I think you’re wasted as a swabby. You’d make a damned fine marine.”

They didn't court-martial him. Instead, they awarded him a Bronze Star.

He had two other medals for killing a Vietcong and a North Vietnamese. In those two incidents, as well, he'd acted on a conviction that he knew the right thing to do. In both, just as with the action at the OP, there was some aspect that, in the aftermath, gnawed at him. The thing that gnawed was the notion that the right thing to do was not the same as the moral thing to do.

And there was the incident of recycling his guns and how he had acted after Daniel died.

In Hong Kong, with Teresa, he'd discovered the way to carry the burdens of the deaths and his deeds. Just carry them. *That's my job* he'd concluded. *Let St. Peter decide what to do about it. That's his job.*

But now he had another issue to deal with. It wasn't clear what the right thing to do was, or the moral one. There was a clear legal thing to do.

Then he thought, *Tuesday asked a good question, didn't he, Lord?*

Then he thought Botch had asked a good question too. "You gonna rat on us?"

He recalled his childhood resolution about not going to hell for other people's sins.

Rats.

RT was waiting for him. He got up to leave, but with his hand on the door, he turned and sat back down. He had to decide. He stared at the crucifix behind the altar for a moment.

"No, Sir," he whispered. "It's not like Teresa said, or as Carl Midlin says. This is mine to carry."

Then he hustled away to meet RT—without going back for the tape recorder. He'd make an excuse. A lie. And that was the problem with things like he was doing. Ugly acts didn't stay the way they were when committed. Ugly acts take on life and attract other ugliness like a magnet attracts iron filings.

Stretch latched onto writing the report the CO had ordered as if his life depended on it. And maybe it did. How the hell can I tell?

It was 0500, and he wasn't sure if what he'd written would fill the bill or not. Maybe the Skipper would tear it up and tell him to start over.

It didn't matter. Not much did just then.

Writing that report, distilling the separate interviews, taking the transcript of the recorded radio transmissions and smooshing it all into one coherent, connected story had kept him from thinking about the one thing that did not go into it.

Murder. The other incidents he'd worried about, he worried because they seemed to him to have been too close to murder for comfort. What Tuesday and Botch did, it wasn't just close to murder. It was the deed itself.

Stretch knew what they had done, but he wasn't going to rat on them. That made him complicit. That smeared ugly murder on his soul.

The carrier would be in the Philippines the next day. He'd have to call Teresa. But now he had another thing he couldn't tell her. He was piling up way too much of that kind crap.

He sat in his Ready Room chair with the stack of lined yellow

paper in front of him. Twelve straight hours of pouring ink onto paper. There was nothing but the truth in what he'd written, but it sure as shooting wasn't *the whole truth*.

Lord, God in heaven, Teresa says You won't give us a challenge we can't handle. I gotta tell you, Sir. I'm up against it.

Coming so soon after the kill-lust incident. *It's like I get over one thing, and here comes another even bigger and badder than the one before.*

Somebody plopped onto the chair next to him.

"Is it done?" RT said.

"I don't have a clue, sir."

"You look like a zombie. Go get a shower. I'll read through your report and get a yeoman to type it up. He should have it done by time we finish breakfast. We can get it to the Skipper right after he's done eating."

Stretch lead-footed it forward and up to the JOB. At the door, he stopped and read what had been written there two days before.

On one side of the door, in black magic marker was penciled:

Home of morally anesthetized
Dehumanized killers.

And next to it in red marker: And one American chicken.

Bawk, bawk, bawk.

With a peace symbol beneath that.

He tried to remember what Rose had said about zealotry when they'd visited her in Hawaii, but there was nothing but fuzz in his head.

Inside the room, snores aplenty.

Stretch gathered up his uniform, skivvies, and his dop kit and headed for the shower.

The shower washed away as much dirt from inside his head and as from outside his body, and as he dressed, he wondered if he'd ever been hungrier in his whole life.

After the shower, as he pulled on a clean uniform, he thought it felt ... well, it still felt crappy, but clean crappy.

He thought about nine months ago when it was announced the Raiders would decommission. It had seemed, then, so all fired important to get to the war.

Here he was. He'd gotten to it, and he wasn't a better man for it. Some people say war is hell. *I wouldn't argue that point.* Fact is though, you don't go to hell to get better.

Chances were good he'd never come back to this, to the war. Maybe that was something to hold onto.

He needed something. There were the children and Teresa was pregnant. If he did leave the navy after the cruise, what would he do? How would he support them?

But that was way too big a problem to take on just then.

It would take a month for ship to get home. He'd probably need all of it to get all the demons roiling about inside him into some form of, not submission, tolerance maybe.

His stomach grumbled.

Finally. A problem I might be able to solve.

VA-92 Warhorse Officer Roster

Position	Name & Rank* (Spouse Name)	Nickname(s)
<u>Pilots</u>		
Commanding Officer	CDR George Franks (Clare)	Skipper, CO
Executive Officer	CDR Bill Riley (Darlene)	XO
Operations Officer	LCDR Wendell Walker (Marla)	Bear, Ops O
	LCDR Dave Clark (Sybil)	AB, Ops O
Maintenance Officer	LCDR Dave Clark	AB, MO
	LCDR Robert T. Fischer (Helen)	RT, MO
Administrative Officer	LCDR Robert T. Fischer	RT, Admin
Safety Officer	LT Charlie Tucker	Skunk
	LT Fred Hollis	Fireball
	LT Ron Moliter	Butt Chin
Schedules	LT Steve Carson (Karen)	Your
	LT Jon Zachery (Teresa)	Stretch
	LT Pete Landry	Hulk
	LT Ray Nelson (Rita)	Red
	LT(JG) Larry Monday	Tuesday
	LT(JG) Mike Allison (Amy)	Alice
	LT(JG) Simon Stokes	Hack
	LT(JG) Butch Felder	Botch

Ground Officers

Assistant Maintenance	LT Carl Midlin	Carl
Material	LT(JG) Amos Kane	Amos
* Navy Rank Abbreviations:	CDR	Commander
	LCDR	Lieutenant Commander
	LT	Lieutenant
	LT(JG) or JG	Lieutenant (Junior Grade)
	ENS	Ensign
	WO	Warrant Officer

THE JUNIOR OFFICER BUNKROOM

Terms:

AAA	Antiaircraft artillery, flak.
BDA	Bomb damage assessment.
bolter	A carrier landing attempt where the pilot either misses the cables or his hook skips over them.
BOQ	Bachelor officers' quarters.
bulkhead	Wall.
deck	Floor.
FAC	Forward air controller.
flak	Antiaircraft artillery.
ground-pounder	Nonpilot in an aviation squadron.
hack	Informal punishment, confinement to quarters.
heavies	Senior officers; to those in the junior officer bunkroom, lieutenant commanders and above were heavies.
inop	Inoperative.
intel	Intelligence.
island	The tall structure on the starboard side of an aircraft carrier containing the pilothouse and the control tower.
JO	Junior officer.
LSO	Landing signal officer.
meatball	Yellow ball of light on the lens next to the landing area on an aircraft carrier. Naval bases ashore are also equipped with a lens adjacent to runways. Carrier pilots were expected to make every landing ashore practice for landing at sea.

plane captain	A junior enlisted man assigned responsibility for a specific airplane. He was responsible for a series of daily inspections, such as checking hydraulic fluid and oil levels and helping a pilot through man-up and engine start procedures. Plane captains were sometimes thought of as pages for knights in shining armor, which was how some fighter pilots saw themselves.
OIC	Officer in charge.
ordie	Ordnanceman in the enlisted ratings.
overhead	Ceiling.
recce	Reconnaissance. Photoreconnaissance becomes <i>photo recce</i> .
ROE	Rules of engagement.
SAM	Surface-to-air missile.
Shoe	Aviators wore brown shoes with khaki uniforms. Surface navy officers wore black shoes with their khakis. During one period, surface navy officers referred to aviators as Brown Shoes. And aviators referred surface officers as Black Shoes. At the time of the story, the terms had gone out of usage somewhat, except in aviation circles, where surface navy officers were still referred to as Shoes, generally with disdain.
Sierra Hotel	Phonetically the letters S and H. They stand for <i>shit hot</i> , a term meaning great or extraordinarily good.
TACAN	Aircraft electronic navigation system indicating the direction and distance to a station—for instance, an aircraft carrier.

THE JUNIOR OFFICER BUNKROOM

YN1

An abbreviation for the enlisted yeoman rating, an administrative specialist, and including rank. YN1 = petty officer first class, YNSN = yeoman seaman rank, YNC = chief petty officer in the yeoman rating. YN1 could be a form of address.

NOW AVAILABLE!!!

A Ticket to Hell:
**ON OTHER
MEN'S SINS**

The Fourth Jon and Teresa
Zachery Story

Chapter 1

Teresa Zachery checked the bathroom mirror for puffy cheeks. Not yet. Three months pregnant. She still had a month or so, or maybe a week.

Her husband, Jon, often told her, “You remind me of Michelangelo’s Mary in his *Pieta*.”

Pieta Mary was a beautiful woman, whose cheeks were not puffed out. It was nice being married to a man who considered her beautiful.

Teresa sighed. *Puffy cheeks*. The subject could not be considered without an erumpent memory of growing up. Mother had harped on her about her weight throughout grade school and high school. Now she studied her profile in a full-length mirror and compared herself, unfavorably, to her neighbor—beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde, shapely Amy Allison.

Teresa would never consider herself beautiful. She wasn’t blonde. Her hair and eyes were brown, evidence she couldn’t be as beautiful as her neighbor. Although she and Amy wore the same dress size, that was irrelevant and could not override what had been implanted in her head: “You’re fat.” Mother never said it directly, but there were ways to imply things so strongly that the implication drove the listener to an inescapable conclusion.

Early in their marriage, she told Jon she was fat and that she’d been fat her whole life.

“You certainly weren’t fat in high school,” Jon said. “You sure as shooting aren’t overweight now. Where did you get this idea?”

Her husband was not a talker. But give him a puzzle to work, and

he gnawed at it until the solution appeared. She admitted the idea had come from her mother. Jon had retrieved an album with pictures of Teresa growing up. He showed her a number of them.

“What I see in these is a girl who is not fat and who is not happy. That last part hurts my heart, Teresa Velmer Zachery.”

Teresa Velmer Zachery looked into the brown eyes of her image. *You are thirty years old, married, have two children, are pregnant, and you still have mommy issues.*

The calendar. Today was a big day.

She left the bathroom and entered the kitchen.

Her calendar was pinned to a corkboard on the wall between the washer and dryer and the door to the carport. First thing in the morning, after the bathroom, she checked it for scheduled activities and to X off another day. Her husband, US Navy Lieutenant Jon Zachery, and her neighbor Mike Allison served aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Solomons* on the other side of the world, in the Tonkin Gulf, flying combat missions over Vietnam. Tomorrow, when she X-ed off today, the circled date, it would mark seven months since the deployment began.

The circled date marked the last day of combat flying. It would still take a month before the carrier crossed the Pacific and returned the crew to their families.

“The Pacific,” Jon liked to say, “is the biggest puddle of water on earth. Takes a while to cross it.”

Another long month to wait, but this one would be without the anguish over him flying combat missions sitting on her heart like a chunk of lead.

She rested her hands on her tummy. Three months pregnant. She’d spent a week with Jon in Hong Kong during the USS *Solomons*’s port visit, well, three months prior.

Daniel. Almost two years ago, she’d gone into labor at seven months. Her son’s little lungs had not been sufficiently developed, and she—they—lost him.

Now her doctor wanted her to avoid stress, but she worried she wouldn’t be able to carry this baby to term. That carried a baby buggy full of stress—as did her husband being a navy carrier pilot flying combat missions over Vietnam. Daughter Jennifer, at five, was bright,

inquisitive, and happy. Teresa wanted to do the right things for her, to protect her and enable her to develop her gifts. Why would there be stress in that? Three-year-old Edgar Jon was a very different child—needier in many ways. Was she doing the right things for him? No stress there.

Jon had tagged the new baby with “Little Pootzer.”

With the others, they’d picked out a boy’s and a girl’s name as soon as she knew she was pregnant. They’d never given a nickname to their other in utero children. Avoiding picking a real name for this one was perhaps his way of dealing with the loss of Daniel. Maybe he thought picking a real name so early in the pregnancy jinxed the child.

Just like circling the date on the calendar jinxed the guys on the *Solomons*. Some of the wives of the Warhorse pilots believed that and would never circle a date as she had done. Some of the pilots also believed that verbalizing the anticipation of a favorable outcome was the surest way to disappointment, by jinxing it. She was sure Jon considered jinxes to be groundless superstition; still, when he heard someone say something jinx worthy, he tapped his head three times and said, “Best wood around.”

Navy aircraft carriers routinely had deployments lengthened, port visits canceled, and flying combat missions extended. Even in peacetime, those things happened. In wartime, schedules were less than guesses.

I shouldn’t have circled the date.

But she’d needed something to look forward to, to mark the end of the most awful part of him being gone. For her, the circled date was not filled with jinx; it was filled with hope.

“Father God, who art in heaven,” she whispered. “My faith is in You. Please watch over Jon extra closely today and bring him home on time. Please and amen.”

A calm settled over her as if she’d stepped from a goose bump-filled, cool shadow into the sunlight. Jon was and would be okay. She just knew.

“Thank you, Lord,” she whispered to the circled date.

She patted Little Pootzer.

Daddy’s okay.

Walking toward her bedroom, she stopped at the children’s and checked on them. Sleeping angels. Jennifer’s brown hair looked like it had just been brushed.

“God created you, Teresa Velmer Zachery, and our daughter with an immunity to bedhead,” Jon said once.

“You jealous?” she said.

“You betcha. It’s why I keep my hair short, and EJ’s too.”

So many things wound up acronymized in the navy, even their son’s name.

Edgar Jon, still in the terrible threes, also looked like an angel as he slept, a blond one. An awake Edgar Jon, however, quite often behaved like another kind of spiritual being.

The toys were all in the toybox. The children’s room was shipshape. As was her house. Rather, it was the US Navy’s house on Naval Air Station Lemoore, California, but she cared for it as if it belonged to Jon and her. If she let the care of her house slip, it was the same as letting care for her children and herself slip into slovenliness.

In her bedroom, as she undressed and then dressed for bed, she thought of Jon on the other side of the world. She hoped his last combat hop would be in daylight. Night hops scared the *bejeebers*—the pilots had their own crude language—out of carrier aviators. Teresa heard them talk at parties; with a few drinks in them, pilots would tell of the terror they felt on a catapult at night as they waited for the jolt that would hurl them into blackness.

She remembered Skunk, the story about how he got his call sign. On his first night catapult shot, he’d peed in his flight suit. He’d launched, climbed, turned to fly behind the carrier, and landed back aboard. According to him, he’d been so scared on the cat shot he had no fear left over for the landing. After his landing, the carrier ended flight ops for that day. Skunk went down to the ready room, and another pilot smelled urine. Skunks do not notice their own stink. Also, in his black hair above his left ear, there was a white apostrophe. He became Skunk.

Please, God, let Jon’s last hop not be a nighter.

Tomorrow morning, when she X-ed off today, such a burden, so much stress would be lifted. Jon, however, wouldn’t see it that way. The carrier *Solomons* and the squadrons embarked on her were all slated to decommission after the ship returned. Jon expected some no-account, dead-end job to occupy his last two years of obligation. He would view

it as the navy casting him onto a trash heap, his service a thing of no value. It would puncture a hole in his soul.

Why, God, can't it be the same for both of us?

Teresa sighed as “the night of the dog poop,” as Jon called it, slipped into her mind.

Late fall, 1966. Jon had just returned from a deployment to the Tonkin Gulf aboard a destroyer. Before that night, their plan was this: Jon would serve out his obligated time; he would leave the service; he would get a job as an electrical engineer; and they would live happily ever after. That night, the night of the dog poop shattered their dream.

A week after his ship returned to San Diego, Jon, nine-month-old Jennifer, and Teresa had visited her uncle Theodore and aunt Penelope Prescott north of Los Angeles. Their daughter, Christine, was away at college and not expected home. But she'd caught an opportune ride and entered her house to find the Zacherys at dinner with her parents.

“Baby killer,” she snarled at Jon and ran back out. Uncle Theodore ran after her, dragged her inside again, and made her apologize to Jon. Late that night, friends of Christine trashed the Zachery car with dog poop and a garden hose.

Before that incident, Jon walked away from the TV when antiwar protest news came on. “It's not antiwar, it's anti-America,” he grouched. But it was on TV, where things that happened to other people were reported. The dog poop made it personal. He disagreed with the protest, and he felt obligated to demonstrate his position. It was his duty to do so. On his destroyer, he wasn't doing as much as the aviators who carried the war to the enemy. He wanted to apply for aviation, to be a carrier pilot, to do something meaningful.

When he'd said that, it drove an icicle into her chest. Carrier pilots were often killed during routine operations. When the North Vietnamese fired missiles and bullets at them, more were killed. He asked for her acceptance of his call to duty. It pushed *happily ever after* from just ahead almost all the way to unobtainable, and it caused her physical and mental pain to say, “You have to do what you think is right.”

When the squadron decommissioned, Jon would see his noble call to duty, his call to do what he thought was right, as having been a waste.

Please, God, help me find the way to help Jon.

She climbed into bed and picked up her rosary from the bedside table. Before starting on the beads, she realized she had done nothing but ask the Lord for things. Teresa ticked off blessings. With her mind aimed at the task, she found a number of them and thanked Him for each one. The last: *And Jon is okay.*

She exhaled worries and sank into peace-filled darkness, her rosary beads resting just above Little Pootzer.

