

NANCI LITTLE



Thin  
Fire

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2011

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Tallahassee, FL 32302

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Originally published by Madwoman Press 1993  
First Bella Books Edition 2011

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
First Edition

Editor: Diane Benison and Catherine S. Stamps  
Cover Designer: Sandy Knowles

ISBN: 978-1-59493-273-1

To Sue, who understands the goddess of that other planet  
and to my family whom I can only deeply thank.

*In Memory*

*H.S.M.*

### **About the Author**

Nanci Little is a U.S. Army veteran. She lives and writes in Aroostook County, Maine.

# **BOOK ONE:**

***NIKKI***



## CHAPTER ONE

So this was the sickin aydee reppledepple.

She hadn't known what to expect. There was precious little information available from the bawling sergeants at the Initial In-Processing Center; they were, in their words, up to their asses in alligators and didn't have time for questions from trainees just in from Fort Jackson or Fort Dix or Fort Anyfuckingwhere.

"Ya goan t'th' reppledepple," they barked, when asked for information of destiny. "Now siddown, I'm upta my ass in alligators here." And when one of them roared, "everybody goan t'th' sickin aydee reppledepple over here!" Nikki Cole went over there because over there seemed to be her only option. For the ten thousandth time, she wondered why she'd joined the Army. She hauled a duffle bag jammed with seventy-five pounds of basic issue and a suitcase with civvies and personal gear onto the bus before one of those alligator-chewed sergeants took a mind to help her up the steps via a slap on the ass. It occurred to her that ditching the duffle, missing the bus and finding a chance to

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slip away with the suitcase had been a brief option.

Too late now; she got on the bus. *Sickin aydee reppledepple, whatever you are, here I come.*

“2d Armored Division Replacement Detachment,” said the sign in front of a ramblingly dilapidated old building that had been built for temporary barracks during WWII and was, in 1976, still in use because it was standing, though its duration in that upright condition was in serious question. *I suppose I could have expected reppledepple out of Replacement Detachment,* she thought, *after four ubiquitously acronymic months.*

“Giddawffada bus, ya fuggin trainees,” a sergeant bawled, and the riders simmered in resentment; Advanced Individual Training drill sergeants had promised they’d never hear that disparagement again. “You’re not trainees anymore,” they’d said with reluctant pride. “You passed the toughest tests of a peacetime Army: Basic and Advanced Individual Training. You were good trainees. Go out and be good soldiers.”

*Ayuh. Right.*

If In-Processing had been a loony bin, this was chaos. The old bawling NCOs were replaced with new ones, not quite so abrasive but not from any friendly planet, either. The replacements (why aren’t we called repples now, she wondered, instead of trainees) made a hasty formation, five ranks of ten.

“Adams!”

“Here, drill sergeant!”

“Do I look like a fuckin drill sergeant? Does this look like fuckin basic trainin? You’re in the fuckin reglar Army now, at Fort Hood Texas homa Patton’s own sickin armored vision say here! Adams!”

“Here.”

“Andrews!”

“Here.”

“Azimus!”

“Yo.”

“Did I say say yo? Did you douchebags hear me say you should say yo? Are you a fuckin Marine or just a stupid muhfucka?”

Same thing. Yo; Jesus Christ. Azimus!”

“Here.”

“Cole!”

“Here.” It came out he-ah; Boston did what Boston did with words like that.

“He-yah,” the sergeant muttered. “Fuckin Yankee.”

“Ayuh, we won,” she muttered back, and the guy beside her tittered. Both of them donated fifty pushups to the sergeant’s hope chest. She snapped hers out smartly; getting dropped for a lip-infraction fifty had been routine for her at Forts McClellan and Dix, and she still hadn’t learned to keep her mouth shut—or, she refused to be silenced. Just a matter of perspective.

The sergeant finished his roll and they made a line. It was ninety degrees on the seventh of April. They talked and smoked, made quiet rude remarks about the sergeants, about Fort Hood, about the division. The line crawled forward. Cole gave up her paperwork to the sergeant who had made her do the pushups. He grinned at her. She stared back impassively. “Yeah, you’ll learn,” he grinned. “You a homo, or lookin for an officer to marry?” She took a notebook from her sleeve pocket and wrote his comment with his name and rank down in it, checked her watch, added the time and date. He finished her processing without affording further reason to preserve his words for posterity or forwarding to the Inspector General.

“Thank you, Sergeant Gaither,” she said sweetly, when he handed back her papers. He glowered. She gave him an innocent smile and moved along. Until a truck came from her new unit—the five-oh-deuce; nothing got called what it looked like on paper, it seemed—her time was her own. She found space on a bench in the dayroom and gratefully, she sat.

“Man oh,” said a lanky blond man next to her. “What a drill. If I knew what half them damn letters mean, it’d be one thing. Why don’t they just say it instead of spell it? What do they call that, when they do that?”

“Alphabet soup mostly. Sometimes they’re real acronyms.” She found a cigarette in her pocket; he lit it for her. “My favorite

one is FTA,” she said, and he grinned; FTA meant fuck the army, and it was usually the first acronym a recruit learned.

“I’m Lowell Bates.” He offered a hand. “Ardmore, Oklahoma.”

“Nikki Cole.” She shook his hand. “Boston.”

“So what’s your assignment?” She told him the unit. “Oh. I’m signal. I’s hopin’ we might be in the same unit. I’d like to take you out. You’re cute.”

“Spare me, guy,” she said wearily. “I didn’t join the Army to ball my way through it, contrary to what seems to be popular opinion about why women join.”

“Yeah? So eat shit, y’uppity Yankee cunt,” he snarled, and left; she didn’t miss him.

There was a pool table in the middle of the room; a tall female soldier with heavy-lidded hazel eyes was chalking a cue that surely hadn’t come off the dayroom wall, with its satin-wrapped handle and silver weights; “Eight in the side, off the rail.” She leaned across the table for a smooth stroke; the cue ball cushioned off and kissed the eight to drop it into the side pocket. “Oh fuck me,” said a lanky black private, and he slapped a ten-spot into her hand and racked his cue in disgust.

Nikki watched as the tall woman took on all corners at ten dollars a game, draping her graceful height and reach across the table, her slim hands stroking nine men away from their money before a willowy, thin-mustached black man whose name tag identified him as Davis won the break and ran them as he called them to accept ten from her. “Nice stickage,” she said, and took her cue with her as she threaded through the crowd, a pack of Kools in hand. Nikki relinquished her spot on the bench and followed.

She found her leaning against the peeling-painted wall of the building, a cigarette dangling from her lip and the cue under her arm as she tucked her winnings into a wallet and the wallet into a hip pocket. “Excuse me,” Nikki said, and the tall woman

looked up. "Are you gay?"

A small smile twitched to the tall woman's mouth, almost reaching her large and expressive hazel eyes. "No. No, I'm not."

"Oh." *I would have sworn.* "Okay. Just wondered."

"You're brave, asking that of someone with a big stick in her hand."

Nikki shrugged. "Didn't hurt either one of us for me to ask." She went back into the dayroom. Davis still had control of the table, and from the way he shot, it looked as if he'd have it for a while. Her place on the bench had been taken; she leaned against the wall and watched the pool players. No women challenged Davis; of the dozen enlisted women in the room, none looked anything but straight. Nikki Cole sighed, and smoked, and watched the games. The noise was incredible, the babble of fifty different conversations underscored by thumping disco music and the rattle and click of pool balls. She had a nasty headache lurking around the back of her neck. She went outside again, trying to escape the noise, and found the shady side of the building. The tall woman with the pool cue was there, smoking, leaning against the wall, talking with a brawnily handsome man about fishing. Nikki shook her head, keeping a distance respectful of their privacy. *In a pig's ass you're not*, she thought. *Maybe you don't know it yet, but honey, you're as lesbian as I am.*

"Well, by Jeez!" The first sergeant of Headquarters Company of the five-oh-deuce was a lanky red-faced man with razor-sharp pantlegs and the gung-ho patches of airborne and combat infantry on his chest. A tattooed snake curled around his wrist and up his forearm, undulating as he rubbed his rough hands together and gloated over the nervous formation in front of him. "You're my newbies, yah? By Jeez, you're a good-lookin group! How bout them, ell-tee, ain't they a good-lookin group?"

The lieutenant was a ring-knocker; even if she hadn't seen the West Point hardware on his left hand, Nikki would have

known that. His lip was rolled up like a windowshade, a sneer that said, no, they're not a good-lookin group, they look like a bunch of wannabees who couldn't make it in the civilian world so I'm stuck with them and will God tell me why? He was five-foot-nine of simmering black-haired, black-eyed machismo, a brand-new company commander with a lot to prove and not much time do it; this rack of fresh meat didn't look as if they were going to give much assistance. "I'm First Lieutenant Gouda," he barked. "Your company commander. I'm not the head cheese; not to my face or behind my back or you'll learn all about Article Fifteen of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. I run a tight company in a tight battalion in a tight brigade in a tight division, so be tight. Remember when's your six-month anniversary of being in the Army. Before it all you got to do is say you want to go home to mama and I'll let you. After it you belong to me, and Lincoln didn't free Headquarters Company of the five-oh-deuce. Just don't step on your dick and we'll get along fine. First Sergeant Czosnik'll in-process you and assign platoons and rooms."

First Sergeant Czosnik waited for the barracks door to close behind the commander before he leered a crooked grin at his formation of sixteen. "Rest," he said, and they dropped their rigid positions of attention. "Smoke em if ya got em. Yah, that's the head cheese, all right. He's a piece a work, yah?"

Most of the formation laughed. Nikki Cole watched the topkick's eyes; he saw who laughed, and looked like a man who'd remember what he saw. She'd seen the good guy-bad guy game before; she lit up and waited for what this supposed good guy might say. "Borrow your lighter, Cole?" a voice behind her whispered, and she passed it back to the tall woman with the mean game of pool and got the Zippo tucked back into her hand without so much as a brush of skin on skin.

The first sergeant talked; they listened. He took them into the barracks, crowded them into his office, and asked for papers; they gave him copies of their orders. He gloated and grinned and rubbed his hands; he said yah and let them know Gouda was the head cheese no matter what the good lieutenant thought. He

doled out platoon assignments and room keys and one by one, they left his office. Nikki dragged her duffle down the first-floor hall, looking for the number on her key, and fitted it into the lock and pushed open the door to find stifling heat, two narrow beds, four big lockers, two night-stands, two chairs. “Eww. Bad hotel.” First come, first served; she flopped onto the bare mattress of the bed by the wall, leaving the windows for whichever of the four other women in the group might join her.

Czosnik had given them the rest of the day to get settled, a generosity she hadn’t expected. She thought of what the head cheese had said about six-month anniversaries. She had longer than six months to get out whenever she wanted, if she decided she hated it—or, if she decided it was intolerable; she already hated it. All Nikki Cole had to do was salute the man and say, “I’m a lesbian,” and she’d be on the next bus out of Killeen, Texas; she had no doubt of that. She sighed and got up, and lit a smoke and went to open the windows, drawing the shades against the sun beaming into the room. She dug into her suitcase to find a clean T-shirt and the heavy crystal ashtray her brother had given her; she put her smoke in the ashtray and shed her fatigue shirt, feeling better in only the thin cotton tee under it. She was a small woman, slender and tiny-breasted, and she never wore a bra; in this heat, she knew that omission would be merciful. She scrubbed the damp T-shirt against her skin, soaking up as much sweat as she could before she changed. Maybe a shower—but there was a lot to do; she’d just get all lathered up again.

She opened the lockers, finding bedding and hangers and no more. The room was big enough for the furniture it held and the people it was to serve; the idea of one person in her space was wonderful, after being stacked forty to a bay at McClellan, and ten to a room designed for six at Dix, but it would be even more wonderful if Czosnik had neglected to assign her a roommate.

No such luck. On the heels of the thought came the sound of a key in the door. She looked up, her sweaty T-shirt half-on, half-off. “McNally. Hi.”

“Cole.” It wasn’t quite curt, but it was several shades of

warmth short of cordial as the pool player kicked in a duffel and a suitcase and slammed the door; Nikki finished peeling off her shirt, used it to towel under her arms, and pulled on the clean one. “I fucking hate Texas already,” the tall woman snarled. “Jesus, this heat and it’s only April? Christ, this room’s hot!”

“Sucks,” Nikki agreed. “Do you mind the bed by the window?” She pulled pins from her hair; a wealth of straight dark length spilled down her back.

“I couldn’t give a shit. I’m on the fucking rag and I’m out of fucking smokes and—thanks.” She caught the pack of Marlboro Lights Nikki tossed her. “Some bitch PFC named Trapp just gave me a ration of shit about dragging my duffel bag down the hall; did that look like a Fort Dix shine on the floor to you?” She shrugged out of her fatigue shirt and tossed it onto the bed.

“Looked like shit to me. Does that laundry list of complaints end with, and they gave me a fucking queer for a roommate?”

“I don’t care who you sleep with as long as you don’t come on to me. You got any aspirin? Some prick stole my cosmetic case over at the reppledepple, kiss a hundred bucks worth of makeup and Daddy’s leather AWOL bag goodbye. I hope he looks good in my Mary Kay down at the 440 Light Company. And no, I’m not always this bitchy.”

“Thank god.” Nikki offered a bottle of aspirin. “How ’bout that Gouda? Don’t step on your dick, he says. Not a problem. Czosnik’s right; he’s a piece of work.”

“He’s dangerous. You be damn careful of him, Cole. He doesn’t want women in his man’s army at all, let alone lesbians.”

“I’m not planning on making it a career.”

“The Army, or being lesbian?” Dryly, she asked; Nikki grinned. “You’re food service, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’m Nikki, by the way.” She offered a hand.

“Elen.” Her handshake was firm and brief. “Truck driver. First Sergeant said if it didn’t work rooming a cook and a trucker together he’d move one of us. Something about you need to get up at three lots of mornings?”

“Three days a week is how we did it at Dix. Yeah, they told

us the cooks always room together. I'm pretty quiet, though. I can dress in the dark."

"We'll see how it works out."

"So why'd you join the Army?" Nikki unfolded the sheets she had found in one of her lockers and snapped one out across her bunk. It smelled a little stale, but had laundry creases in it.

"One-way ticket out of Aroostook County, Maine—so I thought then. I wish I'd joined the Air Force and asked for Loring now, but the Air Force recruiter was a dork. The Navy recruiter was on leave. The Marines were like, no way."

"No shit. A few good men, right?" She made quick, neat hospital corners on the bottom sheet and flipped the top one over it. "I'm from Boston; we're almost homies, I guess. I went to Aroostook once, fishing with some friends. A place called Deboullie Pond?"

"I know Deboullie. Blueback trout. Good fly-fishing up there." She dry-swallowed three aspirin and gave the bottle back. "How come you're a lesbian?"

Nikki shrugged. "How come you're not?"

Elen laughed. "Fair question. Why'd you join up, if you're gay? You had to know they've got the deck stacked against you all the way."

"Couldn't afford any other food service education." She flipped a woolen blanket over the sheets. "God, why do they issue wool blankets in Texas?"

"Shit if I know. Shit if I'll sleep under it, either. I need a car. I need a beer. I need to bum another cigarette. I need to find the PX. I need some fucking sleep."

Nikki tossed her a fresh pack of smokes. "Keep them; I've got a carton. Do you mind if I sleep naked? It's too hot for pajamas."

"Just do it over there." She unlocked her duffle bag and started hauling things out, working into a locker; Nikki found a paperback in her suitcase and settled onto the bed, leaving her unpacking for later. Elen McNally seemed charged with nervous energy, and two of them on that end of the room would only end

up in each others' way.

Elen worked her basic issue into one locker and half her footlocker, her movements as fluid as they had been across the pool table at the replacement detachment; she let the lid of the footlocker slam down and heaved her suitcase up onto it and opened it, stared in, and closed it again and sat beside it with a huge, weary sigh. "Frig it for a minute." She lit a cigarette and smoked half of it in silence before she said, "Cole?"

"Hmm?" She marked her place on the page with a finger.

"Why'd you ask me if I was gay?"

Nikki glanced up. "Error of judgment." *Wishful thinking. If you were, you'd be butch, and I'd be half in love by now.*

"Do I look queer?"

"Lots of gay people don't look gay." She put gentle emphasis on the word. "It was probably the pool cue. I had a girlfriend who was a pool player. She always wanted a stick like yours. Are you going to worry about it now?"

"No. I just wondered."

"Are you going to worry about me being your roommate?"

"No. I'll assume you're couth unless you prove otherwise."

She butted her cigarette and opened her suitcase again, wanting some of the wrinkles to hang out before she started the painstaking task of ironing everything she owned. She knew Cole was watching her, but assumed the inactive tend to watch the active just for something to do—and there was a small satisfaction in being desirable, even to another woman. In high school she'd been the fat, geeky one with the weird, perpetually-mispronounced name, dateless for four years, with only one good friend; her friend was fat and dateless too. Straight-A dorks, both of them, school paper and war protests or not. A year and a half of arduous effort and seventy-five pounds later, at five-nine and one-twenty-five she was svelte, the mirror showing a sculpted, high-cheek boned face with expressive, almost sultry, hazel eyes, but sometimes when she looked she still saw fat and zits. Sure, the Army had been a ticket out of a desperately depressed rural county the rest of her home state barely knew existed, but it had

been a chance for a fresh start, too, a chance to see how people who hadn't known her all her life might perceive her, and she'd been asked out by enough men in the last four months to make up for four lonely years of high school. To know she was seen as a tempting and mature woman instead of a fat nerd only made it easier to accept Nikki Cole's gaze at her back.

*Weights, Nikki thought, watching the sinuous flow of well-toned muscles under the thin white T-shirt. She works out with weights, plays a wicked game of pool, wears a hip pocket wallet, and she's straight? Why doesn't this figure? I've known I'm lesbian since I was thirteen and I've never seen so obvious a dyke—but she's straight. Go fish; how do I know? But god, is she great-looking. Beautiful hands, nice tits, cute ass, o god yummy shut up and read, Cole. She's straight, okay? Deal with it. Prove you're couth.*