

Chapter 1

“CHIEF WARRANT LARUE?”

Lola couldn't see who addressed her despite the bright airfield lights driving back the nighttime darkness. The helicopter that had come to fetch her kicked up a whirlwind of fine brown dust.

The dust coated everything, everywhere in Afghanistan, and Bagram Air Base felt like the worst of it. It had taken less than ten minutes from arrival in-country for it to penetrate every pore of her being. Clearly you didn't need to brush your teeth here, you just chewed the air and they'd be sanded clean in no time.

Now she stood, bathed by the whirlwind, duffel in one hand and her free arm wrapped across her face to block the worst of the chopper's rotor-driven brownout with her uniform's sleeve.

“Yo!” she called out in what appeared to be the right direction.

The turbines didn't cycle down, the blades didn't even slow to idle, they stayed at flight speed, and the dust continued to roil upward in a never-ending supply from the ground.

No previously imagined neat little meet-and-greet on the ground.

No “Welcome aboard! We're so glad you're here!” entry to the innermost circle of U.S. military heli-aviation.

They had come to fetch her and return to base as if

she were as exciting as a new artillery piece rather than only the fourth woman in history to qualify for the 160th SOAR and only the second female pilot.

A hand appeared from the dust and wrapped about her upper arm, firmly but not hard, and guided her into the maelstrom. Clearly she should've pulled on her flight helmet rather than clipping it to the pack strapped on her back. And tied back her hair, which now beat her about the face and neck until her skin tingled with the stings of the wind-whipped ends.

A pause and a shout in her ear stopped her before she could bang her knees on the Black Hawk helicopter's cargo deck. Considerate.

She was barely aboard before she heard the blades biting the air more deeply. Could feel the weight change as she was pressed heavily into the hard metal deck by the chopper's accelerating lift.

The hand guided her to the rear cargo net where she clipped her duffel and pack. As she dragged on her helmet, the hand snagged the D-ring on the front of her survival vest and snapped a monkey line to it. She was now attached to the helicopter by the three-meter-long strap, just in time before the chopper's nose plunged downward and they roared forward. Only a quick grab of the cargo net kept her from sweeping forward and sliding right into the console between the pilots' seats.

One tug by the unseen hand confirmed the line's solid attachment to her chest. Decently, the hand didn't use the opportunity to grab her breast. Even the heavy SARVSO vest and flight suit didn't stop most guys in such a situation. She'd had to sprain more than a few thumbs during her military career, one she'd even had

to break before the jerk backed off. Sent him squeaking all the way to his commander, who'd thankfully booted him down two grades and shipped him stateside. It was the goddamn 2010s, but jerks still thrived. Or thought they did.

Despite no welcoming committee, she'd take the lack of a grab as a good sign on her first mission assignment with the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, the Night Stalkers.

In the backwash of the airfield's lights, with the dust now cleared from the cabin by the draft of the open cargo doors, she could see the man who'd guided her aboard. As much as anyone could see anyone in full flight gear.

Not a big guy, but clearly a strong one by how his grip had felt and the way his uniform's sleeves were tight against the skin rather than flapping in the wind like most soldiers' would. Definitely a weight lifter. She could appreciate that.

A lot of military time was spent waiting. Waiting for the next round of training, waiting for the "go" on a mission that could come in two minutes or two months. Different soldiers burned off the time differently. Some gals just stopped, lying on their bunk and reading or watching movies or something. That was fine for ten minutes at a time, but not as a lifestyle.

There was a whole generation of techno-geeks that were always tinkering with their toys, whether a smartphone or a four-million-dollar Predator drone. Lola often wondered what the geeks had done in olden times before tech was such a big deal. What did they play with back in 'Nam, their FM radios?

Most troopers stayed active. U.S. Army grunts had left a string of jury-rigged basketball hoops at thousands of temporary bases around the world. She was tall enough and fast enough to do well in these games, but she wasn't much of a team-sport gal. She did better in solo endeavors. Some soldiers ran. A lot of them, like the guy who'd helped her aboard, clearly liked moving iron up and down. Weights were her second choice. Her first choice was swimming long distances.

The guy's helmet appeared black in the dim cabin with an incongruously crossed knife and fork painted on the side, oriented like crossed bones on a pirate flag beneath a large smiley face.

The only other thing she could see clearly as they left the last of the airfield's lights was a smile. Not a leer, but a genuine smile before he slapped his visor down. Another point in his favor.

She smiled back.

He plugged a comm line into the jack on her helmet. She could immediately tell that this ship flew with open communication channels. Some pilots kept the intercom system off so that the crew had to key in to speak, but she could hear the quiet chatter of the pilot and copilot. A radio squawk from the field tower wishing them "safe flight."

"Sergeant Tim Maloney, ma'am. Welcome aboard *Viper*. Major Beale drew escort on a forward flight to-night, so she sent us to fetch you."

"Uh, thanks."

"My pleasure, ma'am." Made it sound as if it was completely his doing and really was a pleasure. Clearly a southerner. Not deep-fried South, definitely not

Louisiana, no real accent, but a soft, pleasant weave to the words. Unhurried speech. And an inborn politeness that was too often lost these days. She could feel the familiarity of Tim's speech pattern relaxing her.

He saluted—she could make out the motion as a silhouette against the soft glow of the cockpit readouts behind him—then his bulk was gone and back into the left-side chief's seat.

She hadn't seen the bird falling out of the night sky until it was too late and the dust had blinded her. It was definitely a Black Hawk, but she hadn't heard it until it was right on top of her.

They'd made her wait outside the normal circle of field lights, beyond the edge of the pavement. And still the bird had surprised her.

Looking around, it took her only moments to assess why the unusual treatment.

The cargo net behind her kept extra cans of munitions from sliding around. Outside the bird, she could make out the weapons pylons sticking out to either side where some serious missiles and cannon were hanging.

They'd picked her up in a DAP Hawk. A Direct Action Penetrator Black Hawk was the nastiest piece of hardware ever thrown into the night sky by any military, and only the Night Stalkers regiment of U.S. Special Forces flew them. There were only a dozen or so of these on the planet. Even inside SOAR, it wasn't exactly clear how many.

If a girl was gonna hitch a ride, this was about the sweetest muscle car she could land in. She'd always had a dumb-as-a-brick weak spot for guys with muscle cars, but never stuck around long because they always had to

drive. Half the reason she'd gone pilot was that she got to drive.

But the rotors sounded odd. Wrong. She'd flown over a thousand hours in Black Hawks, over a hundred in a DAP during training. To have the sound be so different was as if she'd gone to sleep and woken up on a different planet.

She leaned out the cargo door, but there was nothing to see in the night.

"She's a quiet one, ma'am." Tim must have noticed her actions.

A quiet one.

Stealth.

Lola had forgotten. She'd flown a quieted DAP Hawk on an actual mission once, well, at the end of one. She'd been so wound up and terrified of screwing up that she hadn't noticed the differences at first. The stealth one that had hard-landed in bin Laden's compound back in 2011 was the only one the public knew about. Here was another.

They'd fetched her in a stealth DAP Black Hawk. This wasn't a muscle car. This was a friggin' big-block GTO with a turbocharger and nitro. Made a girl feel really special. It made up for any lack of a "welcome aboard" moment. And made up for some of the dust that still coated her like an oil slick.

No wonder they'd had her stand in dirt beyond the field lights and kept the rotors going. This bird was not a sight meant for casual eyes. She had to take a pull on a water bottle from her thigh pocket, rinse a bit, and spit out the door and into the roaring wind to clear the last of the grit from her mouth.

Clear of the airfield, her eyes were adjusting to the night. Lola could make out the stars above. And the complete lack of lights below. Primitive agricultural. As soon as you were away from the cities, fires and oil lamps were the only nighttime lights Afghanistan had going for it. It wasn't just dark down there, it was a blank slate visible only by night-vision gear.

Inside the Hawk, she could make out just enough in the darkness to identify the miniguns in front of both of the crew chiefs who lived their lives facing sideways and craning their necks out the gunner's windows. If they were using the standard setup, the guy who'd helped her aboard would be a dead-on gunner who could also fix a helicopter blindfolded, and whoever hunched over the right-hand gun would be the chief mechanic who could also shoot better than most people in the Army.

Copilot forward to the left and pilot forward to the right. That was her seat. But it wasn't. She bit her lip, really hoping she'd made the right choice. She'd given up the pilot's seat in a combat search and rescue bird to fly copilot in SOAR.

Two years of training before they'd let her aboard for a mission, and that was after she'd already been flying for seven years. She'd thought that was ridiculous when she heard about it. Two years later she wondered if that had been enough time. Even from combat search and rescue, CSAR, the jump to SOAR was like going straight from a tricycle to NASCAR. It had been a hard two years.

"Y'all welcome aboard, Chief Warrant 2 Lola LaRue."

She could see the pilot turn his helmet slightly toward the gap between his and the copilot's seat. The

voice wasn't the guy who'd helped her, Tim Maloney. Normally lousy with names, his had stuck easily. That meant it was the pilot speaking.

This guy was clearly trouble. He said her name in the drawn-out slurring way so many had before. Not even the accent was real, faked Texas. Badly faked.

So, if it was gonna play that way, it was time to "pull on her soldier."

"Yes, sir. Appreciate the lift."

"Lola LaRue." He said it again like he was rolling it around on his tongue.

Shit! was the only thought she could come up with. She'd really hoped SOAR was above this. More than hoped, believed. *Stupid, girl. Really damn stupid.*

"Somebody named y'all that?"

Upbeat and chipper, LaRue. "My daddy. I think he wanted me to grow up to be a stripper." She'd discovered that taking it head-on was the only thing that worked.

"Looks like y'all've done gone and disappointed him and probably many other men besides. 'Specially if you're even half as purdy as your file photo says you is." He actually drawled "purdy" into some weird kind of over-Texas-saturated slur.

"Disappointed the hell out of him. And I look way better than my stupid Army photo." It was true and to hell with him.

A deep chuckle.

She swallowed hard and dug down into her Creole badass, street-girl soul for the serious load of rude she'd be needing to launch. A deep breath to tighten her gut. *Okay, here it comes. Stupid joke about maybe a private performance, or maybe just a little one for his crew, or—*

"Well done, Chief Warrant. Welcome to SOAR." His words now sharp and crisp, untraceable except as Army.

Lola had to bite down hard on the sharp retort she had loaded in the chamber and ready to fire. Best she managed was an, "Uh, thank you, sir." A test of her patience or just messing with her head for the hell of it?

Tim cut back in using an airline voice. "Your pilot tonight is Major Mark Henderson, lovingly called 'Viper' by his crew and the few unfortunates who survived—"

"Very, very few," the pilot offered in his normal voice.

"Facing," Tim continued without missing a beat, "the wrong end of this bird."

Major Mark Henderson. Holy crap! This wasn't a muscle car, this was a notorious weapon of death wielded by the most decorated officer of SOAR. His reputation was sterling. He must have just been teasing her, though he wasn't known for a sense of humor.

"Your copilot," Tim continued as if first steward on a 787 full of tourists, getting that bored flight attendant tone so perfect that she had trouble not laughing, "is the famous and dashing handsome Captain Richardson. For your entertainment in the cabin you are joined by Mr. recently married Big Bad John, really is his name. Scout's honor. And you thought Lola LaRue was bad. I'm called, by those who know me, Crazy Tim Maloney. John and I are the best crew chiefs in the sky."

"My wife might have a thing or two to say about that. And those who don't know you call you odiferous." Big, deep voice wrapped around a low laugh. Must belong to the massive dude seated before the starboard-side mini-gun. How did someone that big even fit into a Black Hawk gunner's seat?

“Ignore him, Ms. LaRue. John’s awesome. It’s that his wife is just plain scary. You’ll be meeting her later. Tonight the *Viper*, that would be this finest helicopter in the U.S. Army, not to be confused with ‘Viper’ your pilot, will be flying you over such scenic sights as the village of Mehtar Lam—”

“Which you won’t see because,” Big John explained, “though they have electricity, it’s been offline for three days.”

“The pleasant little hornet’s nest of Loy Kalay will be given a wide berth...”

“As they tried to fry our behinds last time we flew over there,” the Major filled in. She could hear the easy closeness of the crew. A team that flew together and fought together.

“We anticipate a quiet flight over Asadabad,” Tim continued, “because we’re going nowhere near it.”

Lola waited for a comment from the copilot, but he apparently flew quieter than the rest of the crew. He had yet to speak.

“Estimated time to arrival is thirty-five minutes, so food and beverage service will be preempted for this flight. Our in-flight movie is an oldie but a goodie about an invisible six-foot-tall heli-pilot who—”

“*Viper*, this is *Wrench*.” A radio call came over the headset in her helmet as clearly as if someone had been sitting right next to her, except some of the high end was missing. Encrypted transmission.

“Air Mission Commander Archibald Stevenson III, how’s married life, you old cuss?” Major Henderson’s voice, now filled with bonhomie, didn’t quite hide the professionalism.

“You tell me, Major. Your wife is in it again.”

Were all of these guys married? Slim pickin’s for a girl fresh from training.

“Crap!” The humor was gone. “Heading?”

Already the twin GE turboshaft engines were winding up closer to the yellow line.

“310 will get you on the right track...”

The chopper twisted to the left and roared to life as five thousand horsepower poured into the main rotors before the AMC had even finished speaking.

“...you’re twenty minutes out.”

“Not for long,” she heard the Major growl over the intercom.

“The nearest fast mover is thirty minutes out.”

That meant all of the jets were on the ground tonight.

Lola heard the rotors deepen another couple notes of pitch as he twisted them for more speed, and the turbines spun up to a pitch that she knew was well into the yellow zone. Just barely below redline.

“LaRue, you wearing armor?” Any sign of banter gone from his voice. Pure steel remained.

“Full vest, sir, but not loaded into the flight suit.” Kevlar plates front, back, and under the arms. Itched and rubbed when you were traveling but she’d pulled them on before landing in the “zone.” Armor was just something you did in Iraq and Afghanistan, something you did all the time. She tugged up the back collar so that no one slipped a nasty surprise between the vest and the back of her helmet. But her arm and leg armor was stacked in the bottom of the duffel clipped to the net behind her.

“Best we’ve got. Tim, get her up and running on the M60. Set it on your side. You’re responsible for her.”

Lola considered responding that she was responsible just fine for herself and had been since she'd run away from home at fourteen. But the Major's current tone of voice made it clear why he was nicknamed "Viper." At the moment he sounded bloody dangerous. She wasn't going to mess with that.

The shadow that had helped her aboard was beside her in an instant, working on the cargo net. She grabbed Tim's arm to help keep him steady so that he could work with both hands. She'd been right. Really serious weight-lifter's muscle. Warm too, a heat against her hand that had chilled unnoticed with the night and the altitude. He was probably married like all the others, which would explain the politeness. Some woman had trained him well.

Too bad. She liked strong. Appreciated a muscle man in her muscle car. She liked funny too. Mixed in with polite, that could be fun, as long as he wasn't too polite.

The rest of the story came in by the time they had the big machine gun set up on a swivel in the middle of the cargo-bay door. They also rigged a strap so that she had some chance of remaining in place behind the M60 during sharp maneuvering.

Major Emily Beale, flying protective escort on a "meat" mission, a pick-up-a-load-of-troops-here-and-dump-them-off-over-there mission, had watched her load of "meat" be dumped right into a grinder. Despite the best intelligence, they'd landed two full squads of U.S. Rangers just below a Taliban camp in the front range of the Hindu Kush mountains. The ground-pounders were taking heavy fire from a seriously armed

enemy. Emily Beale was trying to break it up, but one of the transports had been hammered out of the sky and the whole operation was going to hell.

"Popping one," Lola called out and kicked a single round out of the M60. A satisfying jolt against her palms as the hammer pounded home and drove a single round into the side of a passing mountain. The belt of ammunition jerked forward one position so fast she probably wouldn't have seen it in broad daylight, never mind at night.

Been a long time since she'd sat in back, at least a year, and that had been a training flight. She'd always been hot for the pilot's seat, ready to really rock and roll, not just shoot at things picked out by the pilot.

Tim had also patched in a data feed for her helmet. She swung her head around to get used to the tactical display across the inside of her visor. The camera system projected an all-around view outside the helicopter in a thousand shades of gray. It sensed the direction she was looking and projected the image from outside cameras in precisely that position, both horizontally and vertically. On top of that were dozens of symbols that she'd need for fire control.

A whole sector was missing. The blankness irritated her until she realized it was the piloting information that she didn't need until she was in her proper seat.

Dead of night, and she could see the rolling hills that had surrounded the airbase quickly shift into towering mountain terrain. She'd certainly seen it enough during SAR flights, but search and rescue was about cleanup, not about bringing the hammer.

Tonight, they were the DAP Hawk hammer.



Lola cursed under her breath when they were close enough to see the battle. Constant streams of tracer green death hammered down from a helicopter that danced and twirled like a ballerina gone mad. The bright streak of a rocket-propelled grenade slithered upward, but the chopper wasn't there and the RPG went wide. The dancing chopper had to be the other DAP Hawk.

She cursed again.

Lola had thought she was a top pilot now, knew she was. But no way could she do what that other DAP pilot was doing. Hell, she could barely keep track of it. That had to be Major Beale. While her husband Viper Henderson was the most decorated SOAR aviator, she had the reputation for being the best.

A nearby hiss, just one notch below a roar, brought Lola's attention back to their situation. Four rockets shot forward from the *Viper's* own FFAR pod with a sharp sizzle. Her makeshift gun mount was not limited like the miniguns. The minis had stops so that you couldn't shoot your own armament where it stuck out on the chopper's side pylons or chop up your own rotors spinning above you like a room's ceiling. She had to remember to be careful. A glance showed the rockets raining down around the origin point of the RPG.

The explosion bloomed and sent a small fireball flowing skyward.

"Whoo-eee!" Crazy Tim yelled out. "Who brought the weenies? Time for a roast."

A couple of dazzling bursts as the baddies' armament

blew up. She saw three, four, five figures running or crawling away from the center of the explosion.

"Kick 'em in the buns!"

She and Tim opened up at the same time. His tracer-laden green buzz-saw of destruction and her own steady hammer pounded into bad guys, cleaning up the work begun by the rockets.

Big Bad John's minigun pounded out the other side of the chopper at more targets. The minis didn't have the ta-ta-tat sound of her machine gun. They howled like the largest and meanest vacuum cleaner ever built. Their electric motors wailing and the fifty-plus supersonic rounds a second roaring like a freight train. It was an eerie sound of the unleashing of death.

Causing the demise of at least one RPG nest, they too were now a target of interest to the baddies. Her tactical display started showing gunfire coming their direction. The array of microphones around the fuselage gathered and computed the most likely point of fire. She pounded short bursts down into the dark at target after target identified merely by crosshairs and a small circle on the inside of her visor.

At one point she blinked and her vision shifted to the outside world beyond the display. A nightmare landscape of soaring peaks, impossibly narrow valleys, and the flashes of attack and counterattack filled her vision. A vertical terrain shrouded in moonlit glow, black shadows, and a hundred sparks of fire from the muzzle flash of hand weapons.

Another blink returned her focus to the inside of her visor, and she saw a mortar track across the tactical display as it launched skyward. Even as the shell descended,

Tim wiped out the mortar crew. The explosive landed against the downed transport bird. Figures dove out the other side of the bird and into the night. Figures with the small infrared reflectors on their sleeves indicating they were friendlies. Even as the bird caught fire, the pilot and copilot scrambled clear, one more dragged than moving under his own power.

“Major,” she started to call out. Every instinct of her CSAR background was driving her toward that spot, no matter how ugly the battle.

“I see it. Can’t!” was all he replied, his voice tight as he rolled them through a heavy-gee maneuver. He flung them down into the canyon where the latest attack had come from.

She shut up and followed the flow of battle as well as she could with only a back-ender’s tactical display. As copilot she was used to receiving far more information in overlapping graphics and visual enhancements. She was also used to having a broader view of the overall scope of the battle with a front-seater’s view.

As a gunner, she had to simply trust that the pilot was making the best use of his assets by the targets that he made available to her side of the craft. Of course, as a pilot, you had to trust that your back-enders could follow through on what you gave them. The Major was giving their side of the Black Hawk a lot of opportunity. At first she’d thought it was because of having two guns mounted on their side of the craft.

But the more she watched, the more she understood that Tim was a master with his M134, wielding the mini-gun with brilliant acumen and immense effectiveness. He compensated for the Major’s twists and turns as if he

knew what was coming before the Major did. His lead for the helicopter’s airspeed was flawless. She felt as if she were better and more competent simply for gunning alongside him.

Despite the two DAP Hawks and the one transport bird still aloft, it still took half an hour or maybe an hour more to scour the area clean. Time blurred with firing, reloading. Dodging out and back. Waiting for someone hiding to foolishly make a break for it.

Wrench, the married Air Mission Commander Archibald somebody, guided the air and ground troops on threats and opportunities that could only be seen from far above. Whoever he was, he too was damn good at his job. A master of tactics, he appeared to anticipate the enemy’s moves as easily as Tim anticipated the helicopter’s.

Lola let herself settle into the adrenal-hyperawareness where a thousand hours of training had taught her to blend tactical displays, helicopter motion, the AMC’s guidance, and her own judgment into a single lethal flow.

At long last, the transport Hawk ducked in and took out the injured, but the ground-pounders stayed. Moving fast, the squads faded into the landscape and were moving on before the local militia could recover and reinforce.

The Major sent a final rocket salvo into the burning transport chopper, ensuring its complete destruction. Nothing left for any bad guys to salvage.

“Thanks, honey.” A smooth voice, so calm that Lola, for a moment, thought it might be a recording of a woman’s voice.

“My pleasure, babe,” the Major replied.

“We should do this more often.”

More often? Lola was limp as a rag from the pounding of battle and the shaking of the gun. Always knowing that the next round could find her and not even having the time to worry about it. The adrenaline letdown was already making her hazy.

She dug an energy bar out of a thigh pocket as the Major leaned the chopper on its side and turned for what must be home. The move was so abrupt that the bar floated above Lola’s palm for a moment. Before she could grab it, the sharp turn and dive sent it tumbling out the open cargo door and falling toward the dark landscape below.

She watched the bright foil catch the light of breaking dawn she hadn’t noticed sneaking over the horizon.

Checking one pocket and then the other unearthed nothing useful. She hadn’t restocked after pilfering from her emergency rations during the forty-three hours in transit from Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Without food, she knew the adrenaline rush would descend into a nasty little headache. Great. Just what she wanted on her first day at a new post.

She set the safety on the M60 and locked it into resting position with more violence than necessary. The gun had performed fine. Her sudden peevishness wasn’t its fault. Lola had been in transit too long, then flown into battle as a gunner, not a pilot. Back-enders didn’t trust officers, ever. And here she was on Day One treading on their sacred turf. They’d probably turn out to be territorial, hazing, never-forgive-you-for-intruding-on-their-space types who—

A bright paper packet was floating just beyond her

visor. For a surreal moment she thought the energy bar she’d dropped had come back to her, somehow falling up as the Major beelined for base.

Then common sense intervened. Tim Maloney had noticed her actions and offered one of his own bars. Paper wrapped, not foil. Right, foil might have too big a radar signature.

She took it. Too wiped to do more than nod her thanks. Rather than a nasty back-ender, yet more proof of decent guy.

Chapter 2

“AIR BASE” WAS FAR TOO GRAND A TERM TO DESCRIBE the SOAR base in Bati, Pakistan. Lola assessed her new base of operations as they slipped down through the morning light, swinging wide over the village that stretched a mile along the narrow river.

On a rise to the east, on the boundary where land shifted from houses and irrigated fields to arid soil and an endless flat plain of dust, huddled an old, concrete soccer stadium. Dull gray with flaking whitewash. Not quite the sort of home a girl always dreamed of.

A ring of guards, Army Rangers, perched along the top row of the seating, all facing outward very attentively. Clearly not a friendly place to have a base. That U.S. Army helicopters were squatting in Pakistan at all meant that some strange negotiations had happened at a level way above her pay grade. The U.S. and Pakistan governments were barely on speaking terms, yet here they were.

The field itself was an inventory catalog of the birds that SOAR flew. Two of the big, twin-rotor Chinooks lurked down at one end. An array of tents beyond made up what must be the main camp huddle.

Midfield was taken up by a half-dozen Little Birds. The MH-6s were the wasps of the unit. Small, fast, and nasty. Pilot and copilot, plus either a decent array of weapons or four passengers who sat on benches outside of the helicopter because there was no room inside.

Down at the other end of the field was another small cluster of tents and a half-dozen Black Hawks. Six transport birds each able to move a dozen troops and all of their field gear. Also, room for their two birds, and the blank spot just big enough for the bird they'd left burning on the ground.

Between the edge of the field and the concrete bleachers ran a wide running track. Most of it was covered with helicopters and at either end by tents, but a path had been left open. Even now she could see a couple of grunts out for a run around the track. Clear message, nothing to do here but fly and run. Probably enough of the former that the latter didn't have time to get too dull.

This time she waited for the blades to spin down and the worst of the dust to settle before jumping down.

She landed true, but she crumpled to the ground. When she tried to stand, pain from her leg flashed bright stars behind her winced-closed eyelids.

Someone was beside her in a moment.

Any attempts to declare she was fine were ignored, first by the others who jumped down from her own Black Hawk and then from the other bird which had landed next to them.

She shut her mouth when she spotted the red stain and hole in her pant leg. She flexed her foot.

The pain spiked and twisted, but the foot moved and the pain stayed on the surface.

“Just a graze,” she managed through gritted teeth. She had enough training from her CSAR work to be an aid rather than a hindrance in a medical situation. “Some antiseptic, a bit of glue, and a bandage, and this

should be fine,” she announced for anyone who could be bothered to listen, which totaled absolutely no one.

She went to stand just as someone leaned down to pick her up. She felt a thump through her helmet followed by a loud curse as she dropped back to sit in the dust.

Shoving up her visor and looking over her shoulder, a vista of bright red greeted her. In the growing daylight she could now see the weight-lifter guy clearly. Tim. His hair crew cut, his skin a natural sun-kissed shade made deeper by the sun, and his nose flowing bright red where she’d smashed it with the back of her helmet.

A huge man loomed up beside him, the starboard-side gunner, and stuffed a rag in Tim’s face, none too gently.

Tim yelped. “Damn it! Go easy, John. I think she broke it.”

Ouch! She really hoped not. Especially after he’d been nice to her.

The big man flashed a grin almost as large as he was. “‘Bout time you spilled some blood for the Black Adders.”

“Black Adders?” Lola stripped her own helmet as some corpsman squatted before her. In moments, he’d cut back the pant leg and revealed exactly what she expected. A thin groove and blood already clotting. She’d need new pants and have to really wash out the sock. Not much more. Certainly less blood than Tim. He sat in the dirt, his head leaned back against the Black Hawk’s cargo deck as he held the bloody cloth to his nostrils.

By now, both crews were gathered around her. Here was her “Welcome to SOAR” moment, sprawled in the dirt with a bunch of guys staring down at her. Only they weren’t all guys. *Do not*, she ordered herself, *do not squirm*.

She distracted herself by inspecting the crews that were in turn inspecting their latest addition, like they were a neighborhood welcoming committee really unhappy about who just bought the house next door.

Lola could identify Tim and Big John. And when the knock-’em-dead blond slipped up beside the equally handsome, blue-eyed Major with the distinctly amused grin, she knew she’d spotted Major Emily Beale and Viper Henderson. Damn, their kids were gonna be something amazing to look at.

The two other women had taken one look at her and turned back to shut down their bird. So, these were the first three women of SOAR. Not exactly the warmest of welcomes. Well, they were going to have to deal. She made four.

The two copilots were already working on their post-engagement reports, flight suits peeled down with the arms tied around their waists, white T-shirts clinging to their frames, damp with the heat. If the weather was this hot in mid-March, what was summer like? Both guys were nice enough to look at, but the excitement of a little blood was insufficient to distract them from their jobs.

“Black Adders.” Big John flashed her another one of his big, easy smiles. “Those lucky enough to fly with Viper Henderson and his wife. That’s what you are now, a Black Adder.”

“We’ll see.” One of the women paused long enough in cleaning her weapon to glare down at Lola. “Gotta have more than a lousy scrape to be a Black Adder.”

Stung by the automatic dismissal, Lola pushed to her feet. Resisting the urge to steady herself on the shoulder of the corpsman who even now was taping on the final

bandage, she stepped over to the Sergeant. She looked down at the woman, a full head shorter than Lola. She had long, Asian black hair with a single, dyed-blond streak, narrow eyes, and a brick-shithouse body. Real breasts, something Lola had always wanted and never grown.

Lola moved up until she was toe to toe with the woman.

“Sergeant, I got way more *couilles* than you ever dreamed of. And that’s Black Adder Sir to y’all. We be clear here?” She could feel the Creole flowing out of her. She bit down on her tongue before she could go too far. She knew that once her own temper was really rolling, it would be hard to reel it back in before it burned her.

She could see the woman’s temper rising fast and hard. *Well done. Screwing up the team before she’d even stepped aboard.* She’d just turned a bit of derision into a battlefield. Well, to hell with her.

Before she could let loose another round, the other crew chief stepped up. Hazel eyes, a cascade of soft brunette hair around a quiet face.

“Give her a break, Kee. She’s flown with me before. She’s alright. And you know how long a haul it is from the States.”

Lola recognized the voice. She’d never seen the woman in daylight without a helmet, but she knew her. Sergeant Connie Davis. Yeah, they’d flown together, once, on a mission that she’d been told she was never allowed to mention to anyone, ever. She’d been on a SOAR training mission in Germany when an emergency call had gone out for a CSAR crew. That combat search and rescue mission was also the last time she’d flown as pilot-in-command.

“Hello, Sergeant Davis.” The quiet mechanic had rarely spoken as they flew together, but they’d gotten it done.

“Chief Warrant LaRue.” Connie Davis returned to her weapon as if nothing had happened.

Sergeant Kee last-name-unknown glared at her as she stripped down the top of the flight suit and tied the arms around her waist with such a hard tug that Lola winced in empathetic pain. Then she turned, making it clear Lola wasn’t worth even dirt. Well, maybe that much. If she were lucky.

Lola’s first instinct was to tackle the little bitch and solve it here and now, but she knew better than to follow her first instinct. Had learned that the hard way. Especially with someone of lower rank. Officers weren’t supposed to pound the crap out of enlisted, no matter how much they deserved it.

Still, the whole holier-than-thou attitude pushed her buttons real damn hard.

She turned back to the others. Tim still leaned his head back against the cargo deck as the corpsman inspected his nose. His big friend hovering protectively despite his dismissive words.

“Not broken,” the corpsman announced. “You’re almost done bleeding.”

“Yeah,” Big John rumbled, “stop whining. You such a wimp, boy.” You could hear the affection in the way he said it. These guys clearly had some serious history. They’d been through it together.

The Majors were still watching her. She felt herself straightening as she faced them, could feel the pull of the bandage across the graze along her calf.

Major Henderson was still smiling at the little display. It wasn't overt, but he wasn't the pure steel of leg-end either. He struck Lola as a man who found humor in any situation, despite his reputation. Well, perhaps any situation other than someone shooting at his wife.

Major Emily Beale was wholly unreadable.

Lola snapped a salute, as clean and sharp as she could with her bloody pant leg cut open and Afghanistan dust penetrating every pore of her exhausted being.

"Chief Warrant 2 Lola LaRue reporting for duty, ma'am."

The Major simply stared back at her with those crystalline blue eyes.

Lola retained the salute for several long seconds before remembering. Then she lowered her arm hesitantly, remembering too late that you didn't salute in the field. A salute could tell a distant sniper which one to aim for.

When her hand at last returned to her side, the Major nodded slowly.

"Welcome to the Black Adders." She then slid on mirrored Ray-Bans exactly like her husband's. Suddenly there were four of Lola staring back at her.

Beale and Henderson turned and were gone, taking only moments to disappear into the shimmer of heat already rising from the packed earth of the abandoned soccer field.

Lola let out a sharp breath and turned for her gear. Only Tim remained, his head still tilted back, the red cloth still covering much of his face.

She could see Big Bad John Wallace walking away with Sergeant Connie Davis. Holding hands.

"What the hell?"



Tim opened his eyes that he'd kept closed against the bright desert sun because there was no way to put on his sunglasses with how his nose felt. About the size of his mama's favorite soup pot.

He noticed where the new girl was focused. John and Connie. Who'd have ever guessed? Connie'd sure pissed off John enough in the beginning. Half a year back Tim would've bet good money there'd be death before marriage, and now you couldn't turn around without them being all lovey-dovey. *Sad state of affairs, my man. Sad state. Bachelors hitting the mat right and left. Down for the count and, even worse, looking all happy about it.*

"Married two months. Only way to keep 'em apart is when the Majors assigned them to different choppers."

He watched her back as Chief Warrant LaRue shed her vest and peeled down her flight suit against the rising morning heat. A thin, white tank top outlined strong shoulders and that sharp taper to a soldier's slender waist. But a woman's hips. Not some anorexic nymph, just a shapely woman in fine shape. Damn fine shape. And that cascade of thick, dark chestnut hair curling down past those strong shoulders. Nonregulation hair wasn't all that common in SOAR, but it was allowed and LaRue's mane was a serious statement in that direction.

Serious eye candy from behind. She'd made SOAR, which meant she was an awesome flier, though Major Beale would make her better. Be fun to watch those lessons. But he wasn't gonna complain for a second about sharing a camp with a woman so easy on the eyes.

Then she turned to look down at him where he still leaned back against the side of the chopper. Skin naturally the color of the most perfect summerlong tan and a face that stopped him cold.

He could see her incredible figure, hard to miss from where he sat at her feet looking up at her, all sleek and lean and perfect. But her face. He didn't want to look away from that face for a moment.

He knew her, but didn't. She had a face that a man, having seen it even once, could never forget. But where? When?

Poland.

He'd never been closer than thirty meters across a wind-torn cruiser's deck, but it had to be her. It wasn't just her beauty or her amazing wave of flowing hair. It was how she stood. Something radiated from her that he couldn't turn away from.

She studied him with narrowed eyes, then eased off and smiled down at him.

"You're sweet."

"What?" but he didn't need to ask. She'd been eye candy from behind, but from the front she was incredible. And she'd caught him staring stone cold. Tim could always be cool around a woman. Mirrored shades on, T-shirt with the sleeves and collar torn off, muscles on show—the women flocked and he didn't complain. And he treated them all nice enough that he never heard them complain one little bit either. He was always smooth, even, steady.

He reached in his mind... and came up with nothing. No smooth line. No easy shrug. No Mr. Casual. All he could do was watch as her eyes shifted from curious to

friendly. She tugged a pair of sunglasses out of a thigh pocket and slipped them on. Then a crazy smile pulled up at one corner of her mouth, dimpling the cheek on her left side. A burst of laughter came forth like from an insane elf.

"Come on." She offered a hand. "Get up out of the dirt and show me where to get food and a shower, in that order."

He took the offered hand, and though his nose throbbled as he made it to his feet, it didn't start bleeding again. Regrettably, he still wore his flight gloves, but he could feel the strength. Long, lean strength in fine-fingered hands.

He turned to help her with her gear, but she pulled on fifty-plus pounds of pack and slung her duffel over one shoulder with the ease of a soldier's long practice. Slender and strong. Stunning and funny.

Tim was so screwed.

Big John was gonna laugh his ass off.