

Chapter 1

U.S. Navy Chief Steward Gail Miller held on for dear life as the small boat raced across the warm seas off West Africa.

The six Marines driving the high-speed small unit riverine boat appeared to think that scaring the daylight out of her was a good sport. It was like a Zodiac rubber dinghy's big brother. It was a dozen meters long with large machine guns mounted fore and aft. The massive twin diesels sent it jumping off every wave, even though the rollers in the Gulf of Guinea were less than a meter high today.

Gail wondered if they were making the ride extra rough just for her or were they always like this; she suspected the latter. Still she wanted to shout at them like Bones from *Star Trek: I'm a chef, not a soldier, dammit*. But being a good girl from South Carolina, she instead kept her mouth shut and stared at her fast-approaching new billet.

The USS *Peleliu* was an LHA, a Landing Helicopter Assault ship. She could deliver an entire Marine Expeditionary Unit with her helicopters and amphibious craft. Twenty-five hundred

Navy and Marines personnel aboard and it would be her job to feed them. All the nerves she'd been feeling for the last five days about her new posting had finally subsided, buried beneath the tidal wave of wondering if she was going to survive to even reach the *Peleliu*.

At first, the ship started out as black blot on the ocean, silhouetted by the setting sun that was turning the sky from a golden orange over to more of a dark rose color.

Then the ship got bigger.

And bigger.

In a dozen years in the Navy she'd been aboard an aircraft carrier only once, and it lay twenty minutes behind her. She'd been there less than a half hour from when the E-2 Hawkeye had trapped on the deck. They'd shipped her to the *Peleliu* so fast she wanted to check herself and see if she was radioactive.

It didn't matter though; she was almost there. From down in the little riverine speed boat, her new ship looked huge. The second largest ships in the whole Navy, after the aircraft carriers, were the helicopter carriers.

Gail knew that the *Peleliu* was the last of her class, all of her sister ships already replaced by newer and better vessels, but even six months or a year aboard before her decommissioning would be a fantastic opportunity for a Chief Steward. Maybe that's why they'd assigned Gail to this ship, someone to fill in before the decommissioning.

Fine with her. She was still unsure how she'd actually landed the assignment. She'd spent a half-dozen years working on the Perry Class frigates as a CS, a culinary specialist. Her first Chief Steward billet had been at SUBASE Bangor in Washington state feeding submariners while ashore until she thought she'd go mad. She missed the ship's galleys and the life aboard.

Then she'd applied for a transfer, never in her life expecting to land Chief Steward on an LHA. After the aircraft carriers, they were the premier of Navy messes. Chefs vied for years to get these slots and she'd somehow walked into this one.

No, girl! You've cooked Navy food like a demon for over a decade to earn this posting. Her brain's strong insistence that she'd earned this did little to convince her.

And she hadn't walked into this, she'd flown. It had taken three days: Seattle, New York, London, Madrid, and Dakar, each with at least six hours on the ground, but never enough to get a room and sleep. And then an eyeblink on the aircraft carrier.

It didn't matter. It was hers now for whatever reason and she couldn't wait.

The LHA really did look like an aircraft carrier. She knew it was shorter and narrower, but from down here on the waves, it loomed and towered. *One heck of an impressive place to land, girl.* She could feel the "new posting" nerves fighting back against the "near death" nerves of her method of transit over the waves.

The flattop upper deck didn't overhang as much as an aircraft carrier, but that was the only obvious difference. Like a carrier, the Flight Deck was ruled over by a multi-story communications tower superstructure and its gaggle of antennas above.

On the deck she could see at least a half-dozen helicopters and people working on them, probably putting them away for the end of the day. It seemed odd to Gail that they were operating so far from the carrier group. It had taken an hour even at the riverine's high speed to reach the *Peleliu* and she appeared to be out here alone; not another ship in sight.

In the fading sunset, the ship's lights were showing more and more as long rows of bright pinpricks. The flattop was at least five stories above the water.

The riverine boat circled past the bow and rocketed toward the stern. Gail had departed the aircraft carrier down a ladder on the outside of the hull amidships. But here they approached the stern.

That was the big difference with the LHAs; they had a massive Well Deck right inside the rear of the ship. She'd seen pictures, but when her orders came, they'd been for "Immediate departure." No time to read up on the *Peleliu*. So, she'd learn on the job.

A massive stern ramp was being lowered down even as they circled the boat. It was as if the entire cliff-like stern of the boat was opening like a giant mailbox, the door hinging down to make a steel beach in the water.

Also like a mailbox, it revealed a massive cavern inside. Fifteen meters wide, nearly as tall, and a football field deep; it penetrated into the ship at sea level. Landing craft could be driven right inside the ship's belly, loaded with vehicles from the internal garages or Marines from the barracks, and then floated back out.

The last of the fast equatorial sunset was fading from the sky as the riverine whipped around the stern at full-speed in a turn she was half sure would toss her overboard into the darkness, and roared up to the steel beach.

Inside the cavern of the Well Deck, dim red lights suggested shapes and activities she couldn't quite make out.

#

The sunset was still flooding the Well Deck through the gap above the *Peleliu's* unopened stern ramp as U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer Sly Stowell did his best to look calm. After nineteen years in, it was his job to radiate steadiness to his customers, the troops he was transporting. That wasn't a problem.

He was also supposed to actually *be* calm during mission preparations, but it never seemed to work that way. A thousand hours of drill still never prepared him for the adrenaline rush of a live op and tonight he'd been given the "go for operation." This section of the attack—presently loading up on his LCAC hovercraft deep inside the belly of the USS *Peleliu*—was all his.

"Get a Navy move-on, boys," he shouted to the Ranger platoon loading up, "nuff of this lazy-ass Army lollygag."

A couple of the newbies flinched, but all the old hands just grinned at him and kept pluggin' along. They all wore camo gear and armored vests. Their packs were only large for this

mission, not massive. It was supposed to be an in and out, but it was always better to be prepared.

Two of the old hands wore Santa hats, had their Kevlar brain buckets with the clipped on night-vision gear dangling off their rifles. It was December first and he liked the spirit of it, celebrating the season, though he managed not to smile at them. It was the sworn duty of every soldier to look down on every other, especially for the Navy to look down on everyone else. It was only what the ground pounders and sky jockeys deserved, after all.

The *Peleliu* was a Navy ship, even if she'd switched over from carrying Marines to now having a load of Army aboard. The transition had worried him at first. Two decades of Marines and their ways had been uprooted six months ago and now a mere platoon of U.S. Army 75th Rangers had taken their place. The swagger was much the same though.

But *Peleliu* had also taken on a company from the Army's Special Operations Aviation Regiment—their secret helicopter corps. They didn't swagger, they flew. And, as much as Sly might feel disloyal to his branch of the Service, they tended to bring much more interesting operations than the Marines.

He could hear the low roar as the engines on the Ranger vehicles selected for this mission were started up in the *Peleliu's* garage decks. The three vehicles rolled down the ramp toward Sly's hovercraft moments later.

Normally it would have taken an hour of shuffling vehicles to extricate the ones they wanted from their tight parking spaces. But fifty Rangers needed far fewer vehicles than seventeen hundred Marines. The whole ship now had an excess of space. Having a tenth of the military personnel aboard had meant that two-thirds of the Navy personnel had also moved on to other billets.

Sly had been thrilled when his application to stay had been granted. It might not be the best career move, but the *Peleliu* was his and he wanted to ride her until the day she died.

It had also turned out to be a far more interesting choice, though he hadn't known it at the time. Marines were all about *invade that country, or provide disaster relief for that flood or earthquake*. The 160th SOAR and the U.S. Rangers were about fast and quiet ops that only rarely were released to the news.

He watched as his crew began guiding the M-ATVs onto his hovercraft. They looked like Humvees on steroids. They were taller, had v-shaped hulls for resistance against road mines, and looked far meaner.

He'd been assigned to the LCAC hovercraft since his first day aboard. First as mechanic, then loadmaster, navigator, and finally pilot. And he'd never gotten over how much she looked like a hundred-ton shoebox without the lid.

Sly kept an eye on Nika and Jerome as they guided the first M-ATV down the internal ramp of the *Peleliu* and up the front-gate ramp of the LCAC. He trusted them completely, but he was the craftmaster and it was ultimately his job to make sure it was right.

The "shoebox" presently had her two narrow ends folded down.

The tall sides were made up of the four Vericor engines, fans, blowers, defensive armor, and the control and gunnery positions. The front end was folded down revealing the three-lane wide parking area of the LCAC's deck. Between the two massive rear fans to the stern—which still reminded him of the fanboats from his family's one trip down to the Florida Everglades where they had not seen an alligator—a one-lane wide rear ramp was folded down toward the stern.

The LCAC was the size of a basketball court, though her sides towered twice as high as the basket. She filled the wood-planked Well Deck from side to side and could carry an Abrams M1A1 Main Battle Tank from here right up onto the beach. Those days were gone, though. Now it was the noise of Army Rangers and their M-ATVs filling the cavernous space in which even a sneeze echoed painfully.

Still, the old girl could handle them and it had instilled a new life in the ship. She'd been Sly's home for the entire two decades of his Naval career and he didn't look forward to giving her up. He sometimes felt as if they both were hanging on out of sheer stubbornness. Hell of a thought for a guy still in his thirties. Hanging on by his fingernails? Sad.

He'd considered getting a life. Mustering out, having a pension in place and starting a new career. But he loved this one.

And he'd been aboard the eight-hundred foot ship long enough that she was now called a two-hundred and fifty meter ship instead. This was his home.

Eighteen year-old Seaman Stowell had nearly shit his uniform the day he'd reported aboard. She'd been patrolling off Mogadishu, Somalia then. In the two decades since, they'd circled the globe in both directions, though since the arrival of SOAR most of their operations had been around Africa. In nineteen years he'd traded East Africa for West Africa...and a lifetime between.

As he did before every mission, he willed this mission to please go better than the disastrous Operation Gothic Serpent—the failure immortalized by the movie *Black Hawk Down* that had unfolded ashore within days of his arrival aboard.

Sly didn't feel all that different, except he no longer wanted to shit his pants before battle. He still had to consciously calm down though.

Instead of a humdrum routine settling in after the Marines Expeditionary Unit's departure, the Rangers and SOAR had amped it back up.

SOAR was a kick-ass team, even by Navy standards. That they also had the number one Delta Force operator on the planet permanently embedded with them only meant that Sly's life was never dull.

That was one of the reasons that Sly was looking forward to this operation. When Colonel Michael Gibson was involved, you knew it was going to be a hell-raiser.

They had the first M-ATV in place and locked down. The second one rolled up the ramp. Lieutenant Barstowe, the Rangers' commander, came up beside him with his Santa hat still in place.

"Chief."

"Lieutenant."

"That's one battle-rigged and two ambulance M-ATVs. Why don't I like that ratio?"

"Because you're a smart man, Chief Stowell." The lieutenant moved up the ramp to talk with the driver of the third vehicle still waiting its turn.

They were definitely going into it heavy. That's what finally calmed Sly's nerves. It was the preparation he hated, once on the move he no longer had spare time to worry that he'd forgotten something.

At least he wasn't the only one sweating it. Today was pretty typical December off the West African coast, ninety degrees and ninety percent humidity. Even the seawater from the Gulf of Guinea was limp with tepid heat as it sloshed against the outside of the hull with a flat slap and echo inside that resounded inside the Well Deck.

The last of the vehicles rolled up onto the LCAC hovercraft. For the Landing Craft, Air Cushion hovercraft—technically pronounced L.C.A.C. but more commonly El-Cack! like you were about to throw up—forty tons of vehicles and fifty Rangers was about a half load. But still he was going to keep an eagle eye on them. These young bucks might think they were the bad-asses, but until they'd faced down a Naval Chief Petty Officer—well, that was never going to happen as long as he was in the Navy.

Nika and Jerome guided the last of the vehicles into position at the center of gravity. Nika had been on his boat for two tours now and she'd better re-up next month because he had no idea who he'd ever find to replace her. She worked quickly on chaining down the third vehicle and then gave him a thumbs up. Jerome had six months as his mechanic, but had the routine

down and echoed Nika's signal. His engineer and his navigator reported ready.

The crew had already preflighted the craft, but he liked to do a final walk-around himself. There was only a foot between either side of the LCAC and the Well Deck walls.

The wooden decking along the bottom of the Well Deck was just clear of the wash of the ocean waves, so he didn't need waders to do the inspection. For conventional landing craft that needed water to move around in, they could ballast down the stern, which lowered the ship to flood the Well Deck a meter deep or more. However, his hovercraft didn't need such concessions. It was better this way. They could lift off dry without shedding a world of salt spray in all directions.

"Nika," he called as he headed down to start his inspection, "get that stern gate open." During the loading, the last of the sunset had disappeared, near darkness filled in the gap above the big door.

The Well Deck's lights flickered as they were switched over from white to red for nighttime operations. They hadn't flickered when he first came aboard, but she was feeling her age. He patted the inside of the *Peleliu's* hull in sympathy as he reached the wooden planking that supported his LCAC. The huge rear gate let out a groan and began tipping out and down toward the sea.

His hovercraft was ninety feet long and fifty wide and there actually wasn't much to see during his inspection, which was a good thing. The deflated skirts that would trap the air from the four gas turbine engines, delivering over twenty-thousand horsepower of lift and driving force, now hung in limp folds of thick black rubber. Patches covering tears and bullet holes from prior missions dotted the rippling surface. Above the rubber skirt, the aluminum sides were battered from the hard use—partly bad-guy assholes with rifles and partly harsh weather operations.

Sly saw the former as badges of courage for the old craft... and did his best not to recall how the latter was earned when nasty cross seas had slammed his craft into the sides of the Well

Deck entrance. He was a damn good pilot, but there were limits to what a man could do when the ship went one way, the seas another, and his hovercraft a third.

He was halfway around his craft when he first heard it, the high whine of an incoming boat. It hadn't been there a moment before. The Well Deck acted like a giant acoustical horn, gathering all sounds from dead astern and amplifying and focusing them like a gunshot at anyone inside the cavernous Well Deck at the time. Often you'd hear a boat before you saw it, especially at night.

He stood at the foot of the rear ramp of the hovercraft and turned, but there were no lights to see.

Then there were, incredibly close aboard. A small unit riverine craft by the arrangement of the blinding white lights that had him raising an arm to save his eyes.

The riverine was carving a high speed turn as if they intended to run right up the stern gate and into the Well Deck.

They cut their speed at the last moment with a hard reverse of the engines, but he knew it was too late for him.

The bow wave rushed up the Well Deck planking ahead of the riverine, driven bigger and faster by the abrupt nose-down of the decelerating craft. The wave came high enough to soak him to mid-calf and made him sit down abruptly. The wave washed part way up the rear ramp of his hovercraft before receding—totally soaking his butt.

He wondered who he could blame for this one.

In a moment, he was going to stand up and the fifty Rangers standing on the LCAC's loading deck were going to be laughing their asses off at the Navy's expense.

That just wasn't right.

Sly glared over at the small riverine craft, squinting against the bright array of lights so that he could see who to blame. The bow section folded forward and allowed a tall woman wearing a duffle over one shoulder and carrying a small black case to dismount. Then the craft began backing away from the Well

Deck even as the bow section was pulled back up. He didn't get a good look at any of them. *The dogs!*

The woman walked up close to Sly and stopped to look down at him.

That initial impression of tall was combined with Navy fit, and a uniform that showed it off in the best way. Her short tousle of dark red hair hung perfectly as if she'd just brushed it rather than gone for a ride on a craft that could hit thirty-five knots. She wore an emblem of a large crescent-shaped "C" over four horizontal stripes. The "C" marked her as a Steward, the four stripes as the new Chief Steward they'd been told to expect.

She looked like a breath of fresh air.

Truth be told, she looked like the goddamn goddess Venus rising from the water as she stepped out onto the last retreating sheen of seawater that was washing back off the deck under her boots.

He stood to greet her properly.

A roll of laughter sounded behind him and Sly turned—remembering a moment too late as he turned his back on the new Chief—the butt of his uniform was still sopping wet.

#

Chief Steward Gail Miller didn't bother trying to stifle her laugh. It just blew out of her. Her laugh was the main reason of many that her insignia wasn't gold colored with twelve years of "Good Conduct," unlike the Chief Petty Officer with the wet behind.

Somehow, the simple fact that she had laughed in the face of a grumpy ship's Captain three years earlier—after her ship took a bad pitch and roll and she'd dumped a plate of turkey with cranberry sauce she'd been serving him down the front of his dress whites—hadn't worked out so well.

She hadn't done it on purpose.

At least mostly not.

But he was enough of a stiff-necked, stuck-up— Well, when the opportunity presented itself, she hadn't fought too hard to retain her balance. Might have succeeded if she'd tried, might not, but even in retrospect she'd still say it was worth it. However, Gail would make certain she was less obvious next time; she would have been in lockup if saner heads had not prevailed.

Not even yet technically aboard the *Peleliu*, she decided she'd better behave now. She sent the wet Chief Petty Officer a sharp salute as his injured dignity appeared to call for it.

She also noticed that the Rangers had stopped their laughter the very moment he turned to glare at them. The man clearly commanded respect among them—at least under normal conditions.

Gail struggled to suppress the rest of her laugh, but she could feel a broad smile giving her away.

"Permission to come aboard, Chief." You didn't "sir" an enlisted man no matter how high he'd risen or you'd get the standard line about how he "worked for a living."

A look of deep chagrin slid onto his face, and his salute came back with a smile that pulled up on the left side of this lips first. A good smile. A damn good one, proving he wasn't nearly as old-school as he looked at first glance. The initial impression of grizzled old sea-dog was actually a handsome and fit man in his late thirties wrapped up in old-Navy respectability.

"Permission granted, Chief." His voice was deep and friendly despite his recent humiliation. He looked her in the eyes, not the chest, unlike the Marines who had just delivered her from the carrier. His hair wasn't crew-cut short, but rather long enough to make her want to mess it up.

Who knew they even made men like that anymore.

"Sorry about that, Chief," she dropped her salute. "But you gotta watch where you sit."

"Thanks. Helpful." He looked down at his watch. "Welcome aboard. We're out of here in thirty seconds, you better hurry

across,” he pointed up the ramp and through the crowd aboard the LCAC.

He started up the ramp himself, his boots squishing with each step.

She surveyed the load on the hovercraft. Rangers aboard with combat gear and a trio of M-ATVs looking huge and brutal with a bristle of sharp weaponry. Even the ambulances had turret guns. They were loaded for some kind of exercise. Two Santa hats that stood out among the crowd of Rangers said it would be an easy one. Maybe just transport to do some on-shore relief work.

“Mind if I come along?”

The Chief halted halfway up the ramp of his craft. She was still down on the wood deck. A seaman worked his way through the Rangers and came down to her, clearly there to guide her to the ship’s commanding officer to report in.

“Headed into a live op, Chief Steward,” the Chief Petty Officer fended her off. He emphasized the last word making it clear where he thought she belonged—in the kitchen.

To him she wanted to say, *I’m a soldier too, not just a chef, dammit*. Granted she only had Basic Training and a yearly one-week refresher, but she was a soldier. Still, it wasn’t her style, so she gave him a different answer.

“Excellent!” An actual mission? She’d never been on more than a training sortie. She remembered that as an exhilarating time. How dangerous could this one be when there were Santa hats aboard.

She handed her gear to the seaman, except for her helmet and armored vest, and waved him off to go do what he had to do with her stuff. With the ease of long practice, he disappeared up the ramp and through the crowd of Rangers headed back into the ship.

Gail had just come from one of the most boring galley messes on the planet. SUBASE Bangor had been tedious at best. Submarine crews returned to the shore of Hood Canal and

immediately evaporated. The only ones she fed day in and day out were the maintenance and refit workers. She was so glad to be back out on the ships that she didn't dare give the Chief a moment to think.

There might be seven thousand culinary specialists in the Navy, but there were only three hundred Navy messes. If she was ready to command one of those, she was ready to go on an actual mission.

She strode up the hovercraft's stern ramp, but didn't stop beside the nameless Chief Petty Officer still riveted in place halfway up—just in case he came to his senses. Instead Gail continued onto the LCAC's deck, donning her gear as she went. She'd never been on one and was eager to look around anyway.

Three-meter steel walls all around. No, three-meter high walls of machinery. This was a hovercraft, big engines and big fans lined either side of the deck. Glassed-in control station high up forward to starboard. Small observer and gunner station port-side forward. Small steering fans to each side forward.

The monster fans at the tail, each twice her height, were positioned to push the boat ahead.

When she reached the first of the Rangers, she turned back to look at him standing there as if paralyzed. She made a show of checking her watch then looking back at him over her shoulder.

“Ten more seconds, Chief. Aren't we outta here yet?”

She offered him her best smile as the nearby Rangers laughed once more at his complete discomfiture.

Gail was sorry to do it to the man, but it was all in good fun.

#

There was a part of Sly Stowell that wanted to drive the woman off his boat, but he had the feeling that was a conversation that wouldn't go quickly and he was out of time. Besides, he had a sneaking suspicion that he'd lose.

A part of him thought that losing to her might not be such a bad thing. His eyes were finally recovering enough from the riverine's glaring lights to inspect her by the Well Deck red night-ops lighting.

She was a nicely built craft, trim in all the right places and generous in the others. There—

She arched one of those fine eyebrows at him and his attention snapped back to reality. He'd been admiring things that a decent man didn't admire on a new Chief, even if she was a Steward and not a Petty Officer.

And if he didn't get on some hustle, he was going to be late to the party.

Fine.

"You," he aimed a finger at her, "are not leaving my side. If you end up dead before you've officially reported in, I'm just gonna roll your body over the side, because I sure as hell don't need the damned paperwork."

Then he looked for Lieutenant Clint Barstowe, suited up just like the rest of his Ranger grunts. Found him right in the thick of it by his red Santa hat—made it easy to respect the man. Leading from the front and keeping the guys at ease. These were all seasoned troops and didn't need their hands held, but it was still well done.

They exchanged nods; no need to speak. *Good to go.*

Sly went.

He turned his back on the new Chief and climbed the ladder up to the control room. Troops weren't supposed to ride out on the Service Deck, out in the open, if at all possible. Half crowded into the small deck houses to either side, the rest squeezed aboard their vehicles.

Even so, no one, except the gunners perched high atop their machines, had a view of anything other than sky. Add in the wild motion of the hovercraft over the Atlantic and he just thanked his lucky stars that he wasn't the one who had to barf out his guts without breaking stride as he ran out onto some hostile beach.

The control room sat atop the right front corner of the hovercraft, a glassed-in room that looked like a miniature airport control tower from the outside and a three-seat passenger jet cockpit from the inside. His engines threw the same force as a fully-loaded 737 in flight and took a lot more skill to fly. No such thing as smooth air in a hovercraft.

Dave and Tom were already in position at engines and navigation.

“Wow! What a great little Christmas tree!” The new Chief came up behind him as he moved into the right-hand seat.

The woman walks into one of the coolest cockpits in the Navy, and remarks on a foot-tall tall Christmas tree.

Well, that told him more about the woman than he'd wanted to know. Why were so many of the really pretty ones brain dead?

Dave had made the little wire sculpture out of green wire and strung it with red-white-and-blue LED lights and a couple strands of red and green plastic beads that were actually a necklace his four-year old niece had sent him. It was cute, but that was about all.

“You!” he pointed at the observer's jump seat. “There!” Why he was being so damned gruff about it was beyond him, but he couldn't seem to get that “new recruit” tone out of his voice. Some part of him must figure it was the only thing she'd understand.

She planted her butt. Thankfully, she'd pulled on her armored vest making her at least somewhat less distracting. She really did have a fine shape. That was one nice thing he liked about having more women in the service over the years, it had definitely served to make a ship's crew more pleasant to look at. Regrettably, unlike most, that appeared to be about all this woman was gonna offer.

“Seatbelt too. You're going to be needing it.”

That got her attention and the quick response showed the woman had some sense; she buckled up. He still wasn't sure quite how she'd come to be aboard and didn't have time to unravel it. “Dazzled” was not a state that ever happened to him, but he suspected that it just had.