

## Chapter 1

*As the Little Bird* helicopter bucked its way through the early October storm, Lieutenant Mick “The Mighty Dozer” Quinn wasn’t too worried; it wasn’t that much of a storm. Especially not by Gulf of Alaska standards. But it did think that slapping their helicopter, the *Linda*, about the sky was good sport and that was making him work for it.

Thirty, twenty, and two.

Thirty-knot winds—thirty-five miles-an-hour to landlubbers. Twenty-foot waves—not even enough to slow down his family’s commercial crabbing operation. And two miles visibility—if it hadn’t been the middle of the night.

The storm they were flying into would soon cut that to thirty, twenty, and a hundred yards. As usual, the Aleutian Islands were wrapped in crappy weather and ice cold water that always found a way down the back of your neck. He didn’t miss that, but he still missed working on the family boat sometimes.

“This is nuts! Like way worse than even cashews.” The storm was, however, pissing off his copilot. Ready to take on Mother

Nature woman-o-a-woman, Patty O'Donoghue snarled at her opponent through the windscreen. Patty was always on the attack and she'd be immensely irritating if she wasn't so funny about it. And so damned competent.

"It's—squall line in a hundred yards—doing this just to spite us," she fed him critical information slipstreamed right in with her grousing.

They worked closely together, very closely. Their AH-6M attack helicopter was the smallest manned rotorcraft in the US military's arsenal. It fit just two people, and it was a good thing that Patty wasn't as wide shouldered as he was or they'd be crammed in the tiny helo's side-by-side seats. Though she wasn't a slip of a thing either; just right, he supposed, for a sassy, kick-butts-now-and-take-names-later soldier.

The rear seat could have held two more people. Except the *Linda* was the attack version of the Little Bird—which was why he'd named her for Linda Hamilton in *Terminator II*. The back seat had been replaced by large ammunition cans with feed belts running out to the guns mounted to either side of the fuselage. Just like Sarah Connor, their helicopter was trim and dangerous as all hell.

"It isn't nuts. I used to work on the Alaskan crab boats," Mick nodded down at the roiling sea just fifty feet below them. "My family's probably out there working right now."

"Big whoop, Quinn. I worked the boats on the Grand Banks outta Gloucester." Then she laughed, "No wonder"—it came out *one-de*; her accent always cracked him up—"we went Ah-mee. Still say this hee-ah mission is nuts." The accent that JFK imitators had turned into a national joke was apparently still alive and well in Patty's corner of the country.

The reasons he'd gone Army had nothing to do with the sea. Or maybe everything to do with the sea, but not in the way Patty meant.

"I mean seriously nuts," she waved a hand at the rain-swept darkness ahead then cycled back through checking all of the

helo's systems. "Five percent falloff in power due to the damp air. Compensating fuel flow."

"*Damp* air?" They had just plunged into the leading edge of the storm with a sharp slap. Rain now pounded against their windscreen as they hustled along at a hundred and fifty miles an hour. The wind and engine noise vied for which could be louder.

"Barely worth pulling on a sou'wester for, Quinn."

"This mission is no nuttier than you, Boston." Much to his copilot's irritation, their commander's nicknames stuck and stuck hard. When Major Pete Napier tagged you, it stuck, even harder than those of his second-in-command, Captain Danielle Delacroix. Danielle's previous tag for her had been "Irish Patty" but Napier had changed that to "Boston" and all of Patty's protests that she was from Gloucester were dismissed out of hand. Mick saw no reason to ease up on her just because they'd flown together for two years of training and the three months since.

He hadn't minded Danielle tagging him as "The Mighty Quinn" from Bob Dylan's song *Quinn the Eskimo*. He wasn't an Alaska Native, though his family had been up there since the gold rush days. Great-Gran was rumored to have taken an Alutiiq lover at one point—in portraits, his grandma certainly hadn't fit in with her older sisters. Then it had skipped a generation and he liked that he favored Gran; she'd certainly been a tough old bird—still was for that matter even if she didn't ride the crab boats anymore.

Major Napier had taken one look at his broad fisherman's shoulders and tagged him as "Dozer." Danielle had blended the two to Mick "The Mighty Dozer" Quinn.

Didn't matter, he answered to any of them. But Patty couldn't just shrug it off; she really cared about such things.

He stayed focused on flying them through the storm without accidentally flying into the ocean. That's what he cared about, deeply—pun intended, they were now passing over the deep Aleutian Basin. Not that it really mattered. If he made a mistake,

it would be the top ten feet of ocean that would kill them, not the ten thousand below that.

Tonight was a typical Night Stalkers' mission, at least for the 5th Battalion E Company. No one could quite agree on what the "E" stood for—other than coming next after the D Company—but "Extreme" was a popular candidate. Tonight's mission was definitely a walk on the wild side: take your four helicopters, fly out into utterly disgusting conditions, mess with the enemy's head, don't get caught.

And so here they were; four in formation, flying west over the Aleutian Island chain in the dead of night.

He flew his Little Bird *Linda* close beside the Black Hawk *Beatrix*. M&M and Kenny flew the 5E's other Little Bird Leeloo on *Beatrix's* opposite side. Trailing a mile behind was the workhorse of the outfit, the *Carrie-Anne*. The heavy-lifter Chinook helicopter flown by Napier and Danielle was the key to tonight's operation. The rest of them were distraction and protection. Three attack helos and one massive transport bird. It had certainly been working for them in the three months since they'd been formed up as a company.

Mick admitted it was a little unusual to be taking on the most paranoid Navy on the planet, the North Koreans. But...

"It doesn't feel atypically extreme," he teased Patty.

He could sense her shrug through their shared flight controls. The collective in his left hand beside the seat didn't lift, but he could feel the vibration of her gesture. The cyclic joystick that arced up between their knees didn't even wiggle that much. A pilot learned to isolate gestures from the flight controls.

Mick was damn glad to have Patty riding second on the controls. Flying in tandem like this helped prevent some subtle control mistake that might kill them both. A pilot as good as Patty added another layer of security, particularly in such foul conditions. He always flew at his best with her. Not that he was trying to impress her or anything, she just brought out the best pilot in him.

Along with the rain, the wind picked up another ten knots and the waves another dozen feet. He climbed to stay fifty feet above the crests.

This whole mess had started with the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy. The PLAN had buddied up with Russia for a massive naval exercise close enough to Japan to give the Japanese a major case of hives. Then, instead of turning for home like good little destroyers and landing craft, they'd driven for US territorial waters. The PLAN didn't push three thousand miles from their home waters just by chance.

"Right of Innocent Passage, my ass," Patty grumbled.

"Kind of my thought as well, but it is the law."

Major Napier's briefing for the flight had reminded them that "innocent passage" was allowed under the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea. As long as they did nothing aggressive, like launching planes or attack watercraft, they could sail right through another nation's territorial waters and say, "Oh, I'm not really here; just in transit."

The fact that the Chinese freaked every time the US came within two-hundred miles of their coast hadn't stopped the Chinese from steaming a loop within a five miles Attu—the farthest west of the Aleutian Islands, uninhabited since 2011. The Pentagon had displayed far more restraint than the Chinese Coast Guard by sensibly doing absolutely nothing.

Then badly misreading the situation—and unaware of the numerous tiny retributions that the Chinese were bound to suffer for a long time to come—the North Korean leader had decided that if the Chinese could flaunt the Americans, so could he.

He'd mobilized every ship that was in good enough repair to risk such a long voyage—all three of them. North Korea's navy was called a "brown water navy" with reason. Most of their vessels weren't even capable of circling from one coast of North Korea, around South Korea, and to the other side—a journey of less than a thousand miles.

Striking for the Aleutians *was* nuts, even if he'd never admit his agreement with Patty just on principal.

The first time, the Pentagon had again turned a blind eye just as they had with the Chinese. The second time the US had sent a pair of jets to do a low-level flyby that hadn't deterred the North Koreans. The third North Korean incursion had passed right between Kanaga and Tanaga Islands in the outer Aleutians—a strait less than five miles wide—to thumb their noses at the Americans.

This time, working their way up the island chain to see just how far they could push it, they had crossed past Dutch Harbor and Unalaska Island within plain sight of the Alaska ferry and innumerable fisherman. Dutch was the largest fishery port in the US and that was too much for the Pentagon. And apparently for Patty O'Donoghue as well.

“The fourth goddamn passage in four weeks is—”

“Is why we're here tonight,” he cut off her rant before she could get her Irish up. Because when Patty did, she wasn't a firecracker, she was a battering ram. She made most of the other pilots psychotic after a single hour aloft.

Her sharp humor and passionate emotions worked for him, at least in flight. Whoever she finally latched onto in the personal side of her life would need the patience of Job or to be just as feisty as she was; he'd wager on the latter, with battles royal ensuing into the foreseeable future with both sides enjoying themselves immensely.

At the moment her sights were aimed at Julian, the copilot on the DAP Hawk *Beatrix*—except she hadn't taken any action yet, at least none that he'd spotted. Maybe he'd misread it. At the end of training it had been a mechanic back at Fort Campbell. Before that was a Specialist in the 101st Airborne and then...

Patty O'Donoghue was a looker with her thick, ember-dark red hair and cream skin, and could have her pick. But, man, the woman was a handful. He wished “whoever” all the luck in the world; they were going to need it.

His idea of an ideal woman was—

“Contact with Korean People’s Navy group, it is in thirty miles,” Lieutenant Sofia Gracie’s voice whispered over the encrypted radio, rich with mellifluous tones of her Brazilian childhood and Los Angeles upbringing. “Correct bearing to three-oh-five.”

He could listen to her voice all—

“You gonna fly this thing *o-ah* shall I, dream boy?” Patty interrupted his thoughts.

“Sure, Patty. Like I’d trust you at the controls.” Which he did—absolutely—or he wouldn’t be flying with her. She was damned good and only flew copilot because he was a little better at the flying and she was a little better at handling the weapons while he flew. He was also Lieutenant to her Chief Warrant 3 for what little respect Patty deemed that to be worth. It earned him the occasional salute, a moderately frequent “sir”—though that was often ironic—and what he felt was more than his fair share of sass.

No big deal anyway. Mick wasn’t more than a second or two late in correcting his flight path to match the other three birds in the flight, all now heading directly toward the tiny KPN fleet. It wasn’t like they were flying a tight formation in this weather. His primary worry was not eating a rogue wave at this low flight level.

“They don’t even own a destroyer to send,” Patty protested as if the KPN’s finest had been sent as a personal insult to one Chief Warrant O’Donoghue. “Their only full frigate has never been seaworthy. They gotta send us *light* frigates, corvettes really. These boys really need to be spanked and sent back home.”

“Which is why we’re here,” though he didn’t waste his effort on saying it aloud. Patty was perfectly capable of sustaining the conversation on her own. Gods but the woman cracked him up.

A straight-in approach was safe enough, because the entire 5E flew stealth-modified aircraft. At fifty feet up in a storm, the Koreans’ radar wouldn’t see a thing of their four helicopters. Of course, if it weren’t for the lovely Sofia flying her Avenger

drone fifty thousand feet above them, they wouldn't be seeing a thing either.

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Patty could see exactly where Mick's attention had gone; like he stood a chance. He'd been smitten since the first moment Second Lieutenant Sofia Gracie had been added to their team. All of the guys had been gobsmacked because Sofia really was that stunning. Most of them had recovered with time, but Mick wasn't one of them.

Being strictly impartial about it, Mick was a handsome enough bastard in a dark, brooding way. Black hair flowed to his collar, matching his dark eyes. It was that deep, soft voice of his that slayed Patty, though she wasn't complaining about his fisherman's physique or the way his big hands were so light on the Little Bird's controls either.

The Mighty Quinn was a solid anchor in any situation. He was always so calm and steady, no matter what storm she tossed in his direction to best him.

He was also one of the few that could keep up with her, male or female. No insult to Kenny and M&M in the *Leeloo*, but they just didn't have the feel for the sprightliness of the Little Bird helos the way that Mick did with the *Linda*. Each time she'd flown with them, they'd learned far more from her than she from them. Mick could just as easily be "Magic Man" as "The Mighty Quinn" for what he could make their aircraft do.

Not that she'd ever consider telling him. If his head ever became as swollen as his shoulders, she'd have to copilot from the outside of the helicopter rather than the left-hand seat. The stealth aircraft flew with its doors on, unlike most Little Birds—the door had a lower radar signature than a pilot sitting in their seat. Mick was an easy man to share the cramped space with.

But if he thought all that was enough to win him "Latin Lady's" undying affection, then good luck to him. Patty hadn't

seen Sofia pick up even a single hint, not that Mick had dropped one either. Dumb. Guys were so damn dumb.

Sofia was in some whole other class of woman that was way above a guy who was merely dark and handsome. She should be modeling women's underwear or doing Miss Clairol commercials with that swirling dark hair and her Brazilian-brown skin. Or Estée Lauder with those dark, dark eyes.

But she didn't.

She was an awesome Avenger pilot. Of course that meant that she and her copilot flew their remotely-piloted aircraft from a cargo container packed with high-tech gear currently parked at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson—typically called a “coffin” for its long, low shape. JBER was eight hundred miles away back in Anchorage, but satellite communications made that irrelevant. No matter that she wasn't physically present, because she did it damn well. She had proved several times that she knew exactly what to do with her drone—sorry Sofia—her jet-powered RPA that flew ten miles up at four-hundred-and-fifty miles-an-hour.

Sofia was also an easy person to like. Maybe there was some way Patty could encourage Mick, but sabotage him with Sofia at the same time just for the hell of it. Nah! The few times she'd stuck her foot in someone else's mess, she'd only made it worse... and then gotten caught. Didn't matter; she had faith that the big lummox would find a way to fail all on his own. Too bad; they'd look good together. Of course, any man would with Sofia on their arm.

And now it was time to look good for the North Koreans... who would never see them coming.

Fifty feet up, they should pick up the Korean's top-of-mast radar at ten miles out.

“Five. Four. Three. Two...” She stretched it out, but shouldn't have. Right on cue, the KPN's radar sweeps blasted onto the Little Bird's passive detection systems.

“How do you do things like that?”

“*Shit* like that, Quinn. For God’s sake, loosen up. And it’s because I’m that goddamn good. Not that it matters. Look at the frequency these guys are using,” she waved at hand at the console, knowing Mick didn’t have time to look down. “They’re running tech that the Army retired back while you and I were still pooping up our diapers, or at least you were. I was always a dainty little child.”

“Uh-huh,” Mick’s grunt might have been long-suffering or it might have been a tease. Man’s grunts were hard to read.

“The KPN’s radar uses such a broad sweep that we could fly right between their lines of resolution. Even Danielle’s big-ass Chinook could do that.”

Why was it that the ever so classy Danielle flew the monstrous, twin-rotor *Carrie-Anne*? Of course flying in a Chinook MH-47G named for the actress who played Trinity in *The Matrix*—the ultimate leather-clad kick-ass heroine—had its points.

Still, Patty could have enjoyed flying her Little Bird with Danielle, not that she wanted to trade Mick even one little bit. Not only was he exceptional as a flier, but if your pilot was supposed to be eye candy, Mick fit that bill very nicely too.

But Danielle had so much smooth sophistication that Patty knew she totally lacked. If they flew as a girl-girl team, it would have been fun...and maybe a little of the effortless elegance would have rubbed off on her.

“Too bad for the KPN,” Mick didn’t sound sorry at all, “that we’re stealth rigged. All that energy spent looking for something they’ll never see.”

“Poor bastards,” Patty agreed. The storm was beating on them now, thick with rain and hard winds. The KPN’s ships were all in the two- to three-hundred foot range, but narrow enough that they rolled hard in the rough waves. Even for people she didn’t like, they were not having a good day...and the Night Stalkers were about to make it even worse.

“Just makes it more fun,” Mick commented.

“You *are* evil and twisted. There’s hope for you yet, Quinn,” she grinned behind the lowered visor of her helmet which was

glowing on the inside with layers of rapidly shifting tactical information.

Mick didn't let his snide out very often, but she always appreciated it when he did.

"Knew there was a reason I liked flying with you." Because whatever else The Mighty Quinn might be, he was a kick-ass pilot and a hell of a partner.

She was never as good beside any other pilot; his skill demanded her best performance be even better. *Be all you can be.* Hell with joining the Army, she'd already done that. Earn the right to fly beside Mick Quinn, that took some serious doing.

"Our target will be the westernmost ship," she filled him in. "It's also the biggest, a Nampo class. Twin 30mm machine guns, so don't mess with that. And intel says an RBU-1200—that's a five-missile anti-submarine weapon so we should be fine as long as you don't dump us in the soup."

"Wasn't planning on it," Mick stated it as if he was discussing a change in a battle plan. She really needed to find a way to loosen him up.

"They also have a helo platform, not that they have the skills to launch in this weather. Rumor has it that they're still flying Russian Mi-4 Hounds. You know those things are half a century old. It would be really cool to see one, even parked on a crap frigate. North Korea is the last nation trying to fly them."

"One minute," Major Napier, their company commander, called over the encrypted radio channel from the trailing Chinook *Carrie-Anne*. "Keep them busy."

"Dance!" Danielle called before Napier clicked off.

That was another reason to want to be like Captain Danielle Dellacroix.

*Dance.*

It was one of those crazy commands that the captain had cooked up during training—back before they'd been formed into the 5E and Pete "The Rapier" Napier took command.

If Patty could be any other woman, it wouldn't be the curvaceous Sofia Gracie; it would be Captain Delacroix with her soft-spoken Québécois French accent and exceptionally strategic mind. Though if she'd been Danielle, she'd now be married to Major Pete Napier and Patty would have killed his ass in the first month. He'd be damned irritating if he wasn't such a good commander.

So, not Danielle.

Patty would find her boy someday. But he wouldn't be a fisherman, who thought a pretty woman on a working boat was an open invitation. The first real attack had only been averted because she happened to be in the galley and could grab a knife. After that, she'd learned to always have a blade handy and still had to flash it at the occasional overeager asshole to convince them that "No!" meant no. Two of them she'd had to scar but good before they'd backed off.

And it wouldn't be some gung-ho Army pilot too damn sure of himself. If she never heard some airjock say "Come fly me!" then ask if she still had her stewardess uniform again, it would be too soon. She'd had enough of those kind of creeps who didn't like the fact that she could out fly every one of their asses. By that time she didn't need a knife, the Army had trained her plenty well in hand-to-hand combat. Switching to Special Operations had only honed those skills.

She glanced over at Mick. And it sure as hell wouldn't be someone who was both fisher and pilot no matter how handsome.

In the meantime she had every intention of enjoying herself. She'd taken up with teasing Julian over on the *Beatrix*. But it was just to mess with his head, there was nothing ever going to happen there. As it was, she'd been having a long dry spell and was just fine with that.

*Dance*, Danielle had said. She'd just instructed each of the pilots to implement evasive tactics based on their favorite music. Better than something *Star Trekish* like "Execute Evasion Plan Delta." The military's top pilots would each dance differently and

it made the flight wholly unpredictable and nearly impossible to target. It also meant...

“Oh, man! You are *not* gonna hit me with country,” she aimed her complaint at Mick over the on-board intercom. She checked that all weapons’ systems were armed and ready in case the North Koreans were dumb enough to actually try and engage American aircraft while sailing in American waters.

“Only the finest,” Mick began humming some Tim McGraw song.

“Goddamn it, Quinn. How is it possible that a perfectly respectable girl knows that’s a Tim McGraw song? You’re ruining me.”

“Because a perfectly respectable girl *would* know it was Tim McGraw.”

“That’s not true!” Patty resisted the urge to stomp a little rock and roll into the rudder pedals as he began making the Little Bird shift and sway.

“It is,” Mick continued placidly. “Which begs the question of how you know anything about it.”

So much worse than that, she even knew the words well enough to sing along—which she absolutely wasn’t about to do. “I’m gonna request a goddamn new pilot; one who knows decent music when he hears it.”

He hummed even louder over the intercom until it was resonating inside her helmet.

“Keep it up and you’re gonna be so dead that you’ll be way past living like you still had any dying to do.”

Patty knew it was a mistake as soon as she said it.

Mick broke into full song with the last line of the refrain, which is what she’d just done her best to mangle. Then he began all over going on all about skydiving and climbing mountains—the helicopter swooping and slipping through the air in perfect time to his music. He wielded a good, deep baritone designed to turn a girl into a liquid puddle.

Well not her.

She fought back with Marianas Trench's *Fallout*, but she couldn't carry a tune for crap so her attempt at punk/emo didn't cut him down even a little.