As the plane began to ascend into the air, Tera’s hands turned white wrapped around the armrests. Her heart pounded. This wasn’t her first plane ride to be sure, but it was different. She was leaving behind so much and heading for uncharted territory. Her stomach tightened into a sickening knot. She pried one hand free and nervously clutched her locket. “You ok hun?” Came a light southern lilt. Tera glanced over at the woman with salt and pepper hair next to her. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

All she could do was smile and nod. Seemingly reassured, the woman nestled back in her seat. It wasn’t that Tera wanted to be rude. She just wasn’t comfortable discussing things with a stranger. She lamented how she will constantly have to meet new people now because of her husband’s line of work. She shuddered. How am I going to get accustomed to a military life? She didn’t have much experience with the military. Her parents were never in the service. The only people in her family in the military were distant relatives, but she hardly saw them. A few of her friends had parents that were formerly in the military, but they didn’t offer her much insight. Most of her friends were little kids when their parents got out. Tera was entering a world she didn’t fully know or understand.
She never thought she would end up marrying someone in the service. The thought of such a nomadic life, away from family was not appealing. So when she met Ethan, she initially brushed him off. But he was persistent and before long she agreed to go out with him.

On their first date, he took her to Galliano’s, an authentic Italian restaurant downtown. As they got out of the car, her left eyebrow raised slightly as she smiled. *Impressive.* She hadn’t expected to be taken somewhere so nice. She felt a little underdressed in her dark jeans, sequined graphic t-shirt and charcoal cardigan. At least she wore heels; it made her look semi-dressy. She was also struck by the fact that Ethan insisted on opening doors and pulling out the chair for her. *That was a first.* Other guys she had dated never did that for her and she certainly didn’t expect a guy in the military to do it. The picture she got of servicemen was from movies and TV shows depicting loud, vulgar and inappropriate knuckleheads drinking beer. Ethan preferred wine. She told him he was not what she expected.

“I hope that’s a good thing,” he said. *It was.* She liked that he wasn’t like the stereotype she had in her head. He was more than just a mindless barbarian who liked to play “war.” Ethan’s dark chocolate eyes gazed into hers with a warm, knowing smile. Her face warmed. She felt like he could see right into her. Quickly, she changed the subject to other things. They talked about their families. She talked about her parents, their restaurant and how they had worked so hard to build it from the ground up. Food was their passion. Tera liked food, but she wasn’t interested in the family business like her younger brother. He was in college working on a business management degree. Her sister was a second grade teacher at a local elementary school. Ethan was an only child. Both his
parents were enlisted in the Army, but were now retired and living in Texas. They were so proud of him when he got into the naval academy. Although his dad had hoped he would go Army, but he was still happy his son was serving his country. He hadn’t been able to see them for a while having been stationed all over the place. The idea of being so far away from one’s family was so foreign to Tera. Most of her loved ones lived in the same state. It meant get-togethers were hectic and loud, but they were always filled with love and laughter. She wondered if Ethan was lonely being stationed somewhere with no family around. “Not at all,” he said, “I like seeing new places and meeting interesting people. Like you.” She blushed.

As the plane leveled out, Tera’s hands loosened and tingled back to life. She tried yawning to equal out the pressure in her ears. No luck.

“So where are y’all headed?”

Tera cringed. She dreaded talking, but she wanted to be polite. “Someplace called, um, Yokosuka?”

“Yeah? That’s nice. Your husband in the military?”

“Yep.”

“Mine too! He’s a first sergeant in the Air Force. What’s yours do?”

“He’s a commander in the Navy.”

“Oh, ok. An officer huh? How long y’all been married?”

“Six months.” She hoped her short under-detailed answers would give the woman a hint.
“Ah, I see.” She seemed to wait for Tera to elaborate.

It was a long uncomfortable pause. Tera could feel the hot sweat starting under her shirt. She realized she was going to have to explain. “He got orders right before our wedding. He had to move out to Japan right after our honeymoon.”

“Yeah, that can happen. It’s the military for ya.”

“I’m starting to get that.”

“So what do y’all do? Are you planning to be a housewife?”

Tera shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I’m sorry…I need to use the restroom. Excuse me.”

In the cramped lavatory she stared at herself in the mirror. Housewife? I don’t think so! Tera was resolute she wasn’t going to be one. At least not right now. Maybe after having a few kids, but not right now. That wasn’t Tera. From the time she was old enough to work she had a job. She didn’t work at her parent’s restaurant, not because she didn’t want to help them, because she didn’t want to be handed a job. She wanted to earn it. When Tera went to college, she took studying very seriously. She worked very hard for her degree in marketing. She loved being creative and coming up with ways to make things appealing for people to buy. She would know what a shopper was looking for because she was a self-proclaimed shopaholic herself. To her, it was “retail therapy.” When she got engaged to Ethan, she made it very clear she was not giving up her career. Thankfully, he was in full support. He said her strong, independent spirit was one thing he loved about her. It meant a lot to her. Ethan reassured her
that she would be able to find work at the new base. He gave her the web address to look up the listings of available positions. She found them, but it wasn’t very clear on how she actually applied. For hours, she went in circles trying to figure out where the application was to fill out and how to send her resume. Ethan tried helping her over the phone, but she got too frustrated and decided she would figure it out when she got there.

A sudden shake of the cabin jolted Tera out of her thoughts. The seatbelt sign lit up with the annoying ding and the flight attendant’s voice cracked over the intercom. She took a deep breath and began to make her way back to her seat. *This is going to be a long flight.* As she squeezed down the narrow aisle, she passed by a small family. The toddler was playing table football with his dad. The mom was trying to comfort the baby while it fussed and cried. Tera felt a lump in her throat and she hurried past them. Her fingers found their way back to the locket. She rubbed it lovingly between her index finger and thumb.

As she sat back down, she could feel the lady’s eyes on her, waiting for an opportunity to start talking with her again. She quickly jammed on the headphones to listen to the movie already playing on the cabin screens. It wasn’t one she was terribly interested in, but she’d take anything to avoid more questions. The woman seemed to give up for now and return to her paperback mystery novel. It looked like the woman had read it a million times. The edges were worn and bent. The binding was wrinkled and cracked. Tera reclined. The movie was so boring that before long her eyes became very heavy and she drifted into unconsciousness.

A few hours later Tera was startled awake by the sound of the announcement overhead. Lunch was about to be served. She stretched, straightened up her seat and
put down her tray table. The woman slipped her flimsy bookmark in the book and stuffed it into the chair pocket. For a moment, Tera thought about leaving her headphones on as a barrier between her and the woman, but she hated the munching sound echoing in her ears even more. Reluctantly she removed the headphones. The woman glanced over with smiling eyes.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance earlier to introduce ourselves. My name is Clare, what’s yours?”

“Tera.”

“Nice to meet you. So, are y’all new to the military?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Tera gently played with her necklace again.

“That’s pretty,” she motioned toward the locket.

“Oh,” she looked at it and back at the woman, “Thank you. My parents gave it to me as a going away present.”

“It’s beautiful. Not like one I’ve seen before.”

Tera could feel her ears getting warm, “Yeah.”

A few days before Tera’s flight her parents had thrown a huge going away party for her. Tera fought the whole night to keep an upbeat attitude and smile on her face. She didn’t want anyone to worry. It was so hard to accept that she was going to be thousands of miles away from them in a strange place surrounded by people she didn’t know, other than Ethan of course. When she opened the finely wrapped box and saw the locket, the floodgates opened. It was the one she had been eyeing. It had a
delicate gold chain with single semi-precious stone beads spaced along the expensive strand in intervals. The locket itself was a large gold circle, about 2 inches in diameter, with a light leafy pattern etched all over it. Inside was a recent picture of Tera with her family. She squeezed her family tightly, wetting their faces with her tears as she kissed each of them in gratitude.

“Are you alright?”

“Huh?”

“You look like you’re about to cry.”

“Oh, um, no I’m fine.” She forced a smile.

The cart clanked into position beside them. The attendant listed what was available for them to purchase. She ordered the fruit and cheese box and got a plastic cup of Pepsi. She always thought it was funny that they didn’t just give people the can instead. Oh well, it was their way. Just like the military, they had their own kind of logic. She didn’t realize how hungry she was until she started eating. The sweet, tart apples and aged bitterness of the cheese was so refreshing. The woman decided on some sandwich meal. Tera didn’t really pay attention. She was too busy inhaling her food. She guessed Clare was also really hungry because she didn’t say anything while she ate.

The attendant came by to refill their drinks and take away the discarded remains of their food and trash. Clare waited till the attendant was a few rows away before she turned back to Tera.

“So, you said your parents gave you the locket?”

She fought back the lump again. “Uh yeah, they
did.”

“That’s so sweet. My parents gave me one too… a little while after I got married.”

“Oh?”

Clare pulled out her antique looking locket from behind her shirt. She was from a large family. Seven kids. She was the youngest. Her daddy had been a mechanic in the Army, repairing and maintaining jeeps and such. He had gotten out when she was in grade school. They had settled in a small town near Charlotte. They were a very tight-knit family. It was difficult for her to leave them when she married her Ricky. It didn’t really hit her until a few days after they moved clear across the country. She called her mom choking, unable to coherently speak while tears cascaded down her face. She was a mess, but her mom helped calm her down. Her mom was always good at that. For her birthday a few months later, they gave her the locket with a picture of them inside. She found it was a nice way of remembering that no matter where she went, her family was always right there with her.

Tera tried holding her breath to keep the tears from forming, but soon one rogue drop broke through the border of her eyes and burned down her face.

“Are you ok?”

“I’m…I’m fine.”

“Then why are you crying?”

She frantically tried to look for an excuse but she couldn’t. The hot water came pouring out of her eyes now. She couldn’t hold them back anymore.
“What is it hun?”

Her diaphragm jerked and quivered making it difficult to speak let alone breathe.

“Is it about your family?”

She nodded.

“Oh hun.” She gently grasped Tera’s hand.

Everything came out of her without any pause. She was scared. She didn’t know anything about this military stuff. She had never intended to marry someone in the service. She couldn’t have imagined moving so far away from her family. She loved them so much. They meant so much to her. She thought she could handle it. She thought she was stronger than this. She loved Ethan. Aside from the military, he was everything that she had ever wanted. He made her so happy and she wanted to spend her life with him. Besides, he wasn’t planning on being in the military forever. He had told her he was going to retire in about ten more years. Although it was weird for her to think that someone could retire that young. She apologized for unloading like this. She hated turning into a puddle in front of someone she had just met.

Clare grabbed a small packet of Kleenex from her purse and handed it to Tera. She gratefully took them and began dabbing her face and eyes.

“I hate how crying ruins my make up and makes my nose all red.”

Clare laughed. “Oh hun, I know what you mean. I’m such a mess when I cry. My nose not only turns red, but it also turns into its own nasty faucet.”
She giggled, “Yeah.” The tears started to subside.

“Don’t feel bad hun. It’s a tough life, but you don’t have to deal with it all alone.” Ethan had said the same thing to her, but she thought he was just talking about himself.

“What do you mean?”

Clare explained that someone called a sponsor would be assigned to help her get situated once she got on base. The sponsor might even be there when Tera arrived at the airport and that the sponsor would most likely be a fellow military wife, whose husband works with Tera’s. Her sponsor would show her around, help Tera find the things she needs, and answer any of her questions and so on. Tera caught sight of the flight attendants getting ready to serve dinner. She excused herself, got up to stretch her legs and freshen up in the bathroom a little before they started coming down the aisles. Dinner was ok. She didn’t really like the burger they had, but it filled her up. They both ordered cocktails and chatted a bit more about their husbands and families. It was so nice meeting someone who had gone through similar things. Even though Clare had a background with the military before she got married, it was reassuring to hear that they had similar struggles in common. Tera was starting to feel less anxious about this whole thing.

“Hey, why does the military use so many acronyms for things? MPF…NEX…PCS…It all sounds like a funny broken language.”

Clare chuckled. “Yeah, I know what you mean. It took a while for me to understand it myself. Now, it just comes out naturally like everything else.”
“It all just seems ridiculous to me.”

“I know, but that’s how they talk. You’ll get used to it.” *Get used to it.* Yeah, she had heard that line from just about everyone.

The cabin lights dimmed so everyone could get some sleep. There were still several hours to go before they reached Japan. The mix of her dinner, the drinks and conversation made it easy for Tera to fall asleep for a second time.

The shock of the lights coming back on jarred her to consciousness. The muffled sound of a baby crying echoed in the cabin. *Guess she wasn’t the only one who wasn’t a morning person.* Over breakfast, she asked Clare other questions such as how to get a job on base. Clare was generous with helpful information and she talked about a place on base called Family Support. It provides help for dependents on such things as finding a job. They also held classes for those that need assistance with writing resumes and giving good interviewing. Tera didn’t need help with that, but it was nice to know they offered assistance like that to spouses. Her anxiousness started to fade. Suddenly the captain’s voice came on overhead. They were only a few minutes from landing.

The words came out before she realized what she was doing. “So, Clare, how can I get a hold of you after I get settled? I would love to get together for coffee.”

“Oh I would love to sweetie, but I’m not staying in Yokosuka.”

Tera felt a twinge of disappointment. “Oh…where are you going?”
“Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa.” It sounded a million miles away.

“Where’s that?”

“It’s one of the smaller southern Japanese islands near Taiwan. But hey, maybe y’all can take a hop over to visit sometime or I could take one to visit you.” Clare could see the confusion on Tera’s face so she explained what a “hop” was. Tetra learned it was when someone flies space available on a military flight. That sounded like a perk Tera could get used to. She surprised herself again by suggesting they trade emails so they could keep in touch and plan to visit each other. She carefully folded the slip of paper and secured it in her wallet for safekeeping. Tera’s ear’s popped as the plane slowly descended. She glimpsed out the window to see the strangely beautiful country that was drawing closer by the minute. She sat relaxed, her arms loosely lying on the armrests.