

The Pentagon
September 25, 1993
6:30 a.m.

Chapter One

“Have a seat,” Fangmeyer said without looking up. Deputy to the Chief of Navy Information, he was a compact man in his late forties with a pelt of brown hair shaved close to his head. He’d been an enlisted man in Viet Nam, and his left chest pocket was flecked with medals.

“I’ll pass, sir, if you don’t mind,” she said. “I’ve got to sit all day.”

He squinted at her, one eyebrow raised. She wore fresh-pressed summer whites. Her hair—cat-black with a few wiry strands of early gray—was pulled back from her face and plaited in a braid so tight the widow’s peak lay exposed. A twenty-five year old lieutenant filling a commander’s billet. “Donovan, is it possible for you to follow even a simple order without qualification?” he asked.

“Of course, sir.” She perched on the arm of his couch and began tapping her foot as she scanned the stacks of folders piled on his desk. The Navy had plenty of trouble these days.

“Now, please, stop moving.” His lower lip bulged with tobacco.

“Aye, aye, sir.” She snapped a mock salute.

He shook his head and a faint smile crossed his lips before he turned back to the papers on his desk. She was one of the few in the office who dared to joke with him. She knew his limits.

Newspapers lay askew on his desk. On the bookshelf behind him lay a carton of orange juice, a green can of chew, a bag of homemade beef jerky, and the TV clicker. The TV bolted to the left wall made a soft humming sound. The office, like most spaces in the Pentagon, was devoid of natural light. Squares of florescence glowed from the ceiling.

Bridget tried to imagine the day's potential questions. *Was it true more carriers were being ordered to the Gulf? Were Navy jets going to be used in Kosovo? When were submarines going to be open to women?*

Finally Fangmeyer capped his pen and looked up. His face appeared strained. She caught a glimpse of Congressional letterhead.

"Did something happen on the Hill, sir?" she asked.

"Congress is still holding up promotions. The Secretary of the Navy wants to personally interview all the admirals who attended Tailhook." He raised a soda can with the top sawed off to his mouth and dribbled out a stream of black. The scent of wet tobacco wafted across the room. Fangmeyer tossed the folders in his outbox.

"I thought the interviews already happened."

"If people had only told the truth in the beginning." He sighed and stared off into the corner where a pen-and-ink sketch of a log cabin hung alongside a series of blue prints. He'd bought land for his dream house, he'd told her in a moment of rare personal openness, five acres bordering a stream in southwest Kentucky.

"You think the admirals lied?"

"I'd call it more like selective recall. I never went to Tailhook, but I hear it was a hell of a party. No secret about that. The last admiral I worked for wouldn't let his daughter attend.

Said it was no place for a lady. And now he's the one acting shocked by the findings.”

Fangmeyer rubbed his eyes. As the second highest ranking officer in the Navy information department, he decided what stories could be briefed to the media and who could do it.

Pentagon correspondents trekked in and out of his office all day. He shifted the subject. “A Hornet crashed last night.”

Bridget bit her lip automatically. “Not again.”

Fangmeyer readjusted his chew. “Carrier night launch. Somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. This one's a bit different. Heck, they're all different. The pilot was female. Ring knocker, like you.”

Audrey. No. As quickly as the name flashed through her mind, Bridget dismissed the thought. Her Naval Academy class, 1990, had begun with 110 women and finished with 80. She'd known them all. About 10 had chosen aviation. Three from the basketball team. A few engineers. Two women who played with her on the tennis team. And Audrey, her roommate, varsity platform diver. The ones who chose aviation had a certain fierceness to their demeanor. A cool detachment. Flat eyes. Eerily perfect vision.

Bridget leaned closer as Fangmeyer started talking again. “It's the first female training death on a carrier. The pilot was going to be assigned to a combat squadron if she qualified. Another first. I don't have to tell you the level of interest this one's going to have. I need you to read over the proposed Q and A then go help Elliott on the news desk. Lord knows, he could use help on the best of days.”

He passed an oversized royal blue folder stamped *Confidential* across the desk.

“This story's going to pull a lot of attention. More if it's not handled right.”

Bridget opened the folder. The floor began to tilt. She leaned back against the couch.

“What is it?” Fangmeyer asked.

“Nothing.” No one was going to see her fall apart.

“Well, message line-up starts in two minutes.” Fangmeyer stood and dislodged the rest of his chew into the can. He swilled orange juice, swished it in his mouth like a fluoride rinse and swallowed. “I’ve got to run now. We’ll talk later.”

She clutched the folder to her chest and headed for the door. “Another great Navy day.”