

Chapter 1

SERGEANT CONNIE DAVIS FELT THE METALLIC STUTTER before she heard it. It broke the rhythm of the music that usually floated in the background of her thoughts when flying.

She began counting seconds... four, five.

Again.

A third time to be sure.

“Major?” she called on the Black Hawk helicopter’s intercom.

“What!” Major Emily Beale’s voice made it damn clear that whatever Connie wanted had better be more important than the firefight going on all around them.

The copilot and the other crew chief, Staff Sergeant John Wallace, kept their silence. It surprised Connie that she’d heard it before Big John. He was the most amazing mechanic she’d ever met.

“We have,” Connie estimated quickly, “about five minutes until lift failure. We’re losing a main blade.” And without that, ten thousand pounds of U.S. Army helicopter and her four crew members were going to fall out of the sky far too fast.

“You sure?”

Connie leaned out the left-side gunner’s window to unleash another spate of fire from her minigun on the bunkered-in machine gun nest that was giving them such trouble tonight. A hailstorm of spent brass spewed out

the window as she pounded sixty-eight rounds a second of tracer-laden hell down on the aggressors. More raw power than the cannons in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*.

For the three long seconds that the nest was in her range, the tracer-green fire whipped and coiled across the sky like a nightmare snake. In three seconds she hurled two kilos of lead. Four and a half pounds didn't sound like much until you pumped it along as three thousand separate pieces moving at three times the speed of sound. She raked her flying buzz saw back and forth twice over the enemies' position in the time they were in view.

"She's right. Maybe ten minutes if you ride it soft," Big John chimed in. He might not have caught the problem, but as soon as she pointed it out he'd found the vibration rippling through the frame of the Black Hawk helicopter, had counted the seconds, and he knew.

It was her first time in full combat with him. But already he was a man she'd learned to really admire during training flights. A man she had real trouble not noticing. She kept finding herself watching him when he wasn't aware. Big John Wallace fully deserved his nickname and was also perhaps the most handsome man she'd flown with in a half-dozen years aloft.

That she was a step ahead of him would have been satisfying in any less hazardous situation. One look out the window was enough to wipe any thought of a smile entirely out of her mind.

Even at night, the Hindu Kush mountains of north-east Afghanistan looked ugly. And tonight's mission had taken their flight in deep, way past five minutes to safety, or even ten. Base lay forty-five minutes away,

with four good blades, and the area around that ranked almost as unfriendly as the people shooting at them now.

They might be the Night Stalkers of U.S. Special Forces, the fliers who ruled the night. But if they went down here, they wouldn't be ruling the night for very long despite being the toughest gunship ever launched into the night sky.

"*Viper*, this is *Vengeance*." The Major, the first woman ever in the Night Stalkers, had long since proved her ability as a pilot and commander when fast decisions were needed.

Helicopters never flew alone into combat, and tonight's mission had paired them with *Viper*.

"We're losing a blade and running for home. Won't make it." Then she took one last turn, wide rather than her normal hard slam, giving Big John a final chance at clearing out the problem they'd been sent to solve. The copilot fired four rockets, and whatever they opened up, John drove home.

The shock wave hit them hard enough that Connie half feared they'd lose the blade now. ...Four, five, shudder, still right on cue. Okay for the moment. She puffed out a breath she hadn't known she was holding as the Major turned south by southeast.

They were through the smaller of two mountain passes while everyone on the ground remained distracted by the massive explosion that continued to roll skyward behind them. No one on the ground remembered to fire at the speeding helicopter until too late.

"Roger, *Vengeance*." The radio crackled in her helmet. "Heavy One is moving, thirty minutes."

Major Beale ran down the throttle to ease the load

on the blade. They stayed low to avoid any stress from attempting a climb. That meant flying low through the next, very well-defended pass, assuming they didn't fold up and crash before then. Even with a good rotor, they'd already be up in high-hot limits. The combination of heat and altitude really knocked efficiency out of helicopters, the air was just too thin. With a bad rotor, they didn't dare climb out of harm's way.

The troops defending the pass less than a minute ahead were very unfriendly.

Connie thumped the ammo can with her boot, barely a quarter full. She opened her gun and tossed the ammo belt loose, snaking it back into the can. She snapped down the lid and pulled out a fresh belt from a new can.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Big John, who sat back to back four feet away on the other side of the chopper's bay, making the same choice. Once again, they were in some sort of perfect synchronicity.

...three, four. Not good. She leaned out the window to spot the pass ahead. They were down in the gut of it. Open to fire from all elevations of both sides.

"Can I—"

"No." She and John cut off the Major in unison, almost making Connie laugh. No climbing, not on this rotor blade.

Connie switched on the night-vision goggles feature of her helmet. She'd turned off the NVGs to avoid being blinded by the rocket flare at the firefight. Now she needed any advantage she could find to see in the dark.

A wash of the world gone green projected across the inside of her visor. Leaning out the gunnery window to look ahead, she watched for the bright shimmer of

gunfire or the sharp glow of running stick figures as fighters scrambled for position. They were there. A dozen or more. And several were higher than they were. She couldn't attack them, couldn't shoot upward, unless she wanted to take out what remained of their own rotor blades. Helicopters were designed to shoot down at things, not up.

"Major?"

"Stop asking and just speak!" Emily Beale was less steady than usual. Hard to blame her.

Connie swallowed hard and pictured it again in her head. She saw no better answer. It was either bet on the poor aim of the many gunners ahead of them or bet that the Major's reputation as the best Black Hawk pilot in all of the U.S. Army's Special Operations Aviation Regiment had been earned, rather than merely granted for being the first woman in SOAR.

"A roll is a neutral-gee maneuver." A slow barrel roll—flying straight ahead while rolling the copter over sideways, upside down, and back to right side up—actually placed very little stress on the airframe or rotor blades, if done correctly.

"Oh shit. She's right," John confirmed in that wonderful deep voice of his, making it almost sound rational even as the Major groaned.

Was it an act like this by some crazy or equally desperate pilot that had killed Connie's father? Why had she mentioned it?

"John, you'll be first. Then Connie."

Was this about to place her in the same unknown grave as her dad? Connie Davis. Just a name on the Night Stalker monument at SOAR headquarters. A short

note in a secret file: Lost. Pilot, copilot, two crew chiefs. No survivors.

The Major aimed for the right-hand wall of the pass, almost head on. Moments before they would have hit the cliff face, the Major slewed the chopper back to the left. But not in a hard turn. In a long, slow roll.

The ground so close they nearly thumped their wheels on the rock passing at a hundred and fifty knots. At 175 miles per hour, death was only the slightest error away.

That was the moment Connie knew for a fact that Major Emily Beale had earned her reputation as the very best. Beginning the roll so close to the cliff wall reduced their availability as a target to those on either side of the pass. And it took advantage of the ground effect decreasing the stress on the blades. The Major had accepted the idea, planned the maneuver, and executed it all on fifteen seconds notice.

As the right side of the helicopter lifted, John's gun had a clear field of fire on the cliff face flashing by. He used the precious moments to rake the walls far and wide while Connie looked straight down at the ground racing by, going weightless in her seat.

They were so close that she watched the tips of the rotor blades swinging past sharp rock with bare inches to spare. She pushed back into her seat, her instincts taking control and trying to shove her body even another inch from impending disaster. The static electricity of the rotors striking dust in the air glittered in her NVGs, a green arc of brilliant sparks. So close to the rock, the sparks appeared to be inside it.

But with air-show perfection, the Major continued the roll, edging clear of the wall so that she didn't strike

a blade. Now upside down, Connie had a disoriented moment to spot any fire John had missed. She only tagged one on the wall racing by so closely before she faced straight up.

In the moment of rolling silence, as she stared at the heavens, she recalled hearing John's gun fire just a few short bursts while they were inverted. That meant any remaining dirty work on the left-hand wall of the pass was going to be her issue as they rolled back to level.

Anticipating the moment, she leaned forward and drove down the triggers the moment she saw rock instead of sky. An arc of tracer-green fire poured from the six spinning muzzles. She swept her M134 back and forth as the chopper rolled, taking her aim at the cliff face flashing by in the night. Enemy rounds spattered against the airframe with sharp thwacks barely detectable over the roar of her minigun.

The threat detector flashed target information on the inside of her visor, and with instinct born of a thousand hours of practice, she swept the gun over position after position, cutting them apart faster than they could duck and cover.

And then the *Vengeance* was through the pass. The targets were falling astern at eighty meters per second.

Beyond the pass, the front range of the Hindu Kush mountains broke like a thousand-meter-high wave, collapsing in deep rolls and turbulent clusters. The flat horizon of desert formed in the distance.

...two, three. A distance they weren't going to make.

"Now, Major," John announced. There was no questioning the man, not when he used that voice. Six foot four and mountain strong with a deep voice to match. It

was a wonder he could cram into the Hawk's crew chief seat, but he did.

Connie had never felt short, but the top of her head would fit under his chin, comfortably. Odd thought.

And he was right. Now, or they were going to fall from the sky.

"This is *Vengeance*. Going down. Repeat. Going down. Beacon hot."

It was a risk. Lately, the bad guys were getting their hands on night-vision gear. A lot of it was first-generation crap, but even that wouldn't have any trouble finding the brilliant, infrared beacon now flashing atop their chopper.

...One, two. The ground was coming up awfully fast. Connie glanced forward. Best not to interrupt the pilot at the moment, but she wondered at the woman's sanity. Major Emily Beale was a SOAR legend, but they were about to become just another footnote in the bloody history of the Night Stalkers. At her current rate of descent, they were going to dig such a deep hole in the desert that the sand might cover right over their impact crater.

Connie braced for the crash. This one was gonna hurt. And hurt bad. Assuming she was alive afterward to feel it.

Fifty feet up, she felt the shudder as the Major yanked the collective full up and cranked the throttle wide open. A calculated gamble.

The Black Hawk's twin turbines groaned in protest, then over five thousand horsepower roared to life. Connie heard them go right past redline, nearly six thousand. The blades howled in protest as they clawed the air

like mad beasts. She and John chanting a mantra to the blade in unison, "Hang on. Hang on. Hang on."

Twenty feet. Ten. Slowing, five.

Then the blade let go. Twenty feet of laminated polycarbonate arced off into the night. Three blades remained, horribly unbalanced, but before they could turn twice more, the Hawk slammed into the sand. Not even hard enough to ram the shocks against the stops.

The Major dumped power, and the turbines collapsed from scream to cry toward moan. But not fast enough.

Another blade broke but didn't fly free. It slammed against the tail of the chopper, then the cockpit, then the tail again even as the rotor slowed. For ten seconds of held breath, they all waited while it dragged and beat the helicopter as it spun its way to a halt. The final scraping groan of wounded metal told Connie that half the bearings in the rotor head would need replacement and probably the swash plate as well.

"Everyone okay?"

"We're fine." Big John rolled free of his harness. "Now!" he called and snapped a monkey line to the steel loop by the cargo bay door.

Connie had to blink a few times. Was she fine? They weren't dead. They hadn't been killed by the failure of one of these hell-spawn machines. What next? Right, clear the blades.

Her body reacted before her brain fully kicked in. The wonders of all those endless drills.

In moments, she'd grabbed a saw and snapped in her own three-meter line just outside the cargo bay door to ensure she didn't get left behind no matter what happened. Jumping to the sand and closing the door exposed

the built-in toeholds that let her climb up the outside of the Black Hawk helicopter until she met John squatting on the top.

Major Beale and Chief Warrant Officer Clay Anderson stood outside their pilot's doors, FN SCAR rifles unslung from across their chests, watching the night. The IR beacon provided Connie with plenty of light to work by with her NVG visor.

With John on one side and Connie on the other, they set to work, first sawing off the broken stubs of the two shattered blades. The hand saws ripped through the honeycomb of the graphite-epoxy spar, though they slowed down at the titanium erosion-resistant edge. Thankfully, the saws had been designed to make it through in emergency situations.

Viper came roaring in, flashed by close overhead. The sharp sizzle of six rockets and the heavy chug of the M230 30 mm cannon pounded down over the backside of the next rolling hill. The explosion and bloom of smoke and fire roaring beyond the ridge announced the end of someone who'd thought to find easy pickings from a downed American chopper.

Together, she and John grunted the main rotor a quarter turn to get one of the remaining intact blades over the tail. Connie could feel the grind of the ruined bearings fighting every inch. Definitely a new swash plate, maybe the lifters as well.

John rapped his knuckles briefly on the rotor head. Same thought, they'd be replacing both. From almost the first moment they hadn't needed words to communicate.

But the *Vengeance* couldn't get a tow with the other blade pointing forward. Too much danger of it being caught by the headwind and kicked up into the lifting chopper.

The low thud of Heavy One, the massive Chinook helicopter inbound to carry them home, told her they didn't have enough time to unlatch the cut stub and fold it back in line with the tail and then do the same to the forward blade to move it into place for shipping. They needed twenty minutes and they had five. Maybe.

John started swearing about the waste, as they both set to work with their saws.

Viper circled wide to secure a safe perimeter around their craft, both drawing fire and answering it in a very definitive fashion. It felt good knowing that Major Beale's husband Major Henderson, and John's best friend, Sergeant Tim Maloney, were close by watching over them. But the remaining fighters who'd been guarding the pass were on the move and time was running out.

The third blade dropped free and fell aside, even as the four-point lifting harness dropped from the hovering Chinook.

In moments, they had their damaged helicopter latched in and secure. They were airborne and headed back to base before Connie was even fully back in the cabin. She tossed a pair of thermite grenades out the door onto the stack of partial blades as they lifted clear. With a blaze of white fire and shooting sparks, the grenades cooked, then melted most of the blades and fused a patch of sand a dozen feet across into brittle glass.

The machine hadn't killed her this time.

That didn't mean it wouldn't next time.

Chapter 2

BIG JOHN WALLACE PULLED OFF HIS HELMET AND scrubbed his fingers through his sweaty hair, reveling in the sensation. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Sergeant Connie Davis as they and their broken Black Hawk were lowered into their position at the air base. The moment they cleared possible enemy sight lines, she began stripping the equipment.

Not her helmet, not the hot flight suit, not her harness. Always first things first by the book with Sergeant Connie Davis. Her minigun's ammunition belt slotted back into its case, her last round hand-cleared from the minigun's chamber, caught in the air, and stowed in the loose-round bag.

Every move in U.S. Army official order. Every bit of maintenance done as if she were a walking, talking training manual. An attempt to alter any of her actions was met with page and paragraph quoted from memory. He'd stopped checking her on that, mostly. He hadn't tripped her up yet, but he still had hopes.

He'd flown with her on a couple of training missions, but Kee Smith was his usual gunner. Except now she was Kee Stevenson and off having her honeymoon. Go, Archie.

Before Kee, John had thought no one would ever replace Crazy Tim, but even Tim bowed to Kee's marksmanship. And Kee ranked damned cute. Not his type,

but real easy on the eyes, assuming you didn't tick her off and get a punch in one.

Sergeant Connie Davis, on the other hand, while awesomely nice to look at... he had no idea what to think of her. The woman never laughed, never smiled. Built at the U.S. Army factory and shipped to the front with all parts in certified working order.

Not his type at all. Sure she looked like the sitcom dream girl next door, the quiet, smart one. The Kate Jackson of the original *Charlie's Angels*. Taller than the feisty elf that was Kee, but neither the long nor leggy of Major Beale. He was typically drawn to the latter, but there were two issues there. One, Major Beale had married Major Henderson, and two, she was also perhaps the scariest woman alive. A good person as a commanding officer, but lethal at any distance. It was a wonder Major Henderson had survived his courtship. Actually, considering what they'd been through, he almost hadn't.

Kee barely came up to Big John's armpit, while the Major rose well past his shoulder. Connie stood tall enough to rest her head right on his shoulder. Her long hair would fall in its soft waves across...

Connie stared at him square on from three feet away across the Black Hawk's cargo bay.

"Sir?" Her helmet was off and her cascade of brunette hair flowed around her face almost exactly as he'd just imagined it, looking as if she hadn't spent the last six hours flying hot and sweaty under heavy gunfire. Her mirrored Ray-Bans were in place against the sharp light of the desert dawn.

"Sergeant, not 'sir.'" He responded automatically. He wasn't a commissioned officer. He knew he sounded

rude, inconsiderate. Though her eyes were covered, he knew they were a soft hazel and set wide across the bridge of her nose. He also knew that they were the only part of her that indicated someone was home.

Meeting Connie Davis, you wanted to dismiss her as some cute Connie Homemaker. The girl next door brought to life right out of the television screen.

But he'd run into the wrong end of her very keen mechanic's mind more than once. Now she sat there, expressionless and unreadable, waiting for what he needed of her.

Those eyes. Even through sunglasses they pinned his brain somewhere he couldn't readily access. He cleared his throat to make it work. "Nice catch on the stutter." He turned back to clear his own weapon.

He barely heard her quiet reply of, "Thank you, Sergeant," before she exited the chopper.

He cleared the chamber round and stowed the belt. Time to get moving. Connie would probably complete the damage inspection by the time he'd made sure his weapon was cleared and locked. She'd probably have it analyzed and half repaired by the time he even had a chance to look it over.

He was either going to kill the woman with his bare hands or... He had no idea what lay on the other side of the equation.

And he didn't want to know.