

IN THE COMPANY
OF *Women*

BY

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the nearly 400,000 American women who served in uniform from 1939 to 1945 in the Women's Army Corps (WAC), Navy (WAVES), Army and Navy Nurse Corps, Coast Guard (SPARs), Marine Corps Women's Reserves, and Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs).

It is also dedicated to the memory of Betty M. and Pauline R., “life partners for infinity” in the words of their granddaughter. Betty and Pauline met in the Women's Army Corps during World War II, fell in love, and managed to spend most of the next sixty years together. Their quiet bravery—and that of the tens of thousands of women and men like them who have led happy lives in plain sight of a disapproving government and culture—deserves special commendation.

CHAPTER ONE

October 1943

Caroline Jamieson stood at the back of the train, watching the tracks recede into dusky brown hills that stretched as far as she could see. She'd left Chicago two days earlier and crossed through four states in the first twenty-four hours: Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas and the northwest corner of Louisiana. Sometime during the second night, while she failed to sleep in her upright seat—*not* the Pullman overnights they'd been promised, the GIs around her griped—the train had crossed into Texas, another state she'd only ever visited on maps and in history books, a vast, sprawling landscape that made her native Michigan feel puny, insubstantial. Now each mile that slipped away beneath her represented the farthest she'd ever been from home.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," she murmured, drawing on her cigarette as sunrise lightened the browns and tans of the surrounding desert.

Not Iowa, either, where she'd completed a month of basic training, nor Illinois where she'd spent a dozen weeks learning how to be an airplane mechanic for the Army Air Forces. Definitely not California, where her initial orders had placed her along with a sizable contingent of her training class. Shari and Denise and the others were on their way home for two weeks of leave before they would journey west to work

at airfields affiliated with the Douglas, Martin or Boeing factories, spending their days off at the Pacific Ocean and the Presidio, their nights out in Chinatown and on Market Street. Meanwhile CJ, chosen to serve as a replacement soldier at Fort Bliss in El Paso, had seen her leave revoked. Still smarting from the sudden change in assignment, she'd been hustled onto the train in Chicago and shuttled off to the farthest western edge of Texas. Lucky her.

Would there be cowboys and sagebrush, Indians and prong-armed cacti? She couldn't imagine what waited at the end of the line, but at least her real life in the Women's Army Corps was about to begin. She was tired of training, weary of temporary friendships and tenuous homes. She was ready to put down roots and dig into GI life. Even if that meant living in Texas.

Grinding out her cigarette, she pocketed the butt and returned to the car where she'd settled in with a handful of civilians and a larger group of servicemen. The boys were playing cards again, but Edith, the middle-aged Arkansan on her way to meet her new baby granddaughter in San Diego, looked up and waved her over.

"Pound cake?" she asked, holding out yet another tin lined with wax paper.

CJ helped herself to the cake she had a feeling would be delicious despite current shortages in sugar and butter. "At this rate, I'm not going to fit into my uniform."

"Don't be silly. You're built like my older boy, Chet. I'll bet you have to work to put on weight."

A bite of cake saved her from the need to respond. In 1943, curves were all the rage—curves she most certainly had not been blessed with. Or cursed with, as the case may be. Unlike some of her fellow WAC AAF trainees, she had managed to avoid anything more than passing interest from the men stationed at Chanute Field. Likewise, the boys on the train had treated her more like a little sister than a "dame." The big brother attitude didn't bother her. Since her recent split with her college boyfriend, she had resolved to keep her head down on the dating front. Besides, the WAC had strict rules about fraternization, probably for good reason.

The boys in the seat across the aisle batted their eyes at Edith, and she sighed good-naturedly. "Take it. I've got more."

The one nicknamed Dorsey, presumably for his musical talents, winked at CJ as he held the tin out to his buddies. "Let them eat cake!"

He, like the others, seemed to flirt almost automatically. But more than once she'd caught him staring at a girl's photo when he thought

no one was looking. They were all from somewhere—hayseeds straight from the Kansas plains; Polish kids from Chicago; Jersey boys with tough accents; Mainers who'd joined the Army because they were tired of the sea; 'Bama boys riled up about the War Between the States. They each had a home and family and girl they had left behind, thanks to the draft or their sense of duty. The sheer number of young men—and women—who now found themselves in Uncle Sam's service was staggering. In her own family, the three who were of an age to do so had joined up, and they were hardly uncommon among their friends and neighbors.

She trained her gaze again on the landscape beyond the train's window. Still flat, still brown, still utterly foreign. Her family's farm would be beautiful right about now. But then, it was always beautiful, except maybe in the heart of summer when the black flies would rather die than leave you in peace. She loved autumn in Southwest Michigan—the cool, dewy mornings, the rattling bugle cries of sandhill cranes, the rose-cheeked apples that all but begged to be picked with a twist and flick of the wrist. Soon cooler nights would settle over the farm, and the leaves would begin to color and dry out, the horses' coats would thicken, and the furrowed fields would lay empty, waiting for snow. But for now, the land and forests would be green, pumpkins plumping on the vine, potato leaves plentiful.

The thought of home was like a missing tooth—she couldn't help but poke the gaping hole with her tongue, testing the raw emptiness of the space left behind. But at the same time, she knew she was fortunate to live where she did. Protected on either coast by the world's largest oceans, America's cities and its people had remained largely untouched, except for those who had volunteered—or been chosen—to “do their part.”

As she was doing now. Soon the train would reach El Paso, and then it would be time to say more goodbyes, to greet a new set of pals whose company may or may not prove to be brief. Why did the military see fit to keep its constituents in constant flux? Although, she supposed she could see the value in teaching soldiers not to grow too attached to a place or to individual people. They were insignificant parts of a great machine erected to defeat the fascist forces currently clawing their way across the planet, blackening each nation, state, city and village they touched.

Ours is not to reason why; ours is but to do and die. She shivered at the thought.

Beside her, the clack of Edith's knitting needles paused. "Goose walk over your grave?"

"If by goose you mean the German Army, then yes."

Edith's gaze sharpened. "Don't give them the satisfaction. Now that our boys are over there, those Nasties will be running home with their tails between their legs, you mark my words."

CJ nodded politely. But she doubted that battle-hardened Wehrmacht soldiers would find much reason to run from green American boys like the ones across the aisle, bickering over whose mother made the best chocolate chip cookies.

* * *

The train arrived at El Paso's Union Depot shortly before nine that night. CJ had barely retrieved her GI rucksack from an overhead rack near the car's entrance when one of the boys liberated her of its left.

"I've got it, Private," he said. "Lead away."

She could fix a 2,500 horsepower engine but she couldn't carry her own luggage? She faked a gracious nod. "Thank you, Sergeant."

His friends whistled, but he ignored them. "Are you riding out to Bliss with us?"

"I don't know."

She'd checked in at the Dallas USO to let the Fort Bliss WAC command know her arrival plans, but she had no way of knowing if they'd received her communique. As they stepped onto the platform, she noticed a WAC sergeant and private watching passengers stream from the train. Message received, obviously. She freed her bag from the helpful non-com and made her way to the two women in uniform.

"Private Jamieson?" the sergeant asked, her sweet voice an odd match for her military bearing and slightly squarer than average jaw.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Welcome to Bliss," the private said, smiling as she reached for CJ's rucksack. "Let me. You must be tired after your trip."

Giving up her bag to a Wac didn't have nearly the same connotations as to a GI, especially when the woman in question was nearly a half foot shorter.

They introduced themselves on the way out to the Jeep—Toby Peterson, the private, hailed from New York City, while Staff Sergeant Velta Welch was an Okie, which explained the twang. That was as far as they got before Welch turned the ignition and put the Jeep in gear. Open cars weren't conducive to conversation.

The autumn night was cold and dark, and CJ barely got an impression of brick buildings and arched streetlights before they were pulling up to the post gate. El Paso didn't seem to be much of an urban center, that was for sure. But Fort Bliss was an antiaircraft artillery, or AA, training post. Probably it was better not to have your ack-ack guns and tow target planes careening close to human population centers. Soon they passed through another gate into a separate compound signed "WAC Personnel Only" and guarded by MPs and barbed wire. The exaggerated security might have alarmed her if the WAC compound at Chanute hadn't been similarly circumscribed from the rest of the airfield.

Friday night was GI night the country over, CJ realized as the sarge went off to park the Jeep and Toby led her to an empty bunk in her new barracks. The other women in her assigned squad room paused to introduce themselves, mostly young women like her with hair pinned up off their shoulders and the same shade of red lipstick fading after a long work day. Then they returned to scrubbing floors, untangling the contents of lockers and trunks and disposing of clothes, civilian suitcases and shoes piled every which way. In the morning, company officers would stroll through the barracks opening this locker, checking that bunk, examining the latrine, day room and orderly room for even the minutest speck of dust. Friday night detail and Saturday morning inspection always reminded CJ of the saying she'd learned in basic training: "If it moves, salute it. If it doesn't, clean it."

Her new barracks were a step up from her previous GI accommodations. Here each Wac had her own cot, an individual wall locker and a private trunk, and every two girls shared a dressing table that doubled as a desk. The latrine impressed as well: two bathtubs, six showers and actual doors on the stalls, for a change. Beside it lay a large laundry room with multiple sinks, indoor drying lines and wood clothing pins. But best of all was the day room, decked out in comfortable, early American furniture and decorated with painted murals of famous women warriors: Boadicea, Joan of Arc, Deborah Sampson, Molly Pitcher, a nameless Amazon and the WAC patron saint Pallas Athene.

Once Toby had given her the barracks tour, there wasn't much for CJ to do but unpack, shine her shoes and iron her travel-wrinkled clothes in the laundry room before stowing them away. No latrine detail yet, and no chance to socialize with the women who whirlwound past in their hurry to get the squad room as clean as was soldierly possible.

Soon three nights of train travel caught up, and she dropped off without intending to in the brightly lit barracks, women murmuring and laughing around her.

* * *

The next morning CJ stood at attention in front of her bunk as three WAC officers paraded through the barracks. She wondered what they were like—rigid and by-the-book like the officers at Chanute Field or intelligent leaders like the non-coms at Fort Des Moines, where she'd completed basic?

Lieutenant Fiona Kelly paused before her. "How are you settling in, Private Jamieson?"

"Fine, ma'am." She was careful not to meet the lieutenant's gaze.

"Good. Let me know if you have any questions or concerns, soldier."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She risked a glance at the lieutenant's face as she moved on to the next bunk. With gray streaks showing in neat auburn hair cut above the collar of her "A" uniform, she was older than most of the other women in the company and exuded a confidence borne not solely of age and rank. Gym teacher? College administrator? The WAC officer ranks were filled with executive secretaries and university instructors and even a dean and college president, if the rumors were correct.

Inspection didn't last long, and by the end of it she had her answer—the enlisted women had worked hard the night before to put their barracks in order, and the officers recognized their efforts. No gigs on Company D, which meant no restrictions for the week ahead. Intelligent leaders by the look of it.

After inspection she went outside to survey the multitude of white wooden and adobe buildings that made up the WAC area, the brown, rocky mountains that hulked in the near distance. Somehow she doubted California would have felt quite so alien. Lit cigarette in hand, she sat on the front steps of the barracks and watched women hang laundry on lines that stretched between low-slung buildings. The coolness of the desert night had faded soon after morning mess, and now the Texas sun was strong in the cloudless sky. Another regional quirk—she wasn't used to such warmth in mid-October.

"Mind if I join you?" Toby, the private who had met her at the train station the night before, paused beside the steps.

"Not at all."

Toby, CJ noted, had changed from her formal “A” uniform into the same one-piece coveralls the WAC trainees at Chanute Field had worn on duty. Both uniforms bore the blue and yellow Army Air Forces shoulder sleeve insignia.

“So, Jamieson, do you like sports?” she asked, lighting a cigarette. “Absolutely.”

“Good. There’s a basketball hoop in back of the officers’ quarters, and a group of us get together on the weekends for softball. We’re playing today, in fact, after noon mess. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Thanks. I will.”

She’d played softball, basketball and tennis on the weekends in Illinois too. Sports were second nature to her. She’d grown up shadowing her two older brothers around the farm and assorted playing fields. Only now Joe, a Marine officer in the Pacific, and Alec, a B-17 flight engineer in Italy, probably didn’t get much opportunity to play games.

“Lieutenant Kelly’s our ump.” Toby blew a cloud of smoke into the air and watched it dissipate. “I thought you looked like the sporting type.”

Just then another Wac dropped onto the steps. “Hiya, girls.”

“Hi yourself,” Toby said, smiling at the newcomer. “Kate, this is CJ, our newest grease monkey. CJ, this is Kate Delaney. She’s with Personnel.”

“Welcome to Bliss,” Kate said, proffering the same greeting Toby and the staff sergeant had given the night before.

Other than the greeting, however, she seemed to have little in common with Toby or the sarge, both of whom were short-haired, narrow-hipped women who looked more natural in coveralls than in the WAC summer uniform that Kate filled out so well. Unlike them, she managed to look curvy and pretty even in a shirt and tie.

“Hiya, kids,” another woman said, snagging Toby’s cigarette and taking a deep draw.

“Antonelli,” Toby mock-growled, “you better watch it.”

“Gee, I’m shaking in my GI shoes,” the dark-haired newcomer returned as she handed back the smoke. Like Toby, she was wearing coveralls.

Between them, Kate rolled her eyes. “Reggie, have you met CJ?”

“Sure did, last night.” Reggie offered CJ a nod. “Hey.”

“Hey.” CJ waved a little and tapped ash from the end of her cigarette. Was being a replacement soldier always this awkward? No doubt it was worse trying to join a tight-knit combat team during an offensive.

Count your lucky stars, she reminded herself for the umpteenth time since joining up.

“We should probably get going,” Kate said. Without warning she grabbed Toby’s cigarette and leaped down the steps.

“Come back here,” Toby said good-naturedly.

“You’ll have to come and get me.”

Toby laughed and took off after the smaller woman, who held the cigarette over her head as she trotted away.

“Duty calls,” Reggie told CJ. “The general has us working half-days on Saturdays.”

She rose quickly. “Am I supposed to report too?”

“Nope. Sarge says you’re on limited duty until Monday.”

Whew.

“Feel like a walk anyway?” Reggie added.

“Why not?”

As they marched down the dusty road that led through the WAC compound, CJ exchanged pertinent details with the others. Kate was from Wisconsin—practically neighbors, they agreed—so the conversation skewed briefly toward the Midwest, Wisconsin cheese and the Great Lakes. Toby and Reggie, both from the Northeast, refused to believe that Lake Michigan was too wide to see across.

“I’ll take you there someday,” Kate said, bumping Toby’s hip with her own.

“That’s a promise I plan to hold you to.”

At the edge of the compound a pair of military police guards nodded politely, their eyes friendliest, CJ noted, as they rested on Kate’s face. The two men returned to their conversation—they seemed to be ranking their favorite desserts—before the women were out of earshot. CJ didn’t envy them, but then again, being an MP was better than being an infantryman in a foxhole on the Italian front. Besides, they probably weren’t alone much. Back in Illinois, despite the rules against fraternization, sympathetic Wacs had often stopped to chat with the MPs on duty.

CJ accompanied the others along the main road toward the center of the post, examining her surroundings curiously. She had passed through the night before but had been too tired to take much notice. Like in the WAC area, the buildings here were mostly whitewashed wood or adobe that reflected the bright sunlight. The landscape, a mixture of tan and brown, stretched toward nearby mountains and the outer reaches of El Paso like a colorless sea.

Ah, the ocean. She tried not to curse the girl she’d replaced, a

married Wac who had apparently gotten pregnant while on furlough with her husband, a Navy pilot home on rotation from the Pacific. Maybe she'd wanted out of the Army without the shame of quitting, or perhaps she'd merely longed to have a child with her husband before it was too late. Couldn't begrudge her that, could she?

At the PX, Toby and the others said their farewells and strode off to their respective assignments. CJ ducked inside and glanced around, wondering if she should pick up an extra pair of sunglasses. As she wandered the aisles, she trailed her fingers over the metal shelf edges. The post general store at Chanute, with its postcards, candy bars and other non-GI items, had felt like a direct link to the outside world. Would this new PX offer the same reassuring connection to a life she had previously taken for granted?

Lost in thought, she turned a corner near a display of stationary and nearly collided with another khaki-clad woman.

"Sorry," she said quickly, reaching out to steady the Wac. At five-nine, she was used to looking down, literally, on other women. But the private first class before her, trim and attractive in what must be a specially tailored summer uniform, met her gaze nearly square on.

"It's my fault," she said, her hands on CJ's. "I was moving too quickly, as usual."

Her hair was the color of honey, her eyes pale blue with a tawny starburst about the pupil—but only in her right eye, CJ noted, intrigued.

The other woman's brow rose slightly. "I don't think we've met, have we?"

CJ realized she was still holding the stranger's arms. "No," she agreed, relinquishing her grip. "I arrived last night."

"From?"

"Chanute Field."

"Ah," the Wac said. And then, with a slightly ironic smile, "Welcome to Bliss."

"And is it blissful here?"

"If you happen to love all things GI."

CJ tilted her head. "Do you?"

"As a third-generation Army enlistee, I should probably toe the party line. But let's just say I'd rather be here than back at home, wishing I'd taken the leap. I'm Brady, by the way."

She offered her hand, and CJ squeezed it.

"CJ. Where's home for you?"

"Southern California. You?"

“Michigan. Kalamazoo, actually.”

Brady smiled again. “I Got a Gal’—bet you never heard that one.”

“Hardly ever.” CJ returned the smile. Glenn Miller’s hit song had launched her hometown into the national spotlight a year earlier. As Brady continued to gaze at her, she felt a blush creeping up her neck. “Well, it was nice meeting you.”

“I don’t suppose you’d fancy a tour of the base? I have a Jeep waiting outside.”

Even if Brady had been the peskiest of GIs, CJ would have had a hard time refusing the offer. Like her father and her brother Alec, she loved motorized conveyances of any kind, which was how she’d ended up with a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) in Maintenance.

“Sounds like fun.”

“Swell. Let me pay for these,” Brady added as she moved away, brandishing a box of red pens and a stack of typing paper.

CJ waited near the front of the PX, watching Brady interact with the civilian cashier. Not as friendly, definitely cooler—which meant she probably didn’t invite everyone she met for a Jeep ride.

Outside, the promised vehicle sat parked illegally at the curb, two GIs chattering away in its front seat.

Brady held the door open for CJ. “Hop in,” she said, her words more of a dare than an invitation.

CJ maneuvered into the back seat, keeping her skirt down and her shoulders squared as the two men up front did a double-take.

“Hang on,” said the driver, a lanky youth with smooth cheeks and sharp brown eyes. “Did I miss something?”

“This is CJ,” Brady said, sliding in beside her. “She’s new. I thought we could give her a tour of Bliss.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” the front-seat passenger quipped. He was almost as blonde as Brady. “Carry on, Jeeves.”

The driver punched him and put the Jeep in gear. “Your wish is my command, my queen,” he slung at Brady as he pulled out onto the main post road.

“That’s Charlie,” she said, nodding regally in his direction.

“And I’m O’Neil,” put in the passenger. “But you can call me Mick. Everyone else does.”

Charmed by his open face and laughing eyes, CJ liked him immediately. The driver she wasn’t so sure about.

“I suppose you’re wondering why we have a Jeep,” Brady said.

“Uh, sure.”

In reality, she'd been noticing again how well Brady's uniform fit. More than a year after its inception, the Women's Army Corps was still working out supply issues.

"We work at Administration," Mick helpfully put in.

That meant this ride probably wouldn't be repeated once she was on active duty. CJ had noted at Chanute that there seemed to be an invisible barrier between the administrative and maintenance ranks, a division that reminded her of the farm girl versus city girl split at her high school.

"What's your rating?" Charlie asked, taking his eyes off the road long enough to give her an appraising stare.

"Seven forty-seven."

Mick chewed his lip. "Maintenance, but what specialty?"

"Airplane engine mechanic," CJ clarified.

The boys up front were silent, perhaps aware that her military occupation required more brawn than theirs. This disparity could create an awkwardness that many men did not appreciate, she had learned. On the train to Bliss, she'd avoided mentioning her rating to the GIs who'd tried to pick her up in the dining car or followed her back to her seat.

But now she was on the base that could, for all she knew, be home for the duration of the war plus six months she'd signed up for. No avoiding reality here.

Brady said, "You must be skilled. There can't be many Wacs rated as airplane mechanics."

"I guess not," she said, smiling at Brady. "What do you do?"

"I work for the Public Relations Office doing news releases and soldier profiles for the *Fort Bliss Monitor*. Oh, and I write a bimonthly column, 'Wacs on Parade.'"

"You actually get to use your brain?"

"Shocking, isn't it?"

From what CJ had heard, a majority of Wacs were underemployed or assigned to positions that didn't match their skills or stated interests. Bliss, in direct proportion to its sprawling size, had a fairly large contingent of women soldiers. On the walk in, her new squad mates had informed her that in addition to Biggs Airfield, women in their battalion were assigned to the Transportation Corps, Personnel, Materials Management and other administrative offices. There were four companies of Wacs at Bliss, close to four hundred female soldiers in all. And more than eight thousand men on any given day, including armored and artillery units and Army Air cadets.

Charlie slowed the Jeep as they neared headquarters, where the post, state of Texas and US flags all waved languidly in the breeze.

“There’s the Grinder,” he said, jerking his chin at the wide parade grounds that seemed to go right up to the mountains in the distance.

“Those are the Franklins,” Brady said, following her gaze. “Some of us like to go hiking up there on weekends.”

“Are you one of those outdoor types too?” Mick asked CJ, aversion evident in his tone.

“Don’t listen to him,” Brady said. “He grew up in New York City. Claims to be allergic to trees.”

“Then this is a good place for you, Mick, isn’t it?” CJ commented.

“What do you call those?” Charlie nodded at the low, scruffy deciduous trees ringing the parade ground.

“Pathetic, mainly.”

Michigan trees—elms, maples, oaks, evergreens—were majestic life forms her parents had taught her to respect. These, on the other hand, were barely more than shrubs.

Brady laughed. “Are you a tree snob?”

“Apparently,” she said, smiling back.

“I suppose there are worse things to be.”

Charlie careened the Jeep around a corner, throwing Brady into her. CJ held out a steady hand. This close, Brady’s eyes were more cornflower than ice, she decided.

“I have to stop running into you.” Brady slid back to her side of the seat. “Otherwise you won’t be any good for PT.”

I don’t mind. But CJ didn’t say the words. Just because she felt an immediate connection to Brady didn’t mean the sentiment was mutual. Still, as they continued the tour of Bliss, she thought that despite a noticeable lack of stately hardwoods, West Texas might not be so bad after all.

CHAPTER TWO

During the next half hour, CJ learned the layout of the post and nearby town while exchanging GI pedigrees with her guides—where they were from, where they'd done basic, how long they'd been at Bliss. Then Brady and the two men agreed that they should probably get back to work before their officers sent a search party after them.

“Where are you headed?” Brady asked as they parked beside the building that housed the Public Relations and *Monitor* offices.

“No idea. It feels like I'm the only one who doesn't have to work this morning.”

“The post library is down the hall from us,” Brady said. “You could pick up some reading material, and then maybe we could walk back to the compound together for mess.”

“Works for me.”

Brady, it seemed, didn't want to get rid of her yet. Funny how quickly someone in the Army could become a friend. The instant camaraderie reminded her of the teams she'd played on in high school and college—shared hardship could bond you in a very short time. Not that she and Brady had experienced any hardship this morning. There was still noon mess to get through, though. No doubt the cooks here were, like all Army cooks, fond of serving chipped beef on toast—SOS in soldier parlance, short for “shit on a shingle.”

In the fluorescent lamp-lit library, Brady introduced CJ to the WAC librarian, Marjory from Albany. Then she headed back to work, promising to retrieve CJ shortly before noon for the slog back to the WAC area, where women soldiers cooked, dined and performed KP in their own mess halls. Marjory went back to the book she was reading, a beat-up copy of what looked like a mystery novel. CJ paced the stacks, curious what the collection had to offer. Mysteries, westerns, military biographies, a few classics like Shakespeare and Dickens, and piles of old issues of *Life*, *Yank* and *Stars and Stripes*. The walls bore the usual propaganda posters: “Buy War Bonds,” “Loose Lips Sink Ships” and the library favorite, “Books Cannot Be Killed by Fire,” which showed oafish German soldiers burning books by the armful.

In the periodicals section, she found what she was looking for: the *Fort Bliss Monitor*. She picked up the latest edition of the base weekly, sat down at a reading table and turned on a lamp. The library was a windowless interior room; without the clock on the wall, she wouldn't have known whether it was morning or evening. Soon she was skimming the paper, looking for a particular byline. She found it on page two: Brady Buchanan. Had to be her, didn't it? She read the article carefully, a profile of the 203rd, an artillery company about to ship overseas. The story was good, she realized—writing crisp, details sharply drawn, tone of the piece a good balance between patriotism, humor and human interest. For once the Army had gotten a Wac's MOS right.

As she stared at the smiling faces of a handful of the soldiers Brady had profiled, CJ felt a familiar knot in her stomach. These boys were all someone's son, brother, sweetheart, friend. Each of their lives touched a hundred others, lives that would be permanently altered if something happened to them. Her family would certainly never be the same if one of her brothers were to go missing or—God forbid—be killed in action.

For the past year her family, like so many others, had lived in fear of receiving a War Department telegram. Alec had been with the Northwest African Air Forces originally. Now that the mission in Africa had ended, he had been transferred to Southern Europe. Being on a bomber crew was one of the most dangerous jobs in the ETO, and Alec's tour wouldn't be over for months assuming he—she stopped the thought. Dark-haired, light-eyed and barely a year older, he looked so much like her that people used to mistake them for twins. She couldn't conceive of a world without him.

In the Pacific, meanwhile, where Joe was stationed, American forces were moving from one fortified island to another on the march to the Philippines, taking substantial losses as they attempted to expel the dug-in Japanese. “Substantial losses”—CJ closed her eyes as her eldest brother’s face flashed before her, the candid image of him in his Cubs uniform from the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* the week after he joined up. “Jamieson Swaps the Majors for the Marines,” read the headline. Her mother had cut out the article and placed it in the scrapbook she had started keeping for him when he made the leap from farm team to major leagues.

The last photo in the book was from Fort Lewis in Washington state, an official Marine portrait Joe had sent home before he shipped overseas. Occasionally CJ remembered that scrapbook, tucked onto a bookshelf in the family room. Joe wanted to come home and go back to his baseball career, she knew, but in a recent rare missive, he’d told her that he hadn’t thrown a ball in months. What was worse, he couldn’t seem to bring himself to care.

“Whatcha reading?” a low voice enquired at her shoulder.

CJ jumped. “Nothing,” she said, folding the newspaper quickly.

“Funny, it looked like you were reading one of my articles.”

“I might have skimmed it,” she said as she returned the *Monitor* to its rack.

“And?” Brady prodded.

“Not bad. For a Californian.”

“Hey, now.” Brady whacked her shoulder.

“Ow. You have brothers, don’t you?”

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

They waved to the librarian and headed down the long, low-ceilinged hall to the outdoors, chatting about family as they went. CJ described growing up on a working farm outside the Kalamazoo city limits with a school teacher mother, two older brothers, a younger brother and a little sister. In turn, Brady described her upbringing in the hills of Los Angeles—businessman father who was rarely home, mother who kept busy with community work, one older brother, one younger, nannies, private schools and later, a Seven Sisters women’s college on the East Coast.

“Which one?” CJ asked.

“Smith, in western Massachusetts.”

“My grandmother and aunts went to Wellesley.”

“Really?”

CJ read the surprise in her glance. “My mother comes from old Detroit money, but she left it all behind to attend teachers college and marry my dad. My grandmother wanted me to apply to Wellesley, but I picked U of M instead.”

“Good thing you didn’t go to Wellesley, or I wouldn’t be able to be friends with you.”

“Good thing then,” CJ said, her arm brushing Brady’s as they walked toward the still-distant WAC compound, low-heeled GI shoes crunching audibly on the gravel road.

“Speaking of Smith,” Brady added, “did you know a woman at Chanute named Adele Talbot? She would have been in Admin.”

“Sounds familiar,” CJ hedged.

Adele, a wealthy Manhattanite, had seemed to derive untoward pleasure from complaining about the Midwest, military bureaucracy and anything else that caught her attention. She had further endeared herself by proclaiming that WAC mechanics and drivers were social anathema. Why she had joined the Army was anyone’s guess.

“I couldn’t stand her,” Brady said.

“Neither could I,” CJ confessed, laughing. “So what did you study?”

“English, of course. You?”

“History. Who’s your favorite writer?”

“Depends. For fiction, the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen. Poetry, I’m a Byron girl all the way.”

“Sounds like you’re a romantic.”

“It would seem so. Who’s your favorite writer?”

“Mary Wollstonecraft. And Mark Twain. Frederick Douglass too. Did you know that slave narratives are considered the only uniquely American literary form?”

“I did know that. But I’m surprised a Michigan farm girl would.”

“Hey, now,” CJ said, laughing again.

They walked on, discussing books and classes they had loved until finally Brady paused.

“You know what?” She glanced sideways at CJ. “I haven’t had a conversation like this since I joined the Army.”

“Same here. When did you graduate?”

“42. You?”

“In May.”

She didn’t mention her decision to defer graduate school. She wasn’t sure why except that maybe she felt inexcusably naïve for the way everything had gone down, as if she should have seen it coming.

At the gate to the women’s compound, they passed MPs who tugged on their caps, eyes glued to Brady.

“Friends of yours?” CJ asked.

“Not that I know of.”

In the mess hall, they had just joined the line when a pretty brunette PFC approached.

“Where did you run off to, Brady?” she asked in a polished New England accent. “I didn’t see you in the usual spot.”

“Sorry, couldn’t wait for my turn at a little SOS. By the way, this is CJ. She transferred in last night. CJ, this is Janice. She works in Personnel.”

CJ nodded. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Janice said as they moved forward with the rest of the line. “What company are you in?”

“D.” CJ glanced down the line. Lunch didn’t look too bad—soup, sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies. Lucky for them, soldiers weren’t impacted by home front rationing nearly as much as civilians were.

“D?” Janice frowned slightly. “Isn’t that a maintenance company?”

“CJ’s an airplane mechanic,” Brady said with what CJ found to be undue enthusiasm.

Apparently so did Janice: “Oh,” she said coolly, and looked away.

CJ resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose at Janice’s cold shoulder. Across the mess, she noticed Toby and Reggie waving.

“Friends of yours?” Brady asked.

“Squad mates. They’re mechanics too.”

“Naturally.”

Did she sound a tiny bit disappointed? Was it possible the Army’s pecking order frustrated her too?

At the end of the line, Janice edged between them, gazing expectantly at Brady.

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” CJ offered, pausing with tray in hand.

“You too,” Brady said. “We should meet for a drink at the club sometime. What do you think?”

CJ felt Janice watching her with a stare reminiscent of Charlie, the jealous Jeep driver.

“Sure,” she said casually. “Why not?”

“Good.” Brady smiled, her blue eyes warm. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

CJ hoped so, but once again she held back the words that would give away her interest in their fledgling friendship. Was it that Brady Buchanan, Smith College graduate and Admin Wac, seemed out of

her league? But that was silly. Brady was the one who had invited her on the Jeep ride, the one who had suggested they go for a drink.

She nodded and turned away, wondering at herself as she crossed the mess to the table Toby, Kate and Reggie occupied with a group of familiar-looking women. It wasn't like she believed social divisions had real merit. Her parents had raised her and her siblings to value all people equally, no matter their race, class or sex. At least in theory.

"How do you know Brady Buchanan?" Reggie asked as she slid in beside CJ.

"I met her at the PX this morning."

"Half the boys on base are in love with her," Toby said. "She's engaged to a soldier, though, so one wave of the ring and they back off. Usually."

Brady was attractive and already out of college, so it wasn't surprising she would be engaged. But why hadn't she mentioned something as significant as a fiancé?

Toby interrupted CJ's thoughts. "You still planning to join us for softball?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

She was stiff from her cross-country train adventure, but it would be fun to get hot and dusty and then clean up and maybe take a nap before evening mess. And after supper, rehash the game over drinks and smokes at the enlisted women's club.

As CJ ate, she recognized a familiar surge of guilt. Her stint in the Army so far had offered significantly more R&R than her brothers and their buddies had, and as an American, she already knew she was luckier than most people. Sure, she had signed over her personal freedom to the Army, which could move her anywhere it wanted without warning and assign her any work it deemed necessary. But she didn't have to worry about her family or hometown being destroyed by bombing or, worse, occupation forces. She was learning new skills, exploring parts of the country she had only ever read about, and meeting new people with different outlooks. The war was a disruption to her previously comfortable life, but the interruption wasn't necessarily unwelcome.

She tamped down the guilt, as she always did, and finished her lunch quickly, looking forward to the afternoon ahead. She wouldn't have thought it possible even a few days earlier, but she was already settling into life at Bliss. Was it possible this place might actually manage to live up to its name?