

Chapter 1

“THERE’S NO WAY YOU’RE ASSIGNING ME TO SOME girlie-chopper.”

Kee Smith had to look a long way up to see herself reflected in the Major’s mirrored shades. Well, let him look down into his own damn reflection in her shades and see how he liked it. All he’d see was himself shimmering in the desert heat and the helicopter he’d just rammed down through the dawn sky. They stood in a baking soccer arena, which was now turned into a baking forward airbase out in the middle of the baking desert in bloody baking Pakistan. Already, the tier upon tier of weathered concrete seating focused the blast of light on the bare dirt field like a magnifying glass.

No response. Crap!

Maybe she couldn’t read the Major’s eyes through those shades, but after six years in the U.S. Army, she could read his silence.

“Sir.” *Damn. Screwin’ up already, Kee.* She’d spent the last thirty-seven hours going from one lumpy flight to another to get into the theater of operations. Her reward, a dusty bivouac fifty miles from Afghanistan’s brutal Hindu Kush mountains. That part didn’t bother her. If President Matthews said the war was here, fine. She came here. But that her new commander turned out to be a stick-in-the-mud, protocol-bound dweeb... That she didn’t like so much.

She was dirty, stank worse than after running a tenner with a field pack. Her butt was chapped from one too many hard racks. Sweat dripped down from her bandana in the desert heat. And there wasn't no way she'd done all that to get assigned to some girlie-chopper. She wanted to fly, damn it. Into the bloody fray, not away from it.

Major Chunk-o-Muscle cracked a smile without a single drop of friendly behind it. His flight suit showed rough wear, she knew from experience didn't happen overnight. The handle of his piece, a non-reg Sig Sauer P226, sweet, looked worn too. The silvery aluminum showing through the black anodizing. That took serious use. The hand resting loose beside it had a gold ring; she'd seen him slip it on after he climbed out of the chopper. Common practice. If you were downed, you didn't want anything shiny on you to attract attention.

Of course, the symbol on his finger had never stopped men from hitting on her before; built short and curvy, they all figured she was easy. They all found out fast just how wrong a man could be. Besides she wasn't into married ones, muscley or otherwise. The Army might choose her partners in the air, even if she didn't like its choices sometimes, but she sure as shooting chose hers on the ground.

"Oh, what's wrong with a girlie-chopper?" His deep voice practically laughing at her.

She shrugged her duffel off her shoulder and let it smack, creating a knee-high local brownout of its own in the dust-fine sand. She rested her aluminum rifle case on top of it. Dragging her hands through her jaw-length mop of hair didn't calm her one bit. She still looked dark

and tousled in the Major's shades. Shit, didn't matter anyway. Go for it.

"Permission to speak candidly, sir?"

His half-amused nod really ticked her off.

"I fought too damn hard to get here to be slotted in with some cute little public relations fantasy you have in your head, sir. Sure I've heard of Major Beale, goddamn legend and all. But if I end up on her squad, I'll catch no end of flak and you'll be wasting both my time and the Army's. They didn't ship my butt to this forward airbase, thirty miles into the middle of nowhere, to form a chick squad." That he'd even suggested it told her what kind of a commander he was and she wasn't looking forward to it.

"They shipped me here because the nastiest battle on the planet is happening just north in the Hindu Kush. I came to kick some serious ass, pardon, sir, not to be slotted by gender. I want, I deserve to be placed because I'm the best at what I do. I belong in a bird like that." Kee pointed over her shoulder without turning. She'd seen the distinctive T-shape of the beautiful chopper, the twin of the Major's own bird, reflected in his shades. The heavy rock 'n' roll beat of its rotors pounded against her diaphragm before she could hear it.

The Major didn't bother to glance up. "You ready to ride on that?"

"Damn straight."

Now he did look up, a smile impossibly softening his stony face. Mr. Chunk-o-Muscle was Major Handsome as well. Who'd have known with that permanent scowl. She turned to follow his gaze.

Falling down like a hammer out of the crystal blue

sky came her baby. A Black Hawk helicopter. And not just any Hawk. It was an MH-60L DAP. The Direct Action Penetrator was the nastiest gunship God ever put on Earth and only the best flew in her. Kee'd almost died of pleasure the first time she saw one. Actually she'd been about to die literally too.

She'd spent five long years bucking her way up from infantry to get aboard. It had taken her three of those to get into SOAR and another two to get through SOAR training. Now she was here, forward operations. She'd done it and now was facing a DAP Hawk. No man had ever made her feel this good.

And this sweet bird wasn't fooling around. Two massive weapons' pylons stuck out from either side of the midsection. On one side she had a rocket pod carrying nineteen birds and a 30 mm cannon just in case they wanted to go mastodon hunting. On the other pylon, another rocket pod and a rack of Hellfire anti-tank missiles, three of which were missing.

Unfriendlylies lay pretty close around here. The surrounding town of five thousand people could be hiding anybody. The two crew chiefs still had their hands on the M134 miniguns peeking out of their shooting holes even while they were just a hundred feet up. The chopper was still exposed to the "friendlylies" lurking in the town outside the stadium. The Hawk even had the mid-air refueling probe, which meant she went in way deep. Kee was down with that.

Only one group flew such a bird, SOAR. The Special Operations Aviation Regiment (airborne), the Army's 160th. The Night Stalkers. The baddest asses on the face of the sky. And she was here. She pinched her leg, on

the side away from Major Muscle-head. It stung. This wasn't no dream. Wide awake. She'd done it.

They both turned away and covered their faces as a brownout of dust washed across the field, adding another layer to her too-many hours of grime. Once the bird hunkered down, and speech and vision were again possible, she faced him.

"That." She cocked a thumb over her shoulder. "Me." She thumped her chest with a fist. "Sir!" For good measure.

"Done!" Again that hidden laugh. "If you can talk your way past the pilot." He turned on his heel and disappeared into the heat shimmer.

So, all up to her, hunh? Good. Didn't scare her none.

Kee yanked her duffel over her shoulder, grabbed her rifle case, and tromped over to the DAP as her rotors wound down and the dust and sand settled.

Respect. She'd give that a shot first. Respect with a little help. Because, like a good soldier, she had more than one weapon in her arsenal. She tossed down her duffel and the rifle case at the edge of the rotor sweep and made sure her T-shirt lay smooth and tight on her skin so that every muscle and curve showed. Pack 'n' rack. Six-pack abs and a good solid rack for a chest. On clear display. Her dusky skin, almond eyes, and single blond-streak in dark hair had some kind of magic at knocking men dead. Wasn't why she had it, but it worked.

She didn't tease, it wasn't her mode. If she offered, she meant it and delivered. But having men's brains switch off around her had its advantages. She wasn't gonna be filing a letter of complaint with the chief people designer who'd wired men's brains to blow away

like dust in rotor wash whenever they were around her. It just amused her that it worked every damn time.

The pilot climbed down, leaned in to trade a joke with his crew chief, and then headed out from under the slowing rotors. He almost passed her by, but Kee snapped a sharp salute.

“At ease.” No salute back.

Crap! Newbie mistake. She jerked her hand back to her side and couldn’t help checking behind her, but Major Muscle was gone. She knew better, had been forward-deployed plenty to know better. In the field you never salute a superior officer. Sure way to tell a sniper who to target.

Kee dropped to parade rest, clenched her hands behind her back. Muscled arms and shoulders back focused men on a chest that wowed ’em all. Some civilian women thought they were hot, but there was nothing like a buffed-out soldier babe. And the civilians knew it, too. Wasn’t a single civilian chick ever gave her a smile when she entered a bar.

“Sergeant Kee Smith. Best damn gunner you ever met. I want on your ship, sir.”

The pilot peeled off his helmet, revealing blue-green eyes and an unruly wave of soft brown hair that she’d bet never stayed under control, no matter how long a woman played with it. He opened the front of his flight suit to reveal a sweaty tee on a slender frame.

“First Lieutenant Archibald Jeffrey Stevenson III at your service. And it’s not my ship. You’ll be wanting to converse with the Major.” His voice so slow and smooth and refined, like a radio announcer on those classical stations.

Then he grinned at her, a saucy, funny grin. Started in his eyes and wandered down to his lips, ending up kind of lopsided. Not Handsome Mr. Major, but it made him look pretty damn cute. She couldn’t help but notice that his long and lean had some nice muscle underneath, you’d expect no less from a SOAR.

The Lieutenant, however, didn’t even have the decency to rake his eyes down her body. The Major hadn’t been able to help studying her frame, she could tell despite the mirrored shades he wore like they’d been welded there. But this Lieutenant somehow managed. Either gay or self-control of steel-like strength. Came down to it, she’d be betting on the latter. What happened when that much self-control let go? Now that could be worth the price of the ticket to find out.

He moved off to her right, passing so close they almost brushed shoulders. He leaned in and whispered, “Good luck. You are going to need it. More than that nice chest, Sergeant.”

“But it’s a damn nice chest, isn’t it, sir?” So he had noticed.

“Yes, ma’am, it is.” And even though she didn’t turn to look at him, she knew they were smiling together for that moment.

Lieutenant Archibald Jeffrey Stevenson III. What was this woman’s Army coming to? Did he have any idea how ridiculous he sounded? Like those late-night movies when the only thing on was some British hoo-ha, everyone prancing around in long dresses. Hard to believe he even said “chest” with a voice like that. Though she’d liked the way he said it, as if it were a compliment, not a drool.

She spotted the oak leaves on the collar of the other pilot and set aside thoughts of long and lean lieutenants with wavy hair. The Major was still helmeted and chatting with the crew coming in to service his chopper. The Hawk'd been through some hard times. Tape patches showed more than a few hits on the fuselage; some of the panels had been replaced, and a couple of those had patched holes too. Now that they'd stopped spinning, she could see that one of the rotor blades was clearly newer than the other three, replaced after taking too much abuse. This bird had seen some heavy action. She moved in to check out the guns, worn hard but so immaculate you could eat off them. Her kind of weapon.

"Pretty, isn't she?" Some crewwoman's voice close beside her. SOAR had women in the ground personnel, but Kee was only the second woman to ever make the grade for flight operations. Sweet candy for sure. A serpent of coiled gray had been painted across the dusky green of the chopper. The colors so close in tone made it hard to see in places, which made it appear all the more dangerous. It wrapped around the gunner's lookout window and writhed across the pilot's door. Etched in his scales, the name of the bird. *Vengeance*. The serpent's head, striking forward along the nose of the chopper, sported mirrored shades. In the lenses, someone had even drawn a reflected explosion of an enemy going down hard.

"Better than sex." She rubbed a hand down the long barrel of the 30 mm cannon. "I can't believe that bastard Major wanted to slot me on the girlie-chopper. This is real flight."

"Don't like girlie-choppers?"

"Not one friggin' bit. I want this bad boy. I didn't come here to form no goddamn chick squad." She stepped forward to stare into the face of the rocket launcher. Seven fired. They'd been in some heat last night. She'd wager it hadn't turned out well for the bad guys. Night Stalkers ruled the dark.

Something kept dragging at her attention. She'd been trained to pay attention to the niggling feeling that something was out of place. Not right. It had saved her life more than once while pounding ground for the 10th Mountain Division.

Looking up, she spotted it.

"The rotor blades. They look different."

Kee could feel the maintenance chick, still behind her, focusing her attention upward.

"Thicker. Most can't see that. This is the first M-mod in the theater. The MH-60M upgrade adds twenty-five percent larger engines, needs a heavier blade."

Kee whistled in admiration. "She must haul ass across the sky."

"She does."

Kee glanced over at her new companion. "Kee Smith."

The first thing she noticed was the shoulder-length blond hair and the bluest eyes on the planet. Pretty, slender, perfect posture. Would fit in with Archibald Jeffrey Stevenson III just fine. Maybe they were hitched. Met in a frickin' hoity-toity fern bar somewhere on the Upper West Side. The woman dug a sparkler out of a pocket and slipped it on her left, though the Lieutenant's hand had been clean. Still, could be.

The second thing Kee noticed was the worn flight suit, the battered helmet under one arm, the scuffed-up

M9 Beretta at her hip, and the pair of major's oak leaves on the woman's lapels.

Kee's poker face clicked in a beat and a half too late. One woman had made it into SOAR before her. A friggin' legend. And not for spreading her legs to the top. A girl couldn't turn around without being compared to the one other woman flight-qualified in the whole regiment. That damn Major Muscle had tricked her. Tricked her into begging to get onto the girlie-chopper she so hadn't wanted. Who'd have guessed the girlie-bird would be a DAP Hawk?

Kee knew the woman's name even before she spoke in that refined voice of hers.

"Emily Beale."



"You for real?" Kee couldn't equate the tall slip of a blonde standing in the dust beside her with the legend. Real or not, no woman truly met SOAR standards before Kee'd come along. That was cold cash to your dealer on the street. There had to be another story here.

"Last I checked."

Kee managed to clamp her tongue between her teeth before she could put her foot any further down the rabbit hole. The legend told that the title of SOAR's number-one pilot belonged to the only woman flying in all five battalions. Kee also knew for a fact that officers lived to mess with lower ranks' minds.

SOAR pilots were as badass as the ground pounders they carted through the sky. Every hour a Special Forces guy trained, a SOAR flier trained. Green Berets didn't have nothing on a Night Stalker. And they couldn't fly.

The Delta operators, the D-boys, okay, they were something other. Even a SOAR couldn't keep up with them, but the crew for the 160th's helicopters sat at the pinnacle of the U.S. military's air power for a reason. They were the best. That meant being the toughest.

Major Beale was a total lightweight, all trim and slender. If you gave Kee a .50cal machine gun to cart around with a case of ammo, you'd be getting somewhere. But if you gave a little FN SCAR carbine to Ms. Major Beale, could she even pick it up?

Major and Major. Her brain went click, loud enough to be audible. Major Chunk-o-Muscle had smiled at the sky when this bird had swung into view. He had the shackle of gold on his left hand to match Beale's sparkler. Married her way to the top. Hey, whatever worked. Didn't mean she wanted to fly with the little Miss Hoity Girl. She'd never make her mark if they always kept her in the shadow of SOAR's only other woman.

But, damn, a berth on a DAP Hawk. Even with a girl pilot, she'd be aboard some serious hardware.

"Having trouble, Keiko Smith?"

"Don't call me that shit."

"What shit?" The curse sounded prissy coming out of that perfect face.

"Keiko. My mama may have named me after a stupid killer whale, but that don't make it my name. Name's Kee."

"Not unless you're fifteen years old. No one knew Keiko the Whale's name until he starred in the movie *Free Willy* in the mid-'90s. She named you in Japanese. It means blessed child. A—"

"Don't give a shit. And I'm not Japanese. I'm

American.” Maybe half Japanese, or part Chinese or whatever, and half who-knew, for sure her mother didn’t. Two days in transit, Kee really needed sleep. She wanted on this chopper so bad it hurt right down to her aching butt. Maybe the cute copilot she’d met earlier, Archibald something the flippin’ Third, really flew the missions. Could Beale be a fake legend?

“Doesn’t matter. The name is Kee. And how is it you know my name?”

The silence landed on her as oppressive as the heat. Fort Campbell, Kentucky, could be hot, but she was dyin’ here. The heat off the bird burned into her brain. The first day in heat was always tough. The first day in heat and going on forty-eight hours with no shut-eye, that rated plain old harsh.

Only when a hand landed on her shoulder, hard, did she realize she was weaving. Soldiers didn’t weave. She blinked her eyes several times to clear the fog and shrugged off the steadying hand even though it belonged to a major.

“Name’s Kee, ma’am. Kee Smith.” A name she’d taken the day she joined the Army, the day she’d re-invented herself. She staggered away, stumbled on her duffel and dragged it onto her shoulder. The rifle case, usually so light in her hands, weighed a ton.

Beaten. Again. She’d set her hopes so high. Five years of busting butt and she’d made it. SOAR. The 160th. She’d toughed it out. Survived. Faced down every man jerk on the way up who said women couldn’t make the grade. Every crap sergeant who thought a woman only had one use in the world and then tried to demonstrate what that was.

First they hated you for being a woman, then for not giving out, and finally, most of all, for when you whupped their ass in public. Then this. SOAR had five battalions, and she’d ended up here. Even if Kee had the heart to climb over another obstacle, knowing that Major Muscle backed up his wife meant she never could. The Army’d stuck it up her backside but good this time.

“Sergeant Kee Smith!” Major Beale’s voice snapped through the burning heat.

Kee stumbled to a halt, head hanging down and she couldn’t drag it up. Right. As stick-in-the-mud as her hubby. She’d offered no “sir.” No frickin’ kowtow to the high master. She’d be cleaning out latrines until she died, a skill she already had too much undeserved practice in.

She managed to turn but didn’t speak. If they were going to burn her down, she’d take it standing. Head up, shoulders back, and, screw Ms. Perfect Size Two, chest out.

Major Prissy-Butt Emily Beale of Hoity-Toity Land still stood in front of her bird. A couple of armorers in their red vests were reloading the rocket pod. A fuel truck hovered nearby, waiting for the ordnance crew to clear.

Her arms were crossed, her purple helmet, unbelievable, with the rampant gold Pegasus, the winged horse of the Night Stalkers, dangled negligently from her fine-fingered hand. It had a bullet crease where a round had shot into the Kevlar, probably made the woman poop her pants. Or maybe she’d shot the helmet herself by accident. They stared at each other across a dozen paces of stamped earth.

Kee stood ready for ire, rage, dressing down. But the woman just stared. The smile that pulled up one corner of her mouth lit the eyes and changed her from pretty to magazine-ad beautiful. She was a knockout! No wonder she'd tripped Major Muscle. But the smile wasn't for Kee, but rather for some joke only the woman knew. Then, snap! The smile was gone. So gone, Kee couldn't even picture it in her mind's eye. Not on that face.

"I know your name because Major Henderson assigned you to me, Smith. And we're both going to have to learn to live with that."

The Major paused. Long enough for Kee to hear the unspoken second half of that sentence. Beale was most definitely not looking forward to figuring out how to live with her.

"You've got eleven hours and fourteen minutes to briefing, eleven hours and thirty-four to flight. Get some rack time. And lose the goddamn attitude." She turned away.

Kee wavered on her feet again, the duffel almost dragging her down to the dirt.

The Hawk. It filled her vision. They were letting her on a DAP.



Archie watched Sergeant Kee Smith from where he lounged comfortably in the shade of Major Henderson's Black Hawk, just two birds away.

The tiny woman saluted Major Beale's back smartly. Enough spite to it that maybe she hoped a sniper was watching and would take out the Major. Then glanced around to make sure no one noticed.

Fooling yourself again, Archie.

But he didn't turn and leave. Couldn't. Sergeant Kee Smith. Almond eyes. Buffed out the way even most guys couldn't achieve, but a body that was all woman. Dark skin of the warmest shade the sun had ever kissed, like a permanent, perfect tan. Brown-black hair, with a single streak the color of a golden sun. It made for a saucy statement that lightened what would otherwise be a forbidding beauty.

With his usual luck she'd be a tramp or a prude or a lesbian, or just want to be his friend, if that.

He'd never found a way to speak to an attractive woman. Pretty, sure. But attractive, the ones who wrenched at your gut merely walking by, tied his tongue into a Gordian knot. Had he really commented on her chest? It was very nice, and rated somewhere between remarkable and spectacular on his own personal list. He had always been partial to well-chested women and that fact surprised him. It did seem rather crass after all, but true nonetheless. But there existed no First Lieutenant Archibald Stevenson III he knew who would actually say such a thing to a woman. Now he watched her from his bit of shade as if she could fulfill every prurient fantasy he'd harbored as a young boy.

Sergeant Kee Smith hadn't acted offended at his comment, but neither had she flaunted her body at the Major as she had for his enjoyment.

Still she stood facing the DAP Hawk, entranced despite Beale's departure. Some pixie-sized fairy of mythological origin reborn in this desert wilderness. Careful, Archie. It couldn't happen of course, he was an officer and she was enlisted. Quick road to a court martial.

However, that didn't stop a man from thinking thoughts. He knew himself too well. He could fall for a woman, dream of her from afar for months, and never take action. Never actually speak to her. Too much disappointment lay down that road, one he'd vowed never to walk again. He liked women, enjoyed being with them. But when someone hit the inner ring of his "attracted" button, he became a mute. Patricia in high school. Mary Ellen in college. Most recently, Lorena, the medevac trainer, who he managed to never speak with directly during the entire two-week course.

Well, if any of those women had hit the inner target ring, Sergeant Smith had just whacked it with a bull's-eye shot. Despite her size, there was a force of nature, a power that wrapped and curled around her filling up far more space.

He'd wasted far too much of his life thinking about women who would never be his. He really should pay more attention to the ones who wanted to be with him, but they never bull's-eyed that button in his brain.

"What are you staring at, Bucko?"

"That's Lieutenant to you." His response was instinctive even as he blinked a couple times. Kee Smith stood right in front of him. His eyes had tracked her, even if his brain hadn't. And this time they were focused where no decent man's should be, on that delicious double curve where chest rolled into that mysterious crevasse between her—one more blink and he returned his eyes to her face.

"Nothing. Simply observing."

"Well, Lieutenant." Amazing that she could pile so much sarcasm into a single word. "Have you observed

where my billet is, Lieutenant Professor, sir? I need some sack time."

Professor? The nickname that had nearly made him insane during Green Platoon training didn't bother him in the slightest at this moment. And that made for an interesting observation in itself.

"Professor?" She snapped her fingers in front of his face.

Now she'd think him a complete dolt.

"This way. I'd be glad to show you."

"No thanks, just point the way. I need to sleep, not wrestle off some guy."

That snapped him out of it. "Stow that, Sergeant!" Came out harsher than he intended. A little flirting, that is all she was doing, and he had shut her down hard. Very smooth.

She actually blushed and looked down. "Sorry, sir!"

About the cutest damn thing he'd ever seen, that a woman so clearly a primal force could blush. No longer trusting his tongue, he pointed at the small tent set aside as women's quarters.

"Thank you, sir." She headed away without a backward glance. No teasing sashay of the hips, no coquettish glance over the shoulder. Had his own thoughts misinterpreted her comment? Had she thought he was suggesting...? He'd never... But she wouldn't know that, so he was just another guy to her.

He watched the diminutive juggernaut heading for her target.

He headed for the showers, hoping his common sense would catch up with him somewhere along the way.