

## Chapter 1

*There were few times* that Colonel Michael Gibson of Delta Force appreciated the near-psychotic level of commitment displayed by terrorists, but this was one of those times. If they hadn't been so rigid in even their attire, his disguise would have been much more difficult.

The al-Qaeda terrorist training camp deep in the Yemeni desert required that all of their hundred new trainees dress in white with black headdresses that left only the eyes exposed. The thirty-four trainers were dressed similarly but wholly in black, making them easy to distinguish. They were also the only ones armed, which was a definite advantage.

The camp's dress code made for a perfect cover. The four men of his team wore loose-fitting black robes like the trainers. Lieutenant Bill Bruce used dark contacts to hide his blue eyes and they all had rubbed a dye onto their hands and wrists, the only other uncovered portion of their bodies.

Michael and his team had parachuted into the deep desert the night before and traveled a quick ten kilometers on foot

before burying themselves in the sand along the edges of the main training grounds. Only their faces were exposed, each carefully hidden by a thorn bush.

The midday temperatures had easily blown through a hundred and ten degrees. It felt twice that inside the heavy clothing and lying under a foot of hot sand, but uncomfortable was a way of life in “The Unit,” as Delta Force called itself, so this was of little concern. They’d dug deep enough so that they weren’t simply roasted alive, even if it felt that way by the end of the motionless day.

It was three minutes to sunset, three minutes until the start of Maghrib, the fourth scheduled prayer of the five that were performed daily.

At the instant of sunset, the muezzin began chanting *adhan*, the call to prayer.

Thinking themselves secure in the deep desert of the Abyan province of southern Yemen, every one of the trainees and the trainers knelt and faced northwest toward Mecca.

After fourteen motionless hours—fewer than a dozen steps from a hundred and thirty terrorists—moving smoothly and naturally was a challenge as Michael rose from his hiding place. He shook off the sand and swung his AK-47 into a comfortable position. The four of them approached the prostrate group in staggered formation from the southeast over a small hillock.

The Delta operators interspersed themselves among the other trainees and knelt, blending in perfectly. Of necessity, they all spoke enough Arabic to pass if questioned.

Michael didn’t check the others because that might draw attention. If they hadn’t made it cleanly into place, an alarm would have been raised and the plan would have changed drastically. All was quiet, so he listened to the muezzin’s words and allowed himself to settle into the peace of the prayer.

*Bismi-llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm...*

*In the name of Allah, the most compassionate, the most merciful...*

He sank into the rhythm and meaning of it—not as these terrorists twisted it in the name of murder and warfare, but as it was actually stated. Moments like this one drove home the irony of his long career to become the most senior field operative in Delta while finding an inner quiet in the moment before dealing death.

Perhaps in their religious fervor, the terrorists found the same experience. But what they lacked was flexibility. They wound themselves up to throw away their lives, if necessary, to complete their preprogrammed actions exactly as planned.

For Michael, an essential centering in self allowed perfect adaptability when situations went kinetic—Delta’s word for the shit unexpectedly hitting the fan.

That was Delta’s absolute specialty.

Starting with zero preconceptions in either energy or strategy allowed for the perfect action that fit each moment in a rapidly changing scenario. Among the team, they’d joke sometimes about how Zen, if not so Buddhist, the moment before battle was.

And, as always, he accepted the irony of that with no more than a brief smile at life’s whimsy.

Dealing death was one significant part of what The Unit did.

U.S. SFOD-D, Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, went where no other fighting force could go and did what no one else could do.

Today, it was a Yemeni terrorist training camp.

Tomorrow would take care of itself.

They were the U.S. Army’s Tier One asset and no one, except their targets, would ever know they’d been here. One thing for certain, had The Unit been unleashed on bin Laden, not a soul outside the command structure would know who’d been there. SEAL Team Six had done a top-notch job, but talking about it wasn’t something a Delta operator did. But Joint Special Operations Command’s leader at the time was a former STS member, so the SEALs had gone in instead.

Three more minutes of prayer.

Then seven minutes to help move the trainees into their quarters where they would be locked in under guard for the night, as they were still the unknowns.

Or so the trainers thought.

Three more minutes to move across the compound through the abrupt fall of darkness in the equatorial desert to where the commanders would meet for their evening meal and evaluation of the trainees.

After that the night would get interesting.

*Bismi-llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm...*

*In the name of Allah, the most compassionate, the most merciful...*

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Captain Claudia Jean Casperson of the U.S. Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment—commonly known as the Night Stalkers—finally arrived at the aircraft carrier in the Gulf of Aden after two full days in transit from Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

The Gulf of Aden ran a hundred miles wide and five hundred long between Somalia in Africa and Yemen on the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula. The Gulf connected the Suez Canal and the Red Sea at one end to the Indian Ocean on the other, making it perhaps the single busiest and most hazardous stretch of water on the planet.

Claudia tried to straighten her spine after she climbed off the C-2 Greyhound twin-engine cargo plane. It was the workhorse of carrier onboard delivery and, from the passenger's point of view, the loudest plane ever designed. If not, it certainly felt that way. Shaking her head didn't clear the buzz of the twin Allison T56 engines from either her ears or the pounding of the two big eight-bladed propellers from her body.

A deckhand clad in green, which identified him as a helicopter specialist, met her before she was three steps off the rear ramp.

He took her duffel without a word and started walking away, the Navy's way of saying, "Follow me." She resettled her rucksack across her shoulders and followed like a one-woman jet fighter taxiing along after her own personal ground guidance truck.

Rather than leading her to quarters, the deckhand took her straight to an MH-6M Little Bird helicopter perched on the edge of the carrier's vast deck. That absolutely worked for her. As soon as they had her gear stowed in the tiny back compartment, he turned to her and handed her a slip of paper.

"This is the current location, contact frequency, and today's code word for landing authorization for your ship. They need this bird returned today and you just arrived, so that works out. It's fully fueled. They're expecting you." He rattled off the tower frequency for the carrier's air traffic control tower, saluted, and left her to prep her aircraft before she could salute back.

*Thanks for the warm welcome to the theater of operations.*

This wasn't a war zone. But it wasn't far from one either, she reminded herself. Would saying, "Hi," have killed him? That almost evoked a laugh; she hadn't exactly been chatty herself. Word count for the day so far, one, saying thanks to the C-2 crewman who'd roused her from a bare doze just thirty seconds before landing.

The first thing she did was get into her full kit. She pulled her flight suit on over her clothes, tucking her long blond hair down her back inside the suit. Full armor brought the suit to about thirty pounds. She shrugged on a Dragon Skin vest that she'd purchased herself to give double protection over her torso. Over that, her SARVSO survival vest and finally her FN-SCAR rifle across her chest and her helmet on her head. Total gear about fifty pounds. As familiar as a second skin; she always felt a little exposed without it.

Babe in armor.

Who would have thought a girl from nowhere Arizona would be standing on an aircraft carrier off the Arabian Peninsula in full fighter gear?

If anyone were to ask, she'd tell them it totally rocked. Actually, she'd shrug and acknowledge that she was proud to be here... but she'd be busy thinking that it totally rocked.

The Little Bird was the smallest helicopter in any division of the U.S. military, and that made most people underestimate it. Not Claudia, she loved the Little Bird. It was a tough and sassy craft with a surprising amount of power for its small size. The helo also operated far more independently than any other aircraft in the inventory and, to Claudia's way of thinking, that made the Little Bird near perfect.

The tiny chopper seated two up front and didn't have any doors, so the wide opening offered the pilot an excellent field of view. The fact that it also offered the enemy a wide field of fire is why Claudia wore the secondary Dragon Skin vest. The helicopter could seat two in back, if they were desperate—the space was small enough that Claudia's ruck and duffel filled much of it. On the attack version, the rear space would be filled with cans of ammunition.

In Special Operations Forces, the action teams rode on the outside of Little Birds. This one was rigged with a bench seat along either side that could fold down to transport three combat soldiers on either side.

Claudia wanted an attack bird, not a transport, but she'd fight that fight once she reached her assigned company. For now she was simply glad to be a pilot who'd been deemed "mission ready" for the 160th SOAR.

She went through the preflight, found the bird as clean as every other Night Stalker craft, and powered up for the flight. Less than a hundred miles, so she'd be there in forty minutes. Maybe then she could sleep.

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As the rapid onset of full dark in the desert swept over the Yemeni desert, Michael and Bill moved up behind the main

building that was used by the terrorist camp's training staff. It was a one-story, six-room structure. Concrete slab, cinder-block walls, metal roof. Doors front and back. The heavy-metal rear one was locked, but they had no intention of using it anyway.

The intel from the MQ-1C Gray Eagle drone that the Night Stalkers' intel staff had kept circling twenty thousand feet overhead for the last three nights had indicated that four command-level personnel met here each night. Most likely position was in the southeast corner room. Four of the other rooms were barrack spaces that wouldn't be used until after the trainers had all eaten together at the chow tent. The sixth room was the armory.

Dry bread and water had been the fare for the trainees. Over the next few months they would be desensitized to physical discomfort much as a Delta operator was. Too little food, too little sleep, and too much exercise, especially early on, to weed out the weak or uncommitted.

He and Bill squatted beneath the southeast window that faced away from the center of the camp; only the vast, dark desert lay beyond. Shifting the AK-47s over their shoulders, they unslung their preferred weapons—Heckler & Koch HK416 carbine rifles with flash suppressors that made them nearly silent.

Bill pulled out a small fiber-optic camera and slipped it up over the windowsill. As they squatted out of sight, the small screen gave them a view of the inside of the target building for the first time.

Not four men but eight were seated on cushions around a low table bearing a large teapot. Michael recognized five from various briefings, three of them Tier One targets. They'd only been expecting one Tier One.

A long table sported a half-dozen laptops, and a pair of file cabinets stood at one end. They hadn't counted on that at all. This was supposed to be a training camp, not an operations center.

They were going to need more help to take advantage of the new situation.

Michael got on the radio.

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“USS *Peleliu*. This is Captain Casperson in Little Bird...” She didn’t know the name of the bird. She read off the tail number from the small plate on the control panel. “Inbound from eighty miles at two-niner-zero.”

You didn’t want to sneak up on a ship of war that could shoot you down at this distance if they were in a grouchy mood.

“Roger that, Captain. Status?”

“Flying solo, full fuel.”

“In your armor?”

“Roger that.” Why in the world would they... Training. They’d want to make sure she wasn’t ignoring her training. Kid stuff. She’d flown Cobra attack birds for the U.S. Marines for six years before her transfer and spent two more years training with the Night Stalkers. She wasn’t an—

“This is Air Mission Commander Archie Stevens.” A different voice came on the air. “Turn immediate heading three-four-zero. Altitude five-zero feet, all speed. You’ll be joining a flight ten miles ahead of you for an exfil. We can’t afford to slow them down until you make contact, so hustle.”

She slammed over the cyclic control in her right hand to shift to the new heading.

Okay, maybe not so much a training test.

Exfil. Exfiltration. A ground team needed to be pulled out and pulled out now. She’d done it in a hundred drills, so she kept calm and hoped that her voice sounded that way. She expected that it didn’t.

“Uh, Roger.” Claudia had dozed fitfully for six hours in the last three days, and most of that had been in a vibrator seat on the roaring C-2 Greyhound. No rest for the weary.

Once on the right heading, she dove into the night heading for fifty feet above the ocean waves and opened up the throttles to

the edge of the never-exceed speed of a hundred and seventy-five miles per hour.

The adrenaline had her wide awake before she reached her flight level.

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Fifteen minutes later, Claudia rolled up behind a flight of three birds moments before they crossed over the beach and into Yemen. The FLIR night-vision gear painted an image across the inside of her helmet's visor of two Little Birds and a Black Hawk.

No, it wasn't a Black Hawk, it was a DAP—a Direct Action Penetrator, the nastiest gunship ever launched into the sky.

Well, weren't they going to have some fun tonight.

One of the Little Birds was the attack version; that's the one she wanted. The other a transport like the one she was flying.

Odd. Neither the DAP nor the attack Little Bird showed up on her radar as more than signal noise, though the transport Little Bird did. It was as if they weren't there, but she could see them. No time to think about it now.

"Captain Casperson"—a female voice—"take right flank off *Merchant*. You'll be taking the southeast corner of a one-story building. *Merchant*, you'll take the team from off the northwest. *May*, expect the LZ to be hot, especially near *Merchant*, so be ready to suppress it hard."

*Merchant* was obviously the other transport Little Bird, so she moved up into formation beside it. The pilot waggled his bird side to side to wave hello. She answered in kind. Nice to be welcome despite being the late arrival to the party.

Whoever was giving the orders was pilot in command, not the remote Air Mission Controller. The only female DAP pilot she knew of was Chief Warrant Lola Maloney. There were only five women in SOAR, but Claudia hadn't tried to keep track of them. Actually, she'd purposely tried not to. They were in combat and she'd been in training, so by ignoring them, she'd

felt freer to simply drive herself to be the very best. She was used to making her own way, had been doing it since she was a little kid.

Still, now that she'd made it, it might be nice to have another woman in the same company she was going to.

She hadn't really thought about that.

Claudia was only the sixth woman of SOAR, fifth now that Major Emily Beale had retired. She'd applied for the 5th Battalion, D Company because even in a regiment as elite as SOAR, the 5D was rumored to be the very best. That was her kind of team. That she'd actually landed the assignment was a little daunting. Well, she'd have to prove she was up to it in the next ten minutes.

They crossed over the beach, dropped down to twenty-five feet, and began following the ups and downs of the dry, rolling terrain. No need to talk; it was just what you did.

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The moment that Michael heard the faintest beat of an approaching helicopter, he whispered into his radio the same word he'd spoken twenty-four hours ago when they'd jumped out of an airplane at thirty-five thousand feet.

"Go."

They had less than sixty seconds; it was all they should need. He and Bill rose.

His first silenced shot punched a hole through the window glass. The second took out the overhead lamp, plunging the southeast room into darkness. They dove through the window in unison as they pulled on their night-vision goggles.

There was the low boom of a breaching charge removing the building's front door—must have been locked. Patrols would have left no time to pick it. The other two operators were tasked with clearing the remaining five rooms and securing the front of the building.

The soft double-spit of suppressed gunfire coming down the hallway said that at least one person had been elsewhere inside the building. They were dead now.

Michael managed to kick six of the rifles aside before the al-Qaeda leaders could react. Bill, who was standing back to give him cover, shot the seventh in the arm and the eighth in the head, twice. Abu Nassir Wafi, a lead trainer, was down. He was the toughest fighter and the least important asset in the room. The double tap to the head was a good choice.

After a brief scuffle, they had the seven remaining men gagged, with zip ties around their wrists and ankles. They lifted and threw each tied man back out through the window. Some grunted through their gags as they landed atop one another.

Bill pulled a short roll of heavily reinforced black garbage bags out of a pouch along his pants' calf—a trick that the SEALs hadn't learned before the bin Laden raid. Word was that they'd wasted valuable time scrounging old gym bags to cart out the intel they'd found inside Osama's fortress. He and Bill began dumping laptops and files into the bags.

The birds were close overhead. He could hear the helicopters' rotor roar drowning out the near-constant fire from the front of the building, the quiet double spit of the Delta operators' HK416s echoing down the hall, and the sharp barks of AK-47s wielded by the terrorist trainers out in the compound.

"All evac on southeast side," he told the helos. He didn't need to tell the other two operators to fall back to join them in the southeast room. They'd know to do that as soon as they were ready.

He emptied the last file drawer and tossed the sack on top of the struggling al-Qaeda leaders.

He and Bill jumped over the sill, not taking much care about who they landed on.

The other two operators followed them out, just moments before a large detonation shook the building and blew fire out the window inches above their heads.

The inside team had left a booby trap in the weapons' store. The building was now secure—the entire inside was engulfed in flames.

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The landing zone was a total shit storm, about like a typical training scenario except this time the bad guys were trying to kill the good guys with live rounds.

The air was thick with the hail of small arms fire as Claudia swung her helo wide to clear the streamers of fire that punched out the windows of the building to all sides. She settled as close as she dared beside the southeast wall of the building.

*Merchant* threw up a world of dust as it dropped in beside her.

Two men came running toward them, but she could see the small infrared patches on their shoulders that identified them as friendlies so she kept her hands on the controls rather than grabbing for her weapon. They were also each carrying large heavy sacks. The bigger guy, and he was way big and broad-shouldered, headed for *Merchant*.

The smaller man tossed his bag on top of her own gear in the rear and returned to the group of bound men on the ground.

Two more friendlies moved to squat at the corners of the building and were laying down cover fire against anyone who tried to circle around the building to the helicopters. Anyone remaining out in the compound had the two gun platforms circling above to keep them occupied.

There was the harsh roar of a minigun sluicing down five thousand rounds a minute, interrupted by the harsh sizzle of rockets and matching explosions just moments later.

For now, they were in a quiet bubble behind the shield of the building, but it would only last another few seconds.

Claudia let go of the controls and took up her weapon to guard for approaches over the desert.

The big guy-little guy team moved to cut the prisoners' feet loose in pairs. They hustled their prisoners onto *Merchant's* bench seats, tied them in place, and shot each with a tranquilizer injection into their necks. In moments, they had four tied and slumped bad guys on *Merchant's* benches. The two friendlies who'd been working guard at the corners of the building clambered onto *Merchant* and the bird dusted off. The two soldiers continued providing cover from their positions aloft.

The other two soldiers started her way, herding the last three prisoners.

On a quick sweep, she spotted a figure running toward them over a low dune beyond the camp.

No "friendly" infrared tags on the man's shoulder, and his weapon was up. She popped the safety and unleashed a three-shot burst. He cried out and fell to the ground.

By the time she turned back, they had the prisoners tied on and drugged out. The big guy sat on an outside bench and the smaller one slipped into her empty copilot seat.

At his nod, she grabbed the controls and was out of there, staying low and racing directly away from the gun battle still roaring across the compound, the two attack choppers and the armed terrorists going at one another. Claudia knew it would be a very one-sided battle. There was a reason that "Death Waits in the Dark" was one of the Night Stalkers' mottos.

She crested a dune and spotted an outlier guard in her infrared night vision. Someone lying on the back of the dune face, spread-eagled and holding a weapon.

"Shooter!" she called out. She needed both hands on the controls and this wasn't a gunship; she had no weapon other than the one hanging across her chest.

Even as she spun to give the man in the copilot's seat a better angle, he twisted in his seat and fired downward through the open door—two shots so close together that they almost sounded like one.

The man turned back, not even bothering to watch the results of his effort.

Though they were already moving at over fifty miles per hour, Claudia could see the bad guy on the ground convulse. His shot went wild and a rocket-propelled grenade blew up the face of a dune.

Damn, she didn't know anyone could really shoot like that. She was good, but that shot was insane.

Not wanting to hang around and see who else was lurking in the dunes, she rolled right to cut the shortest route back to the coast and laid down the hammer. Right at redline on the engine RPMs, she was outta there. Behind her she could see the bright flashes of the DAP Hawk and the attack Little Bird tearing up the camp. *Merchant* was just two rotor diameters off her port side.

Ripples of adrenaline raced through her body like shock waves from a bomb blast. Her old Marine SuperCobra was a pure attack helicopter. She flown plenty of protection runs during an exfiltration, but she'd never flown transport right down in the thick of it. It was a whole different up-close-and-personal kind of ride that still had her heart pounding and her breath running short.

The man beside her didn't say a word. He simply sat back with his rifle laid across his chest.

He kept his hands lightly on the weapon but closed his eyes as if he was perfectly comfortable and not just thirty seconds from a life-or-death mission. He'd been the one actually in the battle, and she was the one being wound all the way up.

He began tapping the back of his helmet lightly against the back of his seat. It wasn't frantic, like nerves. It was slow, almost gentle; a stark contrast to the shooter of a moment before.

"You okay?"

"Sure." He kept up the tapping.

She found herself echoing the rhythm with one finger tapping against the cyclic control in her right hand.

"IMF," he added softly.

IMF? I am fine. Probably. Everything in the military was an acronym, and some made as little sense as that.

Though the IMF was also the Impossible Missions Force—the secret branch of the military in the *Mission Impossible* movies—and Delta specialized in impossible missions just like the one falling rapidly behind them.

“You and Tom Cruise.” She kept her tone neutral. “Just fine.”

He stopped his tapping and turned to stare at her.

She ignored his searching attention.

In the exchange, she’d found his quiet rhythm. It was...the way an evening breeze might move through the Sonoran Desert of her youth in Arizona. *Tap. Pause. Tap. Pause. Tap.* Gods, she could feel the harshest layers of the adrenaline draining slowly out of her system. *Tap. Pause. Tap.*

Time, which had been compressed out of all recognition, began to have meaning again.

Her heart rate had returned to normal by the time she crossed a final berm and was once again “feet wet” over the ocean. She climbed back up to fifty feet and trailed *Merchant*. The other two aircraft, finished with the camp, were formed up behind them. Now she could finally spare the attention to look at her companion clearly for the first time.

He’d finally turned back to watch forward. He seemed small only when compared to the big soldier who’d been with him and was perched on one of the outside benches. Sitting next to her, he looked to be her height, perhaps another inch or two taller.

MICH helmet, not a lot of heavy armor like she wore, and enough ammo to suppress a midsized city.

Four guys attacking an entire terrorist camp at sunset. Coming away with seven hostages and what she assumed were large sacks of intel.

Only one group was that bug-shit crazy. She’d never flown with them, only knew them by myth and rumor. In eight years of service, Claudia couldn’t be sure if she’d ever even met one of them before.

Delta.

Scary bastards, making her damned glad they were on her side.

Still, Claudia made it a personal policy to steer well clear of scary bastards who were bug-shit crazy.

A policy she had no intention of changing.

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Michael registered many things about his pilot.

Female by her voice.

She flew well, with a smoothness that he liked, as if she knew exactly who she was and where she was going. It was a trait they looked for in Delta operators; only the very best had it. And no one but the very best made the Delta grade.

There was nothing to see. Flight suit, armor, and vest. Flight gloves, full helmet with projection visor, and even her lower face covered with a breathing mask and radio mike that let pilots breathe and be heard in even the dustiest and noisiest environments.

But he couldn't stop glancing over.

No one got his jokes. The few who noticed them go by did so only after painfully long pauses. Most wouldn't even get that IMF could be "I'm fine." But to make the jump to *Mission Impossible* and then answer with the next step beyond that he hadn't even seen himself—the name of the character he would be parallel to... Damn! That impressed him almost as much as anything else she'd done in their brief acquaintance.

He'd heard another female pilot was incoming into SOAR's 5th Battalion, D Company, so this must be her. Making it into the 5D said she was already an exceptional pilot. She hadn't harassed him about his tapping thing; just checked in with him and then moved on, which said she knew to trust a soldier's self-assessment. For some reason, his tapping drove a lot of people nuts.

It wasn't like the jittery leg that so many soldiers had, though that was trained out of Deltas. Actually, not all that many guys with those kinds of nerves made it into Delta to begin with.

The gentle tap, tap was how he let the adrenal rush of action run out of him. The gentle rhythm reminded him of climbing trees in his childhood when he'd been seeking somewhere no one else could go. It wasn't escape; it was going higher and farther than anyone before him that charged him up.

Right now he shouldn't be thinking about her, he should be assessing the team's performance. What could they have done differently to capture all eight unfriendlies? How could they have anticipated the arrival at the camp of four Tier One targets or the presence of so much unexpected intel? If there'd been anything to gather in the other rooms, there simply hadn't been time to look. They definitely should have had another bird in deep backup; pure luck they'd gotten this one. The entire camp had erupted in blazes of gunfire from the trainers, answered by the dragon roars from the hovering attack platforms responding with rockets and miniguns.

But that didn't reorient the direction of his thoughts.

This pilot simply allowed him "to be," which he appreciated. Even Emily Beale, as well as they'd gotten along, had never understood his little jokes. Or quite known what to make of him.

*Not surprising, Michael. You're not the most accessible dude in the Force.*

That he knew for damn sure.

He liked this woman sight unseen.

He also knew that, which was surprising.

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The prisoners' knockout shots wore off as they arrived on deck at the USS *Peleliu*, making the unloading a little chaotic. Michael was on the verge of dosing them again when the CIA team arrived from the carrier to take custody. He sighed; they

sure did love their debriefings. It would take the next four hours to cover a sixty-second actual engagement. About normal.

Then he'd noticed the new pilot, still sitting in her Little Bird. No, sagging in her seat.

He touched her on the arm and she startled.

"When was the last time you slept?" He slid up her visor and removed her breather mask. She had a nice face that he decided fit her well, even though he knew almost nothing about her.

"Uh"—she blinked at him—"last time I what?"

"Okay." He'd certainly seen this enough times. She'd held it together for the flight but was wholly tapped out now that it was over. It took four, perhaps five days without a full sleep—depending on the person and the number of catnaps they'd managed to steal—to make them like this.

Michael unbuckled her harness and eased her out of the chopper, taking most of her weight by lifting the big D-ring attached at the center of her vest. The D-ring was there in case she crashed in somewhere and needed a rope rescue. Well, this was a type of rescue and the heavy vest and flight suit blocked most of the feeling of grabbing her right between the breasts.

He leaned her against the side of the chopper, tugged on her rucksack after letting out the straps a bit, and slung her duffel over one arm.

One of the CIA guys was hustling over to drag him off for debriefing.

"I'll be right back."

The guy got all officious. Right until he spotted the look in Michael's eye and scurried back to wherever he'd been.

Michael had thought to coax her along, but she was really past that.

He slipped an arm around her waist and guided her down through the ship. Flight deck...hangar deck...down to second deck. He stopped a Navy orderly who knew where to aim them.

Her bunk was right near the other SOAR women, which made sense.

When he got her there, she simply stood in the middle of her quarters, weaving and staring down at the bunk.

Michael dumped her duffel and pack.

Since she was clearly unable to manage for herself, he undid her helmet and pulled it free. Then the fire-resistant inner hood. A shower of shining blond hair cascaded over his hands, reminding him of silk and water.

Her FN-SCAR rifle, survival vest, and Dragon Skin underneath. Smart woman.

He was not about to undo the front of her flight suit as he had no way of knowing what she did or didn't wear under there, and she was already giving him trouble.

He never had problems concentrating around women. But something about this one...

Even exhausted, travel-worn, and battle weary she smelled of the desert night and—

*Cut it, Michael.*

So he did. "You okay from here?"

She nodded vaguely, which he'd take as a yes.

He was a step from making good his retreat when her hand rested lightly on his arm.

Turning to face her was the big mistake.

She stepped into his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck for a moment, ignoring all the spare magazines pocketed across his chest, the two rifles over his shoulder, and both of his sidearms.

She simply rested her head on his shoulder a moment and whispered, "Thanks."

Then she turned away and, knees buckling, collapsed face-first onto the bed.

When she didn't move, he turned out the light and closed the door—not even pausing to remove her boots, shutting himself away from her.

Then he hurried off to lose himself in the clutching grasp of the CIA debriefing team.

Better that than to face his thoughts about her warmth and the soft hair that had brushed his cheek and the gentle, female scent of the most attractive woman he'd ever held in his arms, no matter how briefly.