

A Soldiers Son

A Novel

By Jack Estes

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A red Frisbee spins slowly through a blue sky and disappears. Suddenly, the sky turns black and gray, rocked with the fury of monsoon winds and rain. Darkness crashes and in the distance there are faint lights and the wail of a Marine Corps chopper, as it crosses the mountains and descends into the Ah Chau valley. Waves of wind and rain pound and hammer the chopper. Lightning flashes as the Huey fires rockets and long, broken lines of red tracers into the jungle. Inside, two pilots fight the controls, trying to keep the ship steady. The crew chief and four Marines sit on web seats, rolling with the wind, banging back and forth against the walls. The door gunner stands harnessed, his machine gun in a sling as he works his gun back and forth, firing a line of tracers, killing the night. Flares drop from a C-140 as the wind in the darkness wails.

"Shit!" the Door Gunner shouts, as an enemy round slices through his leg. He swings the barrel of his .60, fires and screams, "MOTHER FUCKERS!" The chopper pitches, blown by the wind and rain, while green tracers fire up from the ground.

The Marines are young and strong, faces covered with camouflage paint and beads of sweat. They curse or pray silently, squeezing rifles, fatigues rolled, arms ripped. Flares and flashes light them up. The crew chief at the front of the chopper stands, stumbles, and slams against the walls. The visor on Ms flight helmet flips up, his moustache is soaked with spittle, and his teeth are broken. He shouts to be heard. "General's chopper went down! Your guys are getting their ass kicked! We've got to turn back."

"Bullshit!" Mike shouts back. He's confident, strong, powerfully built. He's strapped with a .45 and as he grips the stock of a sawed off shotgun, a Bulldog tattoo on his right forearm, bulges.

"Your firebase is overrun! There's no place to land."

Mike jumps up and thumps his chest. "Fuck you! We're Recon baby! Take us lower and we'll jump out of this piece of shit!" He reaches across the aisle, pulls PJ to his feet, and shouts to the others, "Let's go. Stoner! Padre! Wake the fuck up!" Mike kicks Stoner's boots. PJ grins while the others look stunned as more rounds riddle the chopper.

"Grab your socks and cocks and let's kick some ass." Mike starts a loud "HAARUUGAH!" As the others join in, Stoner pisses himself.

A loud explosion rocks the chopper. The engine misfires. The door gunner is shot through the head. His body blows out the door and flops against the side of the chopper, hung up by his safety harness. The chopper pitches, spins, and is sucked toward the ground.

"Jesus Christ," cries the crew chief. "We're going..."

Mike is knocked flat. He grabs the base of a web seat, and reaches for an airborne Stoner. It's no use. Stoner grasps at Mike's shirt then pants but is ripped out the door, screaming. The chopper breaks through the trees, and slams the ground, as rotors grind to a halt. There is the sound of thunder, more lightning, and the hiss of white parachutes flares as they glide over the jungle. What's left of the fuselage rests a few feet above the ground. Stoner is in a tree, seared in half by the rotor. At the nose of the chopper, a fire starts. The pilot's head has shot through the glass. The copilot is strapped in, burning, mouthing blood, face destroyed, and his last breath easing into the jungle. The rain slows. The door gunner swings from his harness, his body broken, thumping against a panel. The firing has stopped. It is quiet. The wind dies. No one moans. Quiet. Rain gently taps the roof of the chopper and drips off broadleaf plants, forming puddles while the smell of burned flesh waves through the trees. Somewhere in the dark there is the sound of a whistle.

A group of North Vietnamese Army hard-core regulars gather in a cluster, raindrops flicker on their bush covers, looking for the chopper. They have fought days and nights and endured the terror of gunships firing, jets dropping napalm and B-52s unloading earth shocking 500-pound bombs. Some of their comrades evaporated, some turned mad, and some ran screaming, deep into the jungle, eardrums exploding. When the NVA find the chopper they will kill the Marines again, shoot them, shoot their dead bodies, strip them, and hack them with machetes, beyond dignity.

An NVA captain points, his oval eyes full of hate. He blows his whistle, his soldiers move out. Then, the rain stops, for a moment the sky is clear and half of a moon drifts from behind a cloud and hangs in a body of stars.

Mike is alive, disoriented, swimming slowly in a tangle of jungle. His helmet is gone, his uniform shredded, his face is cut and bleeding. His shotgun is missing and a small broken slice of branch has pierced through his left hand. He takes the K-bar strapped to his leg, trims the branch, and with great effort, pulls it out the other side. He takes a battle dressing from the outside pocket of his pants, tears off the plastic with his teeth, wraps his hand, and wipes blood from his broken nose. Another whistle and he feels for his .45. It's there in its shoulder holster.

He can see the gunner swing in the moonlight. What's left of Stoner sways in a tree. Mike thinks of going home as PJ crawls slowly out the chopper door. Mike limps to the chopper and helps PJ out, noticing his forearm, hangs in pieces. He searches PJ's pockets and whispers, "Where's your battle dressing?"

"I forgot the motherfucker!"

Mike looks inside the chopper, sees the last of the fire, notices the smell, the pilots, the crew chief and Padre, lying lifeless. They're all dead. He hears a whistle. He has to work

fast; he knows the bastards are coming. He grabs a rifle, a bandoleer of ammo and slings it over his shoulder. He steps through the doorway, down to the ground and wraps an arm around PJ as they hobble from the crash site to hide in the jungle. He stops. The radio. Got to get the radio. He lays PJ down in a thicket and picks a leech off his face and see's a Frisbee in his hand and wonders how can that be?

Back inside the chopper Mike slips in a wet blanket of blood. The fire is out. In the dark he feels the crew chief and rolls him off Padre. Padre is on his back still wearing the radio. His legs are flopped, feet lying flat. Mike lifts him to a sitting position and works the radio pack off. A flare glides above the chopper, floats by a window, and lights their faces. Padre's eyes open.

"Help me."

Mike Kelly sits up in bed, startled, sweating, his eyes wide open, searching. He listens. He's more alert than terrified. Moonlight has crossed the lake, lawn, and patio and shines through the French doors onto his face as Claire sleeps next to him. The clock on the nightstand reads 3:00 am. Goddamnit This shit again. He lays back and thinks about the details of almost thirty-five years ago, the feel of blood on his hands, the warmth, how it's thick and sticky. He imagines the smell and the fire that night and when it stopped life left Padre's body. He remembers PJ, his arm hanging, bone broken. The whistle. The flares dropping. Claire reaches for him instinctively, touches him, pulls him down, and holds him until his eyes close.

Mike wakes just before the alarm clock rings, reaches out and turns it off. He turns on the lamp and his faded Bulldog is caught in the light. On the nightstand is a manuscript he has just finished writing titled *The Sharecropper's Wife*. It's a historical novel about the Underground in World War II and how a woman named Petra led elements of the French Resistance. It's full of Nazis, heroic Frenchmen, and an American soldier that falls in love with Petra.

Mike picks up the manuscript, reads the first page unsatisfied, and mumbles, "Crap." He's sick of it. The writing is sophomoric he thinks, and not nearly as good as his last book or any of his essays. Those were the essays that won him the Pulitzer for Journalism. Everyone said he he'd better cash in and quick. If he didn't, he reasoned, in a four or five years he'd be groveling with the rest of the down trodden, trying to get read. So he wrote a good book, which made him big money, but the last two attempts felt uneven, with weak characters and almost no arc. Lots of blood though. He was good at firefights and showing how it feels to close off open arteries with his hands.

"Mike, the light. Please." Claire rolls over and pulls the covers.

"Sorry." Mike turns off the light and staggers toward the bathroom like a busted-up cowboy. He's fifty-eight. Fourteen broken bones, three knee operations and a back full of arthritis. He's lived hard. He started knocking drunks out in bars when he was seventeen. He's been shot, stabbed, hit in the face with a brick, and almost died from two types of

malaria and amoebic dysentery. Built like an aged athlete, he wears boxers and has a gnarled gunshot wound. His chest wound looks like a handful of muscle and sinew was scooped out and covered with a flat patch of pink plastic. Mike was nineteen and crossing a rice paddy when the round hit him in the back, rumbled through his lung, broke three ribs and made a bigger hole on its way out. With time, the lung healed fine and only started bothering him when he crossed the other side of fifty. Now, everything hurts.

In the bath, he flips on the light, looks in the mirror, scratches the rash on his neck that he's had for over thirty years, but doesn't notice the hole in his chest where muscle used to be. The counter is full of prescription bottles, magazines, and a baseball glove. His knee already hurts and he braces his weight against the sink with one hand, swallowing pills with the other. Pills for the pain, swelling, diabetes, and high cholesterol. Got to lose thirty pounds, he thinks, grabbing the fat on his belly. If I drop thirty, she'd probably want me again.

Mike sits on the corner of the Jacuzzi and pulls on sweatpants a Boston Red Sox tee shirt and tennis shoes. Back in the bedroom, he picks up the remote, points it at the small Plasma screen mounted above the fireplace and pops it to cable news, where a chopper smolders in ruin. Former Marine, Colonel Oliver North, with Fox News is standing by the wreckage, dressed in military utilities and a flak jacket. He is looking into a camera holding a microphone.

"This morning, another US helicopter was shot down outside of Baghdad. Sadly the crew of four is missing. And today March 6 2004 marks the one year anniversary of the war."

"Mike. I'm trying to sleep."

Mike kills the sound and watches Iraqis gather around the chopper wreck, dancing and mugging at the camera. Mike can see the disgust on North's face. He imagines being there with his sawed-off shotgun, killing them all. Boom! He turns the TV off, glances at the single red rose he gave Clair yesterday, and feels better. He picks up a cotton Hawaiian shirt from the rocker by the dresser and puts it on as he walks over to the French doors and looks out on the lake. A light fog lists across the water. It's autumn and almost dawn, boats are tied, the docks and the lake are quiet. On the other side of the lake, a few lights shine through the fog.

Downstairs, he knocks on his son's door. No answer, Mike knocks again.

"Jake, let's roll." A pause and silence. Another knock.

"Leave me alone. I'm tired."

Mike opens the door, turns on the light, and walks inside. Baseball players and athletic awards and assorted pictures of his girlfriend Megs plaster the walls. A life-sized cardboard cutout of Yankee old timers, Maris and Mantle, stands stiff on one side of the room. On the other side of the room is a long mirror hanging on the wall, a weightlifting bench in front of it, and a rack of chrome dumbbells. To the side of the bench is a desk, a

laptop, with a screen saver running a picture of Jake when he was an extra in a Gus Van Zant movie. Mike and Claire filled with pride opening night in the movie theater, as they watched their boy flash across the screen. They brought friends and family and cheered wildly when they saw Jake on screen tossing a football in a park, for the better part of twelve seconds.

Jake, still racked out, covers his head, and grumbles.

"Your problem is you were probably up all night with that damn cell phone stuck in your ear," Mike growls. "Either that or you were texting your butt off." He scours the room, clothes on the floor, comic books, baseball gear, Jesus what a mess, then he glances at the picture frame above the bed. It's a photo taken more than a dozen years ago, when he took the family to Washington DC to see the Vietnam Memorial. It was a powerful, life-altering trip that reached inside of him and spawned a series of essays that eventually brought home his Pulitzer.

He is touched when he sees the photo of Jake as a small boy, standing in front of the memorial, holding Mike's leg. It pleases him to see the photo hung up by Jake and reminds him of a better time when his boy thought he was a hero. Now he thinks he's a control freak and a jerk.

"Come on, pal."

Jake throws the covers off and sits up, pissed. "You didn't even tell me about this."

"I forgot. Quit being a puss. You want to be all state, don't you? , "No!"

Mike kicks the bed. "Let's go. I'm not spending sixty bucks an hour for you to lie in bed dreaming about Megs."

Jake rises, no shirt, wearing boxers. His shoulders are broad and thick like a steer's and his waist is tapered with round abdominals that his buddies envy. At 6*1" he looks taller than that and at 200 pounds he appears lighter. He's handsome, with short brown hair, a strong jaw line, heavy dark eyebrows, and blue lilac colored eyes. He has that combination of leadership and friendliness that teachers admire and his peers look up to. And when he smiles his teeth are straight and white and his eyes fire up and people are drawn to him. He looks like Mike did when he was eighteen, without the edge and without the anguish in his eyes.

"Shit," Jake says, not wanting to be bothered.

"Watch your mouth."

Jake strides across the room slow and easy, like a stallion. He picks up a couple fifty-pound dumbbells, stands in front of the mirror and curls them, his biceps ball and his triceps jump and he smiles at his reflection and can see Mike, looking at him. Mike

watches him and is pleased. He's got some power Mike thinks as the dumb bells swing up and down almost effortlessly. He's coming in to his body, turning into a man. Maybe that's half the problem Mike reasons. Jake is at that stage in life when he is separating from him, creating his own identity. Individuating, Claire calls it. But he still needs guidance and direction and discipline. Jake pumps out a couple more reps and turns to Mike.

"Don't you wish you could do this Pop's?"

"I'm starting my comeback."

"That's what you always say." Jake sets down the dumbbells, starts to hustle, his attitude changing. "I'll go but we have to stop at the drive through. I want to get a mocha."