

S.F.A.I.L.O.
TEAM OMEGA



flames
of
betrayal

SHEIRA ROSE

S.E.A.L. Team Omega

Flames of Betrayal

By

Sierra Rose

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Flames of Betrayal

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Platoon Rollcall

S.E.A.L. Team Omega First Platoon, based out of Coronado, California, as part of Naval Special Warfare Group-1, has been assigned solely to the National Security Agency for use in covert actions anywhere in the world. Chain of command goes through the NSA, the Navy CNO and the President of the United States. They do not operate by standard Navy protocol.

Rear Admiral Anthony Sanford: Commander of all SEAL teams on either Coast. He's based between Coronado, California, and Little Creek, Virginia. Age: 56

Captain Montel Jackson: He's the commanding officer of the NAVSPECWARGROUP-1 in Coronado, California. African-American male. Age: 56.

Commander James St. Clair: He's the Commanding Officer of the Navy Special Warfare Group 1 S.E.A.L. Team Omega in Coronado, California. Age: 49, 6'1", 225lbs. Annapolis graduate.

Master Chief Petty Officer Douglas MacCray: He's administrator and top enlisted man of all the SEALs in Coronado. Age: 49, 5'8", 190lbs. Former Senior Chief for S.E.A.L. Team Omega until promotion.

Grady Shaw He's the NSA liaison with S.E.A.L. Team Omega. Gives them their orders and works between the group, the CNO, the NSA and the President. Thinning hair, loyal, and likes to hunt and fish. Age 40

Commander Ethan Tremayne: Platoon co-leader, Age:33, 6'6", 220 lbs. An Annapolis graduate, seven years in the Navy, two in the SEALs. This is first command. Father,(James Douglas) is a vital ex-Senator and current Congressman from Kentucky. Owns a condo in Coronado, drives a Jeep Cherokee. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with a 20mm grenade launcher. He speaks Arabic, French, and German. Blue eyes with collar length black hair.

Commander Cassidy Marshall: Platoon co-leader by special Presidential order. Age: 28, 5'4", 130lbs. Born in London, raised in Virginia at Eagle's Rock. In addition, a member of two anti-terrorist teams based from there, owns Marshall Enterprises. Weapons: 9mm Browning Hi-Power, H&K MP-5 SD sub-machine gun. She speaks fluent German, Spanish, some French, and Italian. She has blue eyes with long auburn hair.

ALPHA SQUAD ROSTER:

Michael Chaning: He's the Senior Chief Petty Officer & Top EM in First Platoon, third in command. Age: 33, 6'3", 220lbs. He's married to Connie, two kids. He's been in the Navy for sixteen years and a SEAL for five. Expert fisherman, plays guitar in a blues band. His Weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with a 20mm launcher. He's good with the man, strong and strict but not harsh. He speaks Spanish, Farsi, and some Hebrew. He has brown eyes with short dark blond hair.

Kendal Chase 'Casey' Gibson: Machinist Mate, 1st Class. Lead Petty Officer. Age: 28, 6', 190lbs. He has a quick mind and a good planner when he applies self to it. Drinks and gambles too much at times, when drunk he sings. He likes to flirt. He's an Idaho native. He's an expert with all small arms. Weapon: H&K MP-5 submachine gun. He will aid in planning the ops. He has green-eyes with blond hair that's often past collar.

Rafael Chavez: Gunner's Mate 2nd Class. Age: 29, 6'2", 190lbs. Wife is Sophia, 5-year-old daughter, Pilar. He lives with family in La Jolla. He speaks Spanish, Portuguese, Farsi, and some French. He's the Alpha Squad sniper with an H&K PSG-1 7.62 rifle. He has Brown eyes, black hair that's longer than normal.

Jace Adams: Quartermaster, 1st Class. Age: 24, 6'1", 240lbs. Born in Rhode Island. Ex-High School football star was going pro until he joined the Navy. He's divorced, with no kids. Quiet and enjoys readings, mainly classic horror. Platoon Radio operator who carries the SATCOM unit. Weapon is Alliant Bullpup 5.56 with a 20mm launcher. He speaks some Arabic, French, and German. He has green eyes with blond hair.

Jake Summers: Operations Specialist, 2nd Class. Age: 22, 5'9" 190lbs. Platoon tracker and a quick thinker. Has two years of college. Loves motorcycles and is building one. He enjoys a good party and prefers robust girls. Weapon is either an M-16 with attached grenade launcher or the Alliant Bullpup 5.56 with 20mm explosive round launcher. He speaks several Spanish languages, Farsi and some Chinese. He grew up in Puerto Rico. Has brown eyes and black hair.

Joe ‘Jo-Long’ Carver: Quartermaster, 2nd Class. Age: 24, 6’1”, 185lbs. Son of an American Marine and a Chinese dancer. Platoon translator who speaks Mandarin, Cantonese and two other Chinese languages, Korean, Russian, and Japanese. He’s a marathon nut. Weapon: H&K MP-5 submachine gun. He’s from Sacramento. He has brown eyes with short black hair.

Rusty Kayayan: Electrician’s Mate, 1st Class. Age: 23, 6’2”, 200lbs. He was born in the U.S., parents originally from Armenia. He enlisted the day of High School graduation. Played soccer in school, wants to be professional fisherman once hitch in the Navy is up. He’s a good mechanic who loves to tinker in all things electronic. He’s squad machine gunner. His weapon is an H&K 21-E 7.62 NATO machine gun. He speaks Armenian, German, some Hebrew, and Arabic. He has brown-eyes with brown hair that’s always in his face.

BRAVO SQUAD ROSTER:

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Logan Brookes: Squad leader for Bravo Squad, second in command of the platoon. Age: 33, 6’3”, 220lbs. He’s originally from Oregon. He’s has ten years in the Navy with four in the SEALs. He loves to paraglide. He’s married to Paige, a corporate lawyer, no kids. An Annapolis graduate, Father is a Navy Admiral. Grew up in 8 States and 3 countries. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with 20mm launcher or H&K MP-5. He speaks German, Italian, and Spanish with some French. He has blue eyes with thick, wavy brown hair.

Darius Ford: Gunner’s Mate 2nd Class. Age: 26, 6’2”, 220 lbs. Single, African-American, played basketball in high school. He’s an artist in his free time who draws and paints in all mediums. He likes to do seascapes. He’s been in the Navy for six years and a SEAL for four. He rides an old low-rider motorcycle. Bravo Squad Sniper with a H&K PSG-1 7.62 rifle. He speaks some Spanish and French. He has brown eyes with black short hair.

Sloan O’Brien: Hospital Corpsman, 1st Class. Age: 27, 6’6”, 200 lbs. He’s the Platoon Medic, a marathon swimmer, Scottish ancestry. Lifts weights and generally presses 275 pounds. He likes to surf and race. He’s divorced, with no kids and dates frequently. Weapon is the Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm or a H&K G-11 caseless rifle. He has green eyes with red wavy hair. He has an easy going manner.

Zak Lani: Yeoman, 2nd Class. Age: 22, 5’6”, 175lbs. Hawaiian native. He loves animals, divorced with four kids. He speaks Hawaiian, Farsi, and Arabic. Expert with knives and can throw with a deadly accuracy. He uses shuriken when possible. He’s very agile. Weapon is the H&K MP-5 Submachine gun. Has brown eyes with short brown hair, deeply tanned. He loves to play jokes.

Mason Palmer: Torpedoman’s Mate, 2nd Class. Age: 28, 5’9”, 195 lbs. Married to Rebecca, a Navy wife, with 4 kids. He spent ten years in the Navy and four in the SEALs. Demo expert. He’s the top

pick in the Navy for explosives work. His weapon is an Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm. He speaks German and some Farsi. He was born in Georgia. He has green eyes with short blond hair.

Mark Robson: Engineman, 1st Class. Age: 22, 5'9", 190lbs. African-American. He's an expert with most weapons and always working on them. Weapon is the Alliant Bullpup 5.56mm with 20mm launcher. He loves to play chess. He has green eyes with curly black hair.

Perry Klein: Radioman, 1st Class. Age: 24 6'1", 190lbs. Comes from a small town in Wyoming. On both High School and Navy rifle team. Played 2nd base in College baseball. Loves the water and is an expert in using a kayak, canoe or small watercraft. He's single, shy with girls. Speaks excellent Japanese, good Spanish. Weapon is H&K MP-5 submachine gun. He has blond hair and green eyes.

Chapter One

The USS Constellation was one of the United States Navy's premier flagships for one of its carrier groups. It patrolled part of the largest areas of ocean between the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic.

The normal routine for the large carrier and its group was mainly surveillance and training. At least up until a week ago when orders came from the Navy chief of command of the Atlantic division.

The huge carrier found itself under the temporary command of Colonel Samuel Barnes and his team. The assignment was to locate and stop a renegade Chinese general who had allied himself with a group of militant North Korean and Muslim terrorists with claims of possessing of a small nuclear weapon.

It was certainly a switch from fake training to being on the edge of actual combat if called on.

Luckily, Colonel Barnes and his men had been able to handle the terrorists and their nuclear weapon with no lives being lost except for that of some of the terrorists.

Now it was just a matter of dealing with the tedious task of the big boat trudging back across the still waters waiting for a helicopter contact that would take the commandos off ship to a new battlefield.

"Well, Colonel, I'd say this has been one wild week." Admiral James Horton, the commander of the Constellation and her group, was speaking to Sam Barnes from the front bridge of the battle ship.

Dressed in clean fatigues, Colonel Barnes didn't reply. Instead, he looked out at the now calm waters after last night's brutal storm and thought back to the previous mission.

A tall man with wavy blond hair that brushed his collar and ice blue eyes, this soldier had gone thru many names in his life before the current guise of Samuel Barnes.

Called the Lone Wolf in the killing fields of Vietnam, Major Jon Stone at one point in his government career but still the name he knows himself as and one that many would recognize as the most famous killer in history, Jared Taylor.

Now as he stood on a battleship after another fight, he silently wondered how cordial the Navy man would be if he knew exactly whom he had on his ship currently.

Taylor and his warriors had been done with their mission for three days and was now killing time on the boat either with training exercises or in the case of four of his longtime friends driving the crew crazy.

"Nah, this job was a piece of cake." Eli Schultz spoke to the Admiral from across the bridge where he was examining electronic gear over a tech's shoulder. "Usually Sean and Aiden are at each other's throats."

The electronic wizard for Lightning Team, the blond haired fighter exchanged grins with his stockier, black haired Hispanic and slender, fair-haired teammates.

"This time, there have been only a few growls."

One of the two men mentioned, a tall, rangy black haired man with cool blue eyes, turned to cast a dry look at his team members.

"Mainly because this boat is so huge those kids have plenty of room to play and not be in my face."

Sean Grant was Lightning Team's boss. A former Delta Force member and ex-cop from Houston, Texas, he had been a lead officer on the task force assigned to capture or kill Jared Taylor but soon left that for the Justice Department and then Lightning Team.

A highly impatient man with a quick temper he was often the brunt of jokes from his teammates and from the young members of the Mavericks, the mercenary unit his foster sister owned and controlled.

"Yeah, but what would you guys do without us to save your butts?" Aiden West asked as he and several of his top team members entered the bridge.

Admiral Horton couldn't keep the frown from his face as these young men entered his bridge.

The Mavericks were the main subsidiary of Marshall Enterprises, and world-class mercenaries. They often worked with Taylor and the other teams at Eagle's Rock even though everyone agreed the Mavericks were always happier when they could work alone.

West, a young man in his late twenties or early thirties with long black hair and brown eyes usually hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, smirked at the men of Lightning Team.

The young mercs had been both below decks and out on the flight deck playing with paint guns since Taylor had put his foot down on allowing them to use their actual guns.

It was plain by the paint spots on their clothes that the war had been something of a massacre.

"I, for one, would live better." Grant shot back but grinned as his sister rolled her eyes.

The youngest of both Lightning Team and their counterparts in Omega Force, Cassidy Marshall was in her late twenties.

A British girl with long auburn hair and blue eyes, she owned one of the most successful corporations in the world but more to her concern, she was also one of the youngest commandos in the world.

"Admiral, Admiral Miller from the USS Liberty is contacting us." a communication tech spoke up.

Horton turned and motioned the man to go on. "What did he want?"

"They'd like for us to send out a couple of our 'copters to search for a SEAL team they lost contact with during the storm last night." the tech replied.

No one on the bridge noticed the change that came over Cassidy or the present Mavericks.

"Someone was out in that storm?" Evan Garret, the fourth member of Lightning Team, gaped, not believing it. "Why?"

"According to the Liberty, the Seals were looking for a trawler or something they believed to be carrying illegal cargo of some kind but their contact on the ship lost contact with them and the Admiral would like us to send out search parties since we are closer than they are." the tech explained.

"Yes, I was informed of the situation." Horton nodded then shook his head. "Please tell Miller we are unable to comply."

Taylor looked at the man, noticing his adopted sister was frowning. "What were the last known coordinates?" he asked.

As the tech read off the numbers, Aiden West looked at a map on a wall. "That's about thirty minutes from here. You launch a chopper or two; it would be easy to search for them."

"I was contacted early this morning from Captain Lewis of Naval Intel and he said that any request to search for this team was to be ignored." he replied stiffly.

“What SEAL team is it?” Cassidy asked, almost hoping she was wrong but a cold gut feeling told her she wouldn’t be.

“First Platoon of Seal Team Omega based out of Coronado.” Horton replied, shrugging. “Tremayne’s team never should have been out in that weather and now he’ll learn.”

West grabbed his friend by the arm before she could spit a harsh reply at that.

The young woman had a good reason for knowing that SEAL team well as she had spent several months with them as co-leader and had grown quite close to their team leader, Commander Ethan Tremayne.

“Cool it.” he whispered, eyeing the map again then his friend. “We need to handle this calmly.”

“Admiral, one of my men is a licensed pilot. How about letting us go out and look for Tremayne’s team?” he asked calmly, wishing his diplomat had been with them instead of up on the flight deck.

Horton seemed to sneer at the merc leader. “No mercenary is touching one of my aircraft and I have my orders for Tremayne’s unit. They’re dead.”

Cassidy frowned, not liking the tone or words. “Aiden, do something.”

West nodded barely, looking around them. He had three members of his team with him but armed with only realistic looking paint guns. “Reese, you still up on deck with the guys?”

The microphones the team was connected with were small, flesh colored equipment that was taped on the throat and could pick up the softest words so when he spoke, West spoke under his breath but his second in command had no trouble picking him up.

“Yep, got our gear packed and we’re ready to scoot.” Reese Fletcher acknowledged him while keeping an eye on his team and the assembled sailors on the deck.

“How much trouble would it be for you guys to sort of ‘acquire’ two Blackhawk’s?” West asked while silently giving his men directions.

While Taylor argued with Horton on his decision, Grant was watching his sister and the boys. Noticing the change in their behavior told him something was up.

Silence answered West while the dark blond Boston native hesitated over the question, not sure that he had heard correctly. “Ah, yeah, I’m looking at some right now. Is there a reason we’re going to commit a major felony against the Navy?”

“Explain later. Tell the boys, no deaths. Just hold the Navy boys off until we get up to you.” West ordered, looking at Cassidy. “We do this; we blow our freedom if caught and our clearances.”

“I need to find them,” she answered, hating to involve the Mavericks but not seeing any other choice. “I have my Browning, you have a plan?”

West sighed, considering then nodding. “Shoot the radio panel and we’ll hope that we can pull this off.”

“I’m sorry, Colonel Barnes. My orders are firm and...” the gunshot sounded like a cannon blast as the 9mm pistol shattered the radio panel and sent the technician running for cover.

People whirled to stare but as people began reaching for weapons, the present Mavericks had pulled guns.

“Let’s not do that, boys.” West aimed his ‘gun’ at the Admiral but eyed Jared Taylor firmly while Lee Chan went around collecting the guns from the sailors. “Rules are very simple: no one moves or tries anything and things stay fine. Do something stupid and someone gets hurt.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Eli demanded, flabbergasted by this.

Troy McDowell, the Mavericks 4th in command, shrugged as he pointed his weapon at the group. "I think we're borrowing a couple choppers and going SEAL hunting."

"Cass, don't do this." Taylor declared, eyeing his sister and reading her eyes. "Let me call Washington. Adam can sort this out."

"That's too late. By the time Adam and the President talk for hours, Ethan and the lads could be dead." she returned, backing slowly toward the door with a look of sorry. "I'm sorry but...they're my friends and this all stinks too much for me to let them die like this."

West jerked his head toward the door. "Don't worry Admiral. If at all possible your aircraft will be returned." he paused at the bulkhead door. "Oh, we're jamming this but be cool. I'm sure one of your sailors will come down and let you guys out."

"West!" Grant snapped, uncertain if he should be amused or angry. "You really think you'll get away with this?"

"Probably not Sean but then at least you won't have to worry about putting up with us any more," the merc leader replied with a shrug, adding. "They mean a lot to her and what the boss says goes."

He slammed the door shut with a bang while Troy and Lee blocked the handle with some pipes they had found.

"This won't keep Taylor very long." Lee remarked as they ran up to the flight deck.

"It won't have to." Cassidy replied reaching the deck to see that the assembled crew had all been locked in a shed off to one side and the rest of the Mavericks were running to two already running Blackhawk helicopters.

Reese Fletcher was sitting in the cockpit of the lead chopper as his team leaders boarded and the door slammed shut.

"Does anyone care to tell me what in the hell we're doing and more to the point, why?" he asked calmly after the others had donned headsets.

"Tremayne's team was out in the storm last night and now no one can raise them. Admiral Horton knew about it already but refused to send help so we're...doing it." West explained, turning to look back at his employer. "I just hope they're worth it."

Cassidy didn't choose to reply to the comment. Instead, she was digging in a duffel bag for a small computer like box.

"Does anyone have a bloody clue what frequency Grady Shaw usually uses on the SATCOM?" she asked, turning the box over to a young mercenary.

Remy D'Arcy, a native of New Orleans, expertly handled the SATCOM device that the SEALs always used for communicating and the Mavericks had recently adopted.

"I got it. What makes you think Shaw's on board the Liberty?" he asked curiously, typing numbers in to connect his device with the other mans'.

"Shaw's usually the only contact we have while in the field. He'll be on the Liberty and he's the one who has the information we need." Cassidy replied, hearing her headset switch to a different frequency and seeing Remy nod that they were connected. "Spook-1, this is your second worst nightmare calling. You listening or napping?"

The snickering of several Mavericks was heard but soon a hiss came over the SATCOM then an incredulous voice.

"Whose my main worst nightmare?" the wary voice of NSA agent Grady Shaw could be heard.

Shaw was a short man in his middle ages with thinning hair and had been the main liaison with S.E.A.L. Team Omega ever since they had started working with the NSA.

One of the rare honest spies in the world today he was still wary about certain things and considering his problems of late, this last call had him both surprised and very wary.

“Oh, I figure Adam Olsen when my brother Jared and Lightning Team get to a working radio.” Cassidy replied, rolling her eyes. “C’mon Grady, my time is limited before the Navy boys on the Constellation send out jets after us so fill me in on what the bloody hell you got Ethan into this time.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus, this can’t be good.” Shaw groaned, leaning back in his chair and shaking his head as if the girl or the mercs could see him. “Do I want to know what you and those wonder boys of yours did?”

“No, now give.” came her short reply.

Figuring the situation was bad if the girl wasn’t seriously jumping down his throat yet, Shaw began to explain.

“Short of it, the platoon got a job to go looking for a trawler that is believed to be carrying several hundred tons of pure uranium, drugs and other illegal cargo. We had no clue what ship or even what nation it’s floating under so last night Tremayne and the boys went out to start searching but the storm blew in.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call them back?” Cassidy demanded. “If you knew how bad that storm was going to be they should have been called back.”

“No doubt, kid.” Shaw agreed, explaining. “The group was dropped off in two IBS boats; by the time we learned how bad that storm was going to be it was too late. No chopper could get to them and back before it hit.”

West had been listening and knew how bad that actually was. “When did you lose contact?”

“Actually, the group had separated to search two targets. We lost contact with Ethan’s unit before the storm even hit. I was on the radio with him when what sounded like a shot sounded then nothing and I haven’t been able to reach Channing’s team since the storm.”

Cassidy swore violently. “Alright, give me the last coordinates you had for both teams and... Grady, see if you can’t but us some time. Call Shaun or Steven if you have to have help, just try to buy some time.”

“What in hell did you guys do?” the NSA man demanded, taking a paper he was handed and staring at what it said. “You stole two Blackhawk’s? Horton wants the Liberty to send jets after you guys.”

“First off, we ‘borrowed’ the choppers and second, tell him to go to hell. He refused to send help because he was ordered not to.” Cassidy replied, seeing Remy look at his watch and knowing that even SATCOM transmissions could be traced, she decided to cut the call short. “Got to go, Grady, I’ll call back soon.”

Shaw tried to cut in but heard the link cut off and swore to himself as Admiral Lawrence Miller watched him. “More bad news, I take it?”

“Oh, great news if you like the idea of a bunch of loose cannons with Presidential clearance running around with two ‘borrowed’ Navy Blackhawk helicopters.” he replied sourly, reaching for the radio. “The President is going to love this.”

Chapter Two

“So do we have an idea of where to look,” Aiden West had to split his unit up with one chopper going to one set of coordinates while his Blackhawk went to search the area around the other set. “Trying to find fifteen SEALs and any extra personal they may have had out in the middle of the ocean will be like finding a needle in a haystack.”

Cassidy Marshall had been searching the now calm ocean water with telescopic sights of a rifle. “They have a beacon and we have the frequency. Reese, any luck?” she asked.

Reese Fletcher was trying to fly low to the water without crashing while still keeping an eye on the panels in front of him and still work the cloaking device they had to keep them hidden from the Navy.

“The fact that I haven’t got us killed yet is luck but as to picking up any signals, no.” he called back, meeting his best friend’s eyes and acknowledging the grim truth.

“The odds of finding them alive are slim, Cass, you have to accept that.” West finally had to say, seeing the girl tense and ignore him. “No raft or human being, not even a SEAL, could survive a storm like that.”

She continued to watch the water for any signs of either life or anything that would say they were in the ballpark but all she saw was miles of empty water.

“Cassidy, eventually we’re going to have to face facts that Tremayne and the platoon are dead and return to ship and face that we screwed up.” West had already prepared himself for the anger he saw when she finally turned to face him.

“We turn back when I say and they aren’t dead until I see the bleedin’ bodies.” she replied firmly, meeting and holding his eyes as if daring him to argue.

West was ready to do just that when a weak beeping came from the radio and Remy’s fingers flew over the buttons to trace the signal.

“Reese, 6.5 miles from us is where the strongest reading is.” he yelled to the pilot but Fletcher was already readjusting their course.

While it didn’t take them long to fly to the new area, to Cassidy it seemed like an eternity as she sat and waited. Wondering what they would find when they did arrive.

“We have bodies in the water.” Troy McDowell announced as he looked down at the water.

“How many are there?” Cassidy asked quietly as Weston opened the chopper door and nodded to his men.

“Not sure yet, luv.” the sandy haired Briton replied grimly, jerking the zipper of his wetsuit up.

Several Mavericks had already suited up in wetsuits and as Fletcher lowered them a few feet from the two inflatable objects jumped into the cold water.

Troy had easily reached the men first and seen some were still floating on their own but the raft seemed to be holding a few injured SEALs while the other floating object was a zipped up bag which he would rather ignore for now.

“Hey, Sloan, need a lift?” he asked one of the still floating SEALs.

Sloan O’Brien, a tall, burly SEAL of Scottish heritage, was the platoon medic and the first to easily recognize the rescue team.

“Well damn, getting rescued by Marines is one insult but having to be rescued by you guys is another.” However, the man seemed relieved, swimming around the raft to grasp the hand Troy offered.

“What’s your situation report?” Troy asked, eyeing the other men and seeing some he knew and some he didn’t.

A man he didn’t know replied. “The storm hit us hard but we came through as well as we could, considering. One killed and one serious injury with mostly minor other wounds.”

“Our medic will see to those and we’ll get you back to the Liberty as soon as everyone’s on board.” Troy assured him, trying to place the man from files he’d glimpsed.

Logan Brookes was the team leader of Bravo Squad and second in command of the platoon. A Lieutenant junior grade he was around thirty-three years old and very curious about these men.

“Aiden, we need to get these blokes outta the water. No life threatening injuries just minor ones but one death.” Troy reported into his radio.

The Blackhawk had lowered a bit to allow the other mercenaries to help get the SEALs on board.

Out of fifteen SEALs of First Platoon, they had rescued eight living and one dead. Including O’Brien, there were just three other SEALs the Mavericks knew.

Cassidy was trying to pace in the small confines of the cabin as West and Remy helped waterlogged SEALs up the rope ladder while the black zippered bag was stowed away from view.

“You’re not Navy, I can tell that already” Brookes figured that out quickly as he got fully on board and started to check on his men.

“No, not exactly Lt. Brookes, but that’s a topic for a later time.” Cassidy spoke but her eyes were on a Hispanic looking SEAL who was helped on board with his arm in a sling. “Rafael.”

Rafael Chavez had been with the First Platoon since its founding and one of ones Cassidy had known the longest.

A handsome man in his middle twenties with black hair that usually flouted normal Navy regulations for being long but right now was slicked down with water, his eyes locked on hers and smiled almost reassuringly.

“Got a mixture of Alpha and Bravo squads I see.” West looked around as the last of the SEALs came on board and the door was sealed to allow the chopper to climb and start back to the Liberty.

“We’re called Mavericks, Lieutenant. And as some of your men can attest to, we’ve ‘worked’ with your outfit before.” Aiden West sensed Brooke’s concern and could tell his employer wasn’t ready to announce just how close she was to the platoon.

Kendall C. ‘Casey’ Gibson looked up and seemed confused but was willing to allow things to play out for the time being.

“Any word on the LT’s squad?” he asked curiously, absently batting Ira Weller’s probing fingers away.

Cassidy started to shake her head ‘no’ when a voice came over the radio from the second Blackhawk.

“Aiden, we found the second site.” Lee Chan’s British accent was tight. A sure sign his next words were going to be bad.

West waited a beat before asking. “What else are you going to drop on me?”

“And we have a raft shot full of holes and three bodies, all dead. No sign of the rest either living or dead.” came the ½ Vietnamese, ½ British mercenary’s reply.

The SEALs on board the chopper were grim as the young merc leader asked his next question. "The bodies, we know them?"

"No." Lee was looking at the corpses as he spoke while his unit brought them on board the hovering Blackhawk. "Probably SEALs but none we knew. My guess is the bloody terrorists captured the others. We passed a ship on the way here."

Thinking quickly West made his choice before his leader could cut in. "Alright, pull back and meet back at the Liberty. Get the coordinates of that ship cause I figure we'll be back."

The ½ British lawyer turned mercenary acknowledged and signed off and that left his leader the grim task of facing his own employer.

"Lieutenant, did you have any other people out on this recon?" he asked, needing to determine that all the dead were SEALs.

Brookes shook his head, accepting the bottle of water he was handed. "No but Ethan did have some extra men from another squad."

Cassidy did some quick mental calculations. "That leaves six still unaccounted for."

"If they were dead, the bodies would have been left." Casey replied, not caring for what that meant.

"So, they're prisoners, then." Rafael nodded, wincing as O'Brien rechecked his arm.

"Wonderful." West muttered, rubbing his eyes and already knowing what his friend was thinking and cut in quickly. "First we get these guys back to ship, talk to Shaw, see how much time we have and let me talk to Shaun back in the States. If he can keep the Constellation off our backs or more to the point, Lightning Team, then maybe we can pull a raid off to find Tremayne."

"I will not leave those men." she declared firmly, eyes sparking as she crossed her arms. "Washington can go to hell but I've never left anyone behind and I won't start now."

West blew out a breath, trying to rein in his temper because he knew how she felt but he also knew how much trouble they really were going to be in.

"Damn in, Cassidy! We'll be lucky if we aren't arrested on sight as soon as we land on the Liberty. Trying another move this soon without any backup or authorization is just asking to slit our own throats."

The current SEALs were watching this scene play out and since only three of them knew the young mercenaries, it was clear no one had a clue what was going on.

Rafael Chavez, the sniper for Alpha Squad, coughed lightly to break the tension. "I'm taking a wild guess, but you guys shouldn't be out here, should you?"

He asked the question of the general members of the Mavericks but his dark eyes locked onto Cassidy, knowing by her eyes and body language something was wrong.

"Cassidy Renee, what did you do?" he asked more firmly.

The British girl slowly looked around at the SEALs before finally meeting Rafael's eyes.

"We were on the Constellation when the call came in that you guys had been lost in the storm, some bloke from Navy Intel had already been in touch with Horton, and he refused to send out any search parties... so we came." she explained, hoping he wouldn't notice the lack of information.

Logan Brookes raised his eyebrows. "I can't see a Navy Admiral lending two Black Hawks out to...whatever you guys are."

As the Mavericks carefully avoided that and Cassidy shifted uneasily, Casey finally read the signs and gaped openly. "Oh, my God, you guys stole two Navy helicopters?"

“Borrowed, we only borrowed them for a little while.” Cassidy corrected quickly as Rafael groaned.

“And you had the nerve to lecture us on some of the stunts we pulled.” he muttered, eyeing her warily. “Do I want to ask how exactly you got past the Navy to ‘borrow’ these things?”

West coughed. “Doubt it.”

Brookes was staring between them, getting a gut feeling that he should have stayed in the water. “Just who the hell are you people and what the hell kinds of clearances do you have?”

“Well, before this stunt we had both Presidential and U.N. clearances along with diplomatic immunity.” West sighed, eyeing his friend. “After this, I doubt if we have anything but the Grace of God looking after us and since we’re all atheists, that ain’t much.”

“The Liberty is coming up.” Reese Fletcher called back, adding almost cheerfully. “So far they haven’t locked missiles or the big guns on us.”

“Shut up, Reese.” West snapped catching his Magnum as Remy tossed it to him. “No chances so make sure your sidearms are ready.”

As Fletcher landed, he saw the other team had beaten them back and were still on the flight deck talking with some Navy officers and Grady Shaw.

“Well, Lee and the boys aren’t in chains yet so it could still be clear.” he replied, shutting down the engines and hearing his best friend growl a curse at him.

Deckhands and medics were there to help the injured SEALs out as Shaw came over with a middle-aged man with Admiral’s stripes.

“Welcome back, Logan.” Shaw shook hands with Brookes and was amused at the look he got.

Logan Brookes knew he needed to see that his men were taken care of but his questions were also outstanding in his mind.

“Can you explain what the hell is going on?” he demanded.

The NSA man knew what he was referring to even before he looked up at West.

“Get the others settled and meet me in the recreation room. I’ll have answers for you then.” he replied, noticing that Cassidy seemed torn between wanting to follow the SEALs and seeing what he was going to say.

Admiral William Miller eyed the two choppers and the young people he now had on his carrier. “I was just telling Grady that we don’t get enough interesting things happen here.” He remarked lightly. “It’s odd that just when two Navy choppers get stolen out from under Horton’s nose that my ships’ communication center develops a serious bug and can’t reply to his bellowing.”

West eyed the man carefully, gauging his words. “I suppose those things can happen from time to time. Even the U.S. Navy can’t tell when things will break down.”

“Yep and I figure that my men aren’t going to be able to fix that bug for quite some time so if someone say...wanted to launch a couple misplaced birds in order to go track down a ship I sure wouldn’t be able to say anything about it.” Miller replied cheerfully, eyes light with mischief. “You all go with Grady while my boys do a little careful washing of these birds.”

As the Admiral went off whistling, the confused mercenaries looked to Grady Shaw who busted out laughing.

“He thinks it was great that someone took Horton down a notch,” he explained, heading into the ship. “Let’s go talk.”

Chapter Three

The talk took place in the ships recreation room that the SEALs were using as a base while they were there.

Shaw sat down and eyed the new arrivals with a critical eye. "You guys are in deep shit." Speaking freely since none of the platoon was there yet. "Horton's in a rage, Washington, while slightly amused, is outwardly incensed, and even the President isn't sure what to do with you guys. Olsen is spitting nails and it's all I can do to keep his team outta this yet.

"What in the hell happened?" he finally demanded. "None of you are this reckless."

Before Aiden Weston could speak, Cassidy stood up and started to explain from start to finish.

"What was I supposed to do?" she asked helplessly after explaining what had happened. "I couldn't leave them and he wasn't going to anything. By the time Adam could do anything, even if he could have gotten around Navy Intel, it would have been too late."

Shaw rubbed his face, hearing the pain in her voice and knowing the girl well enough to know he should have been glad no one had been killed, yet.

"Alright, I think I can buy some time since you did find Brooke's team." he sighed, thinking how many favors he could pull in.

"I won't abandon Ethan and the others." Cassidy cut into his thoughts and he groaned silently. "Aiden and the lads can stay out of it but I will not abandon Ethan."

"How did I know you were going to say that?" he asked of thin air, spreading his hands. "You sound too much like Tremayne for my own good."

She smiled slightly but her eyes remained firm. "No SEAL has ever been left behind and none are going to be on my watch. They're my men too."

"Have you told Brookes who you are?" Shaw asked curiously, knowing that she hadn't.

Cassidy ran a finger down a map. "No, I don't think he's the type to handle learning First platoon's co-leader is a woman. I'll tell him but just not yet."

The NSA case officer looked at West and hated that he couldn't read him and couldn't gauge how the Mavericks would handle this situation.

"With what men Logan has left, you won't have enough to handle a whole ship full of terrorists." he replied, seeing West take a deep breath and release it slowly.

"We're handling it," he said, kissing what was left of his life and career goodbye. "You just keep Taylor and Lightning Team off our backs for as long as possible."

Shaw could have laughed aloud at that but kept silent as Lt. (J.G.) Logan Brookes entered the room, looking around grimly.

"Alright Shaw, tell me what's going on and how we're going to get Ethan and the others back." he demanded up front.

It took a little while to gather what SEAL's they had together in the recreation room and because Shaw better than to tackle a planning session without food he had the ship's galley send up a lot of it since he knew they would be there for some time.

“Okay ladies, here’s how it pans out. Since only three other bodies have been recovered, it is safe to assume that the rest of the platoon has been captured by the terrorists on board the trawler Arcadia.”

Shaw knew he had the full attention of his audience but couldn’t help notice that several SEALs were casting wary looks at the Mavericks and wondered if Cassidy really knew what she was doing.

Jake Summers, the platoon scout, frowned. “That’s an odd name. What banner this ship flying under?”

“It doesn’t have a banner. It’s a Japanese ship that sailed from Cyprus, so we believe some very nasty people may be using it for their own purposes.” Shaw replied, adding. “That’s why we wanted it stopped before it reached port.

“And of course only the First Platoon could handle it.” Cassidy spoke from the back wall where she was leaning.

The tone the girl used warned Shaw what would be coming next. It had been an old argument between them.

“Doesn’t the NSA or CIA have any other black bag group they could sacrifice to the wolves, Grady? Why is it always Ethan and the lads?”

West closed his eyes, knowing he should have seen this coming even as Casey was trying not to laugh at the expression on Shaw’s face.

“Want to know off hand how many men your black ops have cost the platoon, Grady?” the girl pushed away from the wall and slowly walked toward the NSA man.

Brookes didn’t know this strange young British woman but he did know she was somehow connected to his unit and also didn’t like the quiet tone or the look in her eyes.

“Chavez, O’Brien.” he called to the two men he knew had a connection to these strangers.

“Let’s start with Syria, simple job. Go in, blow up a town, get out, and make pick up. It was supposed to be a real bloody cake-walk.” Cassidy’s tone hadn’t changed but it was clear her mood had. “Just needed picked up and got screwed.”

Shaw coughed awkwardly. “Cass, this isn’t the time for...”

“That job cost Sully his life, and knocked Tex out of the SEALs. Two good men, my men, and they weren’t the only ones.” her blue eyes were ice as she locked on his. “You want me to name others. Keith, Scotty, Abe...and now this.

“You sent them in with no information and four are dead. Anymore, if I raid that boat and Ethan...” she cut off, refusing to think that. “If any one of them is dead, you had better pray I die because I will find you and...”

Sloan O’Brien figured that was enough and easily lifted the girl off her feet and back a few feet. “That’s enough of that, little skipper.” he spoke softly but it was enough to clear Cassidy’s mind and she looked around at him.

“Put me down, Sloan,” she ordered, shrugging him off. “I’m fine. Do you have any actual details Grady or am I flying blind as usual?”

Figuring it was finally safe to speak Shaw cleared his throat. “We know that ship has a crew of one hundred but the boat can house twice that many. We really have no idea how many men are on board and if everyone is bad. The crew could be innocent but then...” he shrugged. “You’ll have to use your own discretion to deal with that.”

“What about prisoners?” Aiden West asked.

“We want the uranium out of the hands of the bad guys. A prisoner would be fine but don’t get killed if you can’t.” was the answer.

Shaw knew that both the SEALs and the Mavericks worked better if they weren’t hampered with restrictions like taking prisoners. Therefore, even though his superiors would probably have liked a few, he wasn’t going to distract them from their main goal.

“A stupid question but do we have the green light for this?” Jace Adams asked.

A tall blond man at 6’1 with a passion for reading classic horror, Adams was the platoon’s radio operator and took care of all their SATCOM transmissions.

Shaw hesitated on that, meeting Cassidy’s eyes. “Officially no and that brings us to my statement of liability.”

“Uh-oh, here it comes.” Casey groaned, sliding lower in his chair and closing his green eyes. “The old deniability line, if we’re killed or captured the United States will disavow any knowledge of our existence. Been there, done that.”

Laughter spread over the room at that, even Shaw smiled briefly but then he waved for silence. “That’s usually the case but this time things are a bit different...”

“This job’s illegal as hell.” Cassidy told them, knowing SEALs didn’t need any lies or sugar coating so she looked at them fully and spoke honestly. “Some of you know me and most don’t but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that I fully intend of finding Ethan and the others come hell or high water.

“My mates and I broke a few rules by coming to find you guys and we’ll probably break a few more before this is done, but that’s us. Breaking rules is what we do best but this time it’s different.” she paused to look at each man in the room.

“Someone high up wants you guys to rot in the wind so Grady can’t get an official green light to raid that boat to look for Ethan and his team which means any action taken is illegal and could be considered an act of war or some such rot. You blokes are legal and if you choose to go on this mission and things go bad it may not only be your lives you’re risking but also your careers and your freedom.

“I won’t make that choice for any of you and since we have a few hours before any move can be made, think it over carefully because once we move there is no turning back.”

Cassidy looked to Shaw, read his concern, but ignored it to motion to West. “Finish giving them your usual speech, Grady. You don’t need us for that.”

As Cassidy and the Mavericks left the room, an awkward silence filled it until finally Shaw swore. “Damn.”

Chapter Four

U.S.S. Liberty Deck

Cassidy Marshall stared at the twilight sky as she stood on the flight deck, her thoughts a jumble of memory and planning.

After several minutes of silence, West spoke from off her shoulder where he had been standing. “We’re doing this alone.”

It wasn’t a question. Just a statement that he could see in her eyes, feel from her mood.

“I can’t ask them to do this.” she sighed, not looking at him. “It’s illegal with no promise of success. It’s too big a risk to ask of them.”

“Oh, but it is alright to ask it of us?” he countered, not cruelly just curious.

Her eyes slid to look at his face then looked back at the water. “No.” she whispered. “I won’t ask it of you or the Mavericks either, Aiden. I made this choice and I’ll live or die by it.”

Not caring for that comment West considered the odds in his mind before turning to go back down below. “Just make sure that you’re certain they’re worth this risk, Cass. Make sure he’s worth the damn risk.”

After a long time of silence as Cassidy considered this, she turned to go back inside and ran right into the chest of Casey Gibson.

“I kind of wondered if you weren’t maybe planning on ditching the rest of us.” he spoke easily, holding her arms lightly to steady her,

Cassidy scowled up at him, hating it when one of them snuck up on her. “Damn it, Casey. Shouldn’t you be with the rest of your squad?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I thought I’d wonder up here to check on the CO since I know what a devious little mind my co-commanding officer has when she want to.” he grinned down at her. “You weren’t thinking of going off with just the Mavericks were you, Cass?”

“No.” she replied, walking away from him. “I’m thinking on going by myself.”

Casey blinked at that and swore under his breath, bolting after her. “Have you lost your mind, kid?” he demanded. “You can’t seriously be thinking about doing this alone.”

“I got Aiden and the lads into enough trouble with this already so I won’t ask them to do anymore and this is way too illegal for you guys.” she explained simply, hearing his violent oath. “Trust me, Case. I know what I’m doing.”

“No doubt; but you can’t do it alone.” Casey sighed, going in search of his team.

Officer’s Cabins:

Cassidy entered a small cabin, sitting down and rubbing her face. “I hate these choices,” she muttered, knowing what she was doing was her only choice.

She was just finishing hooking the shoulder holster for her Browning when the knock came, expecting Cam or one of the others she was mildly surprised to see Logan Brookes on the other side.

“Lieutenant,” she stepped back so he could enter. “I was actually expecting Rafael if Casey opened his big mouth.”

This was Brooke's first good chance to see the young woman up close and he could see she was slightly older than he first had guessed, though her eyes looked older yet. They were eyes that had seen too much and as he watched her check the clip in the Browning Hi-Power and put it in the holster, he guessed she had done too much for someone so young as well.

"Actually, since I'm officer in charge while Ethan is...I mean I told them I wanted to talk to you," he stated.

"Rank hath its privileges." Cassidy nodded, wincing as she heard her own words and waved a hand. "Sorry, too much going on so it makes me cranky."

He only nodded, watching as she moved. "Ace says you plan on going after the squad alone."

The next few words she uttered made him blink. "I didn't think young ladies used those kinds of words."

Cassidy looked at him then laughed. "Lt. Brookes, what makes you think I'm a lady? You've seen some of the blokes I hang out with. I know words that would and could make any long time sailor blush." she hesitated then nodded, "And yes, that's my plan."

"Why?" he asked curiously, seeing her frown at him.

"I won't ask my mates to get involved because they're in enough trouble and this will be too illegal for the SEALs to be into." she was tired of explaining it, she just wanted it over with.

Brookes considered that. He also thought on what Rafael had told him in confidence about this woman. "You plan to take on a ship with an unknown amount of terrorists on board? Is that stupid or suicidal?"

Cassidy's eyes narrowed at that. "Neither just devoted." was her reply, shrugging. "Realistically, there shouldn't be too many people on board. It would have been too hard to sneak that many on."

"You don't have a plan, do you?" he asked, knowing already.

"Yeah, I had one just not for this action." she shot back, and then sighed. "Look, Lieutenant, it's not your problem..."

"That's my commanding officer and squad out there." Brookes interrupted firmly, pulling a chair over to sit in front of her. "So how about if we shelf the worry about our careers and also shelf the heroics and maybe between all of us we can get the others out of this alive."

Cassidy looked at him warily. "I can't promise this will work."

"You've worked with SEALs before obviously. You know we don't like promises. The only easy day to a SEAL was..."

"Yesterday," Cassidy smiled, remembering Ethan saying that to her. "Okay, Lt. Brookes. We'll see what we can do."

The J.G. for First platoon smiled. "Good because I was supposed to tell you that if my talking didn't work Rafael was calling his wife."

He was surprised to see the girl's eyes narrow and she seemed to consider that. "Fine, for that on his daughter's next birthday I'm buying her that bloody set of drums he's been dreading."

As Cassidy went out the door yelling for Rafael Chavez, Logan Brookes looked over at Aiden West. "Is this good?"

The merc leader had to almost take pity on the man who had no clue who he was dealing with, but to Brookes he just shrugged it off. "Oh, sure, it is. She's been yelling at him since the platoon was formed."

When they got to the recreation room, it seemed that a near brawl was close to forming.

Cassidy was standing shouting up at Chavez while Casey Gibson snickered from close by.

It was an almost comical and highly dangerous scene if one considered Morgan was only 5'4", maybe 5'6" with heels on and nearly every man in the First Platoon was 6' and over.

However, Chavez seemed calm, even amused as she stood yelling at him until she mentioned the drums.

"You are not buying Pilar drums." he refused firmly; a long standing disagreement between them was that she was constantly buying his five year old daughter gifts. "End of conversation."

"You threatened to call your wife." Cassidy retorted hotly, ignoring the other men.

"You were being stupid so of course I was going to call Sofia." Rafael shrugged easily enough.

Casey laughed. "See, I told you it was a stupid plan."

"And you have a big mouth." she snapped back, whirling to pin the young man with her eyes. "How many of these new blokes know about your little interesting habits, Case?" she asked sweetly.

That shut the laughter off in a hurry as Casey paled. "Oh, c'mon chief, you wouldn't dare."

Cassidy's smile was still sweet but just a little bit wicked. "You mean they don't know that you have a very obscure and strange fondness for..."

"Don't worry Lieutenant, they're always like this." West assured the man, looking as Grady Shaw hurried in. "Uh-oh, that's his bad news look."

"Uh-oh is right." Shaw muttered, taking calming breaths. "I was able to pull strings and get the Constellation put on a course that runs away from us but our problem is that a chopper had picked up your pal Grant and his crew already and from what I can learn, they still aren't happy with you."

West swore, knowing involvement by Jared Taylor or Lightning Team would mess things up. "How long until that chopper gets here, Grady?" he asked.

"You probably have about an hour." Shaw replied grimly, adding. "Both choppers have been refueled and the gear is stowed. You need to move and move now."

"Work on getting some kind of clearance for this gig and keep them outta my hair." West replied, whistling sharply. "Anybody going on this trek gets moving now, timetable was upped."

The SEALs were used to that so they didn't ask too many questions and all Cassidy had to do was look at her friend's blue eyes to guess what had happened.

"Have Shaun contact Ethan's Dad. Between him and Shaun, they may have a shot of getting Adam to recall Jared and Sean," she told Shaw, who doubted it but said he would try.

"Cass, be careful on this." Shaw urged, not liking the feeling of this job. "It stinks more than usual."

The young woman paused at the bulkhead door to look back, considering the odds but still gave the NSA man her best smile. "Grady, what could go wrong?"

Knowing he'd heard that tone and those words too often, Shaw shook his head and headed for the radio room to find a phone to try to do what he could about getting some kind of clearance.

Chapter Five

Aboard the lead Blackhawk, Ten minutes later:

"I figure the best way we can do this is split up once we're on board the ship." West sighed, looking at the boat plans once they were on the lead helicopter. "This thing is huge but any hostages are probably below decks."

Brookes had to agree. "We need to find them and call for pickup and scrap the rest. It's the only way to reduce the risk of casualties."

"I'll put most of mine up front to try to distract the terrorists and send a few with your SEALs." West wished he had more of his team but what he had would just have to do.

"Aren't they cute?" Cassidy sat on the bench seat and stretched her long legs while looking at West and Brookes. "Just so adorable sitting there, planning the op."

Both men glanced up as she sat up straight and went on coolly. "Just remember one thing, this is my op."

Brookes started to reply when Sloan O'Brien laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Let her go, sir," he urged, watching the woman. "Trust her."

Cassidy sighed, pulling her auburn hair back and under a black cap. "There is no bloody way in hell to approach and board her without them knowing it so we'll try a different way. Fast rappel while our ever present gunners give covering fire."

"They could kill the hostages." Darius Ford warned.

"Or us, as we rappel down." Joe Carver cut in but tightened his Nomex gloves.

Brookes began to cut in but stopped as Cassidy looked up calmly.

"Both points are true," she agreed, going on in a tone born of years dealing with Lightning Team. "But, we are going to be on the ground and moving before these sorry lads even realize what is happening and they won't have a chance to kill anyone. Anymore questions, gentlemen?"

Several heads shook and Gibson grinned. "God, I have missed her."

"Well, that being the case Mr. Gibson is first man down with these handy new concussive smoke grenades so everyone please remember to have your masks on." Cassidy smiled as Casey sputtered. "Days like this you miss Tex, don't you?"

"You're prettier, ma'am." Casey replied, pleased to see surprise in the girl's eyes for once. "Don't gawk, boys," he snapped at his teammates.

Jace Adams adjusted his mask and nodded toward the front. "She...got a...y'know...boyfriend, Case?"

Casey paused to consider that before grinning. "Yeah, she does." he waited a beat to drop the other shoe. "The skipper has that honor."

That announcement caught all the present SEALs by surprise and Troy McDowell laughed as he passed. "That was low, mate."

"I figured I may as well stop 'em now." Casey shrugged, feeling the chopper begin to change its pitch. "It's show time, boys. Suit up."

The trawler Arcadia was below them and as of yet they had gone unnoticed. It was an old boat with what seemed like covered boxes on deck.

“Second unit wants to know if they go know or wait.” Reese Fletcher called from up front.

West was looking down at the ship and not liking that they hadn’t attracted any attention. “We go down together,” he decided, pausing. “Reese, if anything happens, you and Kyle take off and call for help from the carrier.”

As his best friend nodded, West looked at the assembled SEALs. “There’s still time to back out, boys,” he warned.

The response to that were several laughs and snorts. “Yeah, like that would happen, Cam.” O’Brien joked; fixing his weapons so they wouldn’t move too much and sliding open the door. “Are we going or what?”

Cassidy looked at their target again and then nodded. “Go, Casey!”

Casey Gibson threw off a quick salute then went out one of the side doors, his gloved hands sliding down the heavy ropes and his non-skid boots hitting the deck.

Up in the front of the ship, he saw several figures landing from the other chopper but so far no hostiles.

“So where the hell is everyone?” he demanded in a whisper.

Within seconds, all the warriors were on board and being sent in different directions.

“Aiden, take the others and search up here and on the bridge, we’ll go below.” Cassidy ordered into the lip mike she now wore.

West hesitated a second but nodded. “Keep in touch.” he instructed firmly, nodding at several of his team to follow him.

Once split up, Brookes knew they would have to split again to do this quickly. He watched the girl and saw how easily she gave orders and, much to his surprise, how quickly his SEALs responded.

He touched her arm. “Take Rafael and a few others with you and we’ll start searching the cabins and the holds.”

Cassidy nodded, whistling lowly, and motioning to the men she wanted to follow her.

Aiden West scowled when they still hadn’t located any enemy agents after twenty minutes. “This is wrong,” he muttered, eyes scanning for trouble when Bryden Young called him from the bridge. “You have news?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think you’ll like it any.” The light haired Southern merc replied grimly, nodding to where their medic was swearing violently over a bleeding man. “That’s the ship’s captain.”

West could have guessed that. He could also tell by the amount of exposed intestines that the man was dying. “He do this or did the terrorists?” he asked wearily.

Lee Chan, while of part Vietnamese descent, spoke Japanese fluently and listened to the older man’s pained whispered words.

“He says he and crew were hired without knowing what or who they were carrying, that within an hour of leaving port that the men with guns took control of the ship and killed many crew. They were supposed to meet another ship within a few days from now but the encounter with the Americans upset everything.”

Lee paused as the man took a ragged breath before continuing. “The terrorists killed the rest of the crew except him when the helicopter flew over earlier. He locked himself in here and chose to die in his own way by committing seppuku.”

“That’s great, just great.” West swore, thinking. “Where are the Americans and what the hell happened to all the terrorists?”

Lee asked the questions and frowned. “Oh, bloody hell.” he muttered, looking up. “Tremayne and the lads are way below decks in the hold with the bleedin’ uranium and the bad guys are...”

A sudden burst of gunfire and explosives shook them and Lee finished. “...below decks and under those tarps.” he finished.

“I hate this!” West swore, having no doubts that his team could handle this lot but what worried him was that the SEALs had no idea that any ‘crew’ they’d encounter would be trying to kill them.

West was on the stairs leading to the main deck when his radio buzzed in his ear. “What? I’m kinda busy trying not to get killed here,” he snapped, expecting the voice of his second in command.

“You damn well better not get killed you stupid moronic dimwitted idiot because I want to be the one to kill you for this stunt!”

“Ahh, God.” West squeezed his eyes shut at the voice, wondering who up in the heavens really had it in for him. “Grant.”

Sean Grant was practically snarling into the mike as he paced in the small confines of their helicopter while Eli Schultz, Ramon Lopez and Evan Garrett looked on in amusement.

“Kid, I have seen you to do some really dumb stunts in the years I’ve known you but this last one has got to take the prize.” he declared loudly to be heard over the rotors. “Have you got any clue how much trouble you guys are in and I don’t just mean with me?”

West didn’t have time to debate the quality of his recent choices since suddenly there were several men with guns trying to kill him and his team.

“Can we have this discussion later, Sean?” he asked, ducking as a bullet rang off the metal stairs near his head. “I’m more than a little busy.”

Listening to the sounds of gunshots and explosions over the connection, Grant frowned. “Damn it, we’re about twenty or so minutes out from the trawler. Can you hold on that long?”

Whirling to fire his Magnum at a lunging dark skinned killer, West swore under his breath. “Do I have a choice?” he asked, and then caught himself. “No clearance, Sean. We got ourselves into this and we can...” a loud concussive blast knocked him down and out.

“Aiden, what the hell happened?” Grant yelled again, swearing as he looked toward the cockpit. “Tell Luke to push this thing Jared, those damn brats are going to get killed before I get a shot at ‘em.”

A low chuckle had Jared Taylor looking down at his longtime friend and pilot, Luke Fabrizio.

“Yeah, but Sean doesn’t care about the kids or anything.” The former Mafia flyboy commented dryly.

Taylor looked back as Grant yelled orders to his partners. “He cares, Luke. He cares. Twenty still our ETA?”

Fabrizio looked up with a grin on his tanned face. “For my best girl and her squad of hotshots, I can cut it to ten.” He promised, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

Chapter Six

Trawler Acardia, upper deck:

Lee Chan had seen his leader fall and quickly rolled to his side. He didn't see any blood and was relieved to see his friend starting to come around.

"Enough is bloody well enough. Bryden, get to a good position and blast anything that moves that isn't one of us." he ordered, switching frequencies to try to reach the SEALs below but only getting static. "Remy!"

"Yo!" without sticking his head up and therefore give away his position, the New Orleans native called back. "Messenger?" he guessed.

Lee smiled, pleased at his teammates. "Grab Jesse and get below. Find Cassidy and the others and warn them."

"Gotcha, boss," Remy D'Arcy looked next to him at a lean bronze-skinned dark eyed young man. "Okay, Jess. Here's where we see if you're as fast as Kirk. Keep up with me and don't get killed."

Jesse Tallbear wasn't yet 21, the age where one could become a full-fledged Maverick; in fact, he was just turning 19 but was already 6'1. Tall, lean with the long legs of a runner, and slender build that didn't betray his real strength.

Jesse's older brother Kirk had been a full-fledged founding member of the team, and proud to be one. When he had died in combat, it was in his will that Jesse be given a chance to follow in his footsteps and while the younger man knew he had been accepted with caution he still wanted to prove it was the right choice.

Now he grinned at Remy and quickly followed as they ran through a barrage of gunfire. Remy hit the deck next to the door leading below, sliding behind a beam for cover then looked for the boy.

Jesse, he slowly admitted to himself, was as good or in some cases better than Kirk. He was quick on his feet and as he ran, he seemed to be able guess where the bullets would strike and avoid that spot. "Another Apache wonder." he grinned as the boy dove next to him, not even breathing hard.

"Into the deep dark that is shadow?" Jesse asked, nodding back at the door and recalling a line from a book he'd read once.

"*Oui, mon ami*," Remy checked his semi-auto rifle and reached for the handle. "Oh, and Jess?" he waited for those bright dark eyes to look his way. "You're the baby on the team and we old men hate to be showed up so anytime you run that distance or any distance, try to at least appear to be out of breath, huh?"

Jesse grinned wider and only nodded, following his teammate into the dark corridor and instantly hearing the gunfire. "That's got to be trouble."

"No kidding." Remy muttered.

Below Deck:

Things had seemed easy enough, perhaps too easy as the SEALs made their searches of the cabins in this area.

"This makes no sense." Casey Gibson muttered, shifting his H&K MP-5 submachine gun on his shoulder. "Where the hell are these guys?"

"Maybe they jumped ship." Joe Carver suggested, eyes darting in search of a hidden enemy,

Cassidy Marshall was staring at the MP-5 she was carrying and considering. "If another ship or even a sub had been in the area the Liberty would have picked it up. Either we have the wrong ship, which I doubt, or these blokes are VERY good at hiding."

"Obviously, boss." Rafael Chavez muttered, stopping suddenly and cocking his head while motioning to his teammates.

Both Cassidy and Casey exchanged looks as Carver eased closer to a cabin they hadn't searched yet.

"There are noises." he nodded, looking around. "Anyone got any ideas?"

"Open the door?" Casey rolled his eyes, reaching for the handle when Cassidy rapped his hand. "Huh?"

Something didn't feel right. It could be crew, hiding out in here and afraid but it also could be the people they were there to find.

She motioned him to one side with Carver while she and Chavez took the other side. Then after a second more, she nodded to Carver who took a firm hold of the handle and jerked it open

"Come out, hands up!" he yelled

A babble of voices came from inside, then the lone head of a dark skinned man with a long bushy hair and beard appeared.

"Americans!" he cried, dropping to his knees in the corridor as if in praise. "We are saved!"

While he cried and praised, his fellow crew in the cabin were also yelling and shouting while obviously relieved about being saved but something was still felt wrong.

Rafael watched the man, not putting down his weapon and thinking hard until something clicked in his mind. Something Grady Shaw had told them.

"The boat sailed from Cyprus. Its crew was all Japanese."

"Shit!" He swore, bringing his gun to bear on the men in the room just as one pulled a handgun from beneath his shirt and aimed at Cassidy. "Down!" he yelled, firing into the man's chest.

The sudden move didn't startle the SEALs as Casey had been watching the man in the hall and seen him go for the knife.

"We have ringers!" he shouted, bringing the butt of his weapon down on the man's head just as Carver fired his weapon.

The first shot must have been a signal because suddenly armed men poured out of three other cabins.

"This hall is too close for us to fight in and live." Cassidy looked around and seen what she wanted. "Down the corridor, if we can get to a larger space then we'll be fine."

"I love her confidence." Carver muttered but fired two more short bursts and took off running. "Is she usually so bright and chipper in a firefight?"

Rafael spun and fired off another shot, catching a man in the face. "Sure, it was all her time around Keith. He got her into the metaphysical crap of good feelings in a fight mean good things."

“Oh, don’t you dare start that crap.” Casey muttered, glancing over his shoulder to see they still had company. “All through the damn Syrian job, he kept harping at me with that stuff.”

“And you were the only one to come out of that job without one bloody scratch.” Cassidy reminded him crisply. “Keith said you had a strong and clear aura about you.”

Casey rolled his eyes but froze in step to bring his gun to bear at a side door as it suddenly slammed open. “Cass!”

The girl started to whirl when a huge arm caught her waist and lifted her up.

“Nice to see you too, little skipper.” O’Brien muttered sourly, quickly setting her down and letting loose a burst from his Alliant Bullpup rifle. “No time to chat because we have trouble coming.”

“We already have trouble in case you didn’t notice.” Carver replied sourly, wincing as a bullet went past his ear. “You didn’t have to bring more!”

Logan Brookes hit the hallway with the rest of the troops behind and he slammed the door, looking around and seeing what he did. “I’m guessing the hold?”

“Only choice, it’s big enough to have a decent chance until we get help from above,” she agreed, frowning when she noticed Sam and Jesse. “I don’t think I like that you’re here.”

“Boys are in huge fight up top so them getting down here is iffy” Remy replied grimly then added. “On a lighter note, in the hold we’re heading for is where the captain said the SEALs are being held.”

Adams let out a sigh. “At least we got some good news.”

Cassidy looked at her man hard. “What else is there?” she demanded, recognizing his look.

“It’s also the same room with the uranium.” he finished, wincing as O’Brien slapped his head. “Hey, don’t kill the messenger, Sloan.”

As soon as they hit the hold however they seen things were getting worse then better.

“We have water in here.” Darius Ford groaned. “Either they decided to sink the ship and destroy the evidence or something else happened.”

Cassidy gauged the water level. “It’s slow rising yet so we have a chance to get them out. Troy, check the map, there has to be another way out of this hold.”

As McDowell checked his wrist map, Brookes tapped his men to hold the terrorists from gaining entrance while the rest looked for their objectives.

“Hey, Cass, if we live through this, will you marry me?” Casey asked, wading through water past his ankles.

Brookes started to tell his man to quit joking around but he seen the girl was already grinning.

“You have too many strange habits, Case,” she laughed. “I couldn’t let any husband of mine play in poker games for four days straight or start howling at the sky after a few drinks.”

O’Brien busted out laughing from where he was laying down covering fire. “We really should have had him de-hypnotized after that.”

“No, you and Zak shouldn’t have had him hypnotized in the first bloody place.” the young woman snapped back at him, adding while she ignored the look Brookes was giving her. “Ethan and Craig should have had both you shot for that.”

“Here.” Jesse called from a door halfway down the hall. “But it’s been sealed.”

Cassidy seen that and swore, feeling the boat shake as an explosion rocked it. “Damn, what in the bloody hell are they doing up there?”

“Oh, did I mention Lightning Team was coming?” Remy called over his shoulder, expecting the swearing he heard in return.

“It’s been sealed with a torch. It’ll take another torch to get us through and we don’t have time.” Brookes stated grimly, seeing her face tighten. “The water is rising faster.”

“Troy, front and center!” she yelled for the main demolition expert of the Mavericks.

Leaving what he was doing, the sandy haired demo man was already humming in his throat when he looked at the door.

“Bloody thing is reinforced heavy duty steel. This door isn’t made to be opened when it’s been sealed,” he declared, feeling her eyes.

“I’m not asking what it’s made to do, mate. I’m asking if you can blow it without sinking us?” she replied, watching him measure and think silently.

A voice shouted from the corridor they had just left. “Americans you have sealed yourself into a tomb! Save yourselves the pain and surrender. We will be merciful.”

“Yeah and I’m a little blue alien.” Adams returned, ducking. “Their aim is getting better.”

“Casey, get up there and toss a couple frag grenades out there to keep them busy,” she ordered, slapping Troy’s arm. “I need it down.”

McDowell swore but dug in his shoulder pack for some packs of explosives and wires. “Get back and I mean *my* back.”

The frag grenades Casey tossed caused a rumble that had radios blasting with questions but it did stop the shooting for a time.

“What in the hell is going on down there?” West demanded, trying to think in about six different ways.

“We have some very persistent bad guys and Casey gave them a present.” Cassidy looked back over her shoulder. “Aiden, we won’t be coming back out the way we came into this room, Reese will have to circle around to the other side.”

West looked on his map and could see where they were and about where they would come out if there was a door. “Did you fine Tremayne and the boys?” he asked, ignoring the yelling in his other ear.

“Yeah but Justin has to blow a door down.” she replied watching as he slapped several pounds of demo charges on the door.

A sputtering came in her ear. “If there’s uranium in that room you can’t blow the door.” Eli Schultz exclaimed from somewhere.

“Well, I have water seeping in already so I figure blowing the door won’t hurt it anymore than that, do you?” she bit off, shutting the radio down.

Brookes seen her expression and guessed the cause. “Not happy with the cavalry?”

“I would be happier if it had been little green men from space than those three.” she sighed, hearing Troy shout to stay down.

After checking on the placement of the SEALs and his own boss, the sandy haired Briton said a quick prayer and pushed the button.

A loud sound and a flash filled the hall and shook the whole boat as smoke filled the hall.

“Troy?” Rafael Chavez called, worried about the young merc. “You okay?”

“I bloody well better get a raise for this whole mess.” Troy growled, moving closer to inspect his work.

The door was loose and water was seeping out. "Hey, Adams, c'mere and yank this monster off the rest of the way." he requested.

Jace Adams had played High School football and had been on the fast track to the professionals until he joined the Navy. So the blond 6'1" 240 pound SEAL had no trouble removing a half-exploded door.

Cassidy had to force herself not to charge into the room even as she felt Troy's hand on her arm.

Logan Brookes shined his light into the room and swore. "O'Brien, get over here." he ordered, "The rest of you keep an eye on those doors."

Sloan O'Brien shouldered his weapon as soon as he stepped through the door, swearing under his breath.

The room they had gained entrance to was a huge hold that was originally made to hold cargo. Now it was holding floating containers and several men tied to chairs.

Troy, allowing the SEALs to care for their own, was most concerned with the containers. He took a small box from his pack and turned it over, almost instantly picking up reading.

"Background radiation is up but not dangerous. None of the boxes have been punctured." he called out.

Brookes acknowledged this news with a nod but was concentrating on his team, allowing O'Brien to check one man at a time while he centered on Mike Channing, the platoon chief and the unit's commanding officer, Ethan Tremayne.

"O-kay guys, time to wake up." O'Brien spoke loudly, carefully checking pulses and seeing injuries that he didn't like but none was life threatening yet. "The air in this place had all but run out, skippers." he explained.

"Quiet, I have a hangover," a low voice groaned from a turned over chair.

O'Brien laughed, pulling the chair upright and looking at the eyes of the man who had spoken. "Nah, but you'll probably feel like you wrestled a dolphin."

Rusty Kayayan forced his eyes to focus, spitting blood from his mouth. Damn, you are ugly Sloan."

"Save a guy and get grief." the red-haired medic returned lightly, knowing he had to keep it light but glancing down as more water rushed in. "We need these chains off now."

Cassidy looked out the door where the others were once again trading shots with the enemy. "Rafaell!" she shouted. "Come here and play lock pick."

Chavez paused at the door to look at her eyes then lightly squeezed her shoulder. "You guys have caused us so much grief it isn't funny."

Zak Lani, a SEAL originally from the Big Island in Hawaii, just grunted at that as Rafael went to work on the locks.

"Ethan?" Brookes knelt in front of his leader, feeling for a pulse and not liking it.

Michael Channing winced as he rubbed his wrists, not trying to stand yet. "They worked him over the worst." he sighed, looking up and seeing Cassidy in the door. "He tried to deflect them from the rest of us."

"That bloody well figures." Cassidy muttered, not entering the room yet even though every part of her wanted to.

With voices around and fresh air coming in, consciousness returned slightly to Ethan Tremayne and like any true SEAL he woke up swinging.

“LT!” O’Brien shouted, seeing his CO swing and winced as Brookes took the blow on the side of his head.

Chapter Seven

Tremayne wasn’t clear on where he was but he knew his men were in danger and that was all he needed to know.

He started to reach down to grab for a weapon when a foot stepped on the gun barrel.

“No, Ethan.”

The soft voice froze him. It didn’t belong here. Here, wherever he was, there were only loud, cruel guttural voices with devices and fists that hurt. This new voice, this soft voice with the lilting accent...he knew it but it didn’t belong here.

Cassidy had seen Brookes go down and swore at herself for not expecting the sudden violence. Her friend would be in shock, disoriented and scared. She knew he’d lash out. So letting him get his hands on a weapon was not in the cards.

“Ethan, stop and listen to me.” Keeping her foot on the gun, she knelt slowly in front of him and touched his hands. “I know this is probably confusing for you but you’re safe now and since I’m responsible for this little party I’d appreciate it if you didn’t do any more damage to these men.”

She fought to ignore the beating of her own heart as she seen his injuries and held his eyes, hoping even if he didn’t recognize her then her tone would calm him down.

“That was your second in command you just clobbered, mate.” she smiled slightly. “Granted I would like to do that at times but we can’t and we need to leave this place now.”

Ethan Tremayne’s blue eyes were glassy but they seemed to calm down as he slowly raised one hand.

She saw Troy McDowell tense and knew Rafael and O’Brien were close, just as she also knew if her friend reacted badly to her, they would be too late.

“The rest of First Platoon is here, Ethan and we’re going home,” she promised softly, wishing her tears wouldn’t come now.

Ethan stared down into those big blue eyes where tears were starting to form and he slowly let his hand rest on her face.

“Cassidy,” he whispered then passed out, falling forward.

The young British woman quickly held him up as O’Brien swore. “He needs more medical help than I can give him here.”

Joe Carver suddenly ran in. “The bad guys just got some help; we need to get outta here before they storm in.”

Brookes was up now, though he was still shaking his head and he glanced at Cassidy. “Do you have any ideas?”

She had a lot of those but most of them she hoped not to have to use, considering she'd already set-up her basic one. "Casey, toss another frag out there then bar the door and you guys get back here to help with these guys!" she yelled to the front.

Seeing the looks, she shrugged. "We go out the back door and hope your ride is there."

With all that was going on, only Channing seemed to notice her exact words because his head whipped up to look at her.

The blast from the grenade was followed by the sound of feet. "We have maybe ten or so minutes before they regroup." Casey Gibson reported, looking at his team. "How many can move on their own?"

"If I had my way, none of them would be moving." O'Brien replied, and then sighed. "But since our continued survival is an issue I'd say most. Rusty for sure, Zak is iffy; Perry and Clay are shaky but can move. The Chief and the Skipper are a big fat no."

Channing stood up, glaring. "I sure as hell can move under my own power." The chief of First Platoon snapped, ignoring how his head was buzzing. "It'll take all of you guys to help Ethan and cover our rear so give me a gun and..."

"Chief, even if I said you could go on your own I would not give you a damn gun." O'Brien replied firmly.

Even as Channing was winding up for a long-winded fight about his fitness Cassidy finally cut in.

"Enough!" she snapped, eyes bright and using a tone that she had perfected by bossing around stubborn SEALs. "Troy, get out that door and contact Reese. Tell him where the best place for pick-up is and then cover it. Adams, grab Ethan and get going."

"Put the injured, I don't care if it's just a bleedin' bruised pinkie, in the middle and Mike, stop yelling and let someone help you." she ordered, turning without a thought to the gaping men. "Casey, up front and Jake, cover the rear with that Bullpup you have. Does everyone have an order? Good, let's go."

"God, I have so missed her." Casey Gibson repeated cheerfully, heading up the other set of stairs when the door behind them crashed in. "We have company!"

Cassidy swore, she needed time for that chopper. "Casey, Joe, give me what grenades you have and then go!"

That caused a pause as both men looked at her. "You go and I'll toss 'em." Casey volunteered, not liking the idea of leaving her.

"I can handle it, mate," she promised, seeing his concern. "Kendall, despite what certain people think, I know how to throw. I mean several of my employees have brothers on major league baseball teams, so get going."

"You better be right behind us," he warned, turning and running for the steps.

Cassidy sighed; looking down at the round weapons she had and took a deep breath. She seen the armed men enter the hall and with eerie certainty threw all four grenades in a row before slamming the door and locking it from the outside.

She was halfway to the evacuation site when the blast was felt and more than a few feet away when the first bullet struck her.

She wasn't sure where it had come from but felt it hit her in the lower back toward her hip and she went down, rolling and automatically pulling her Browning since she had lost the MP-5 and firing, please to hear a scream.

Apparently, the fight on top of the trawler wasn't quite over and she swore at that. She needed this over with quickly. Her most pressing concern was getting her people off this boat.

She climbed to her feet, not certain if another bullet hit or not but there was pain in her side and stomach.

"Aiden, pull back." she ordered calmly, seeing the other chopper had circled and Reese Fletcher had enough space to get low enough to hover near the deck.

West's answer distorted briefly then he came back in a clearer tone. "We still have shooters. They'll pick the choppers off if..."

"Tell Luke to strafe the front bow, he's armored and we just need enough time for Reese to pick the guys up." she cut him off. "Get clear, Aiden."

Satisfied with that, she turned toward the chopper. "Brookes, get those men on board ASAP then take off!" she ordered

He turned to throw a look at her and frowned, something was wrong. "We're almost ready to go."

"Reese, get them on board and take off!" she commanded. "Do not, no matter what, turn around."

Fletcher almost laughed into his radio. "Once I'm clear why in the hell would I want to come..." his words dried off as he tried to get a look at his employer. "Oh, shit."

Brookes was last man on board as Cassidy helped him get Zak on board the chopper. "We're in." he nodded, frowning as the girl suddenly stepped back and jumped out, back on the boat. "What the..."

"Cassidy, what the hell are you doing?" Rafael Chavez lunged back toward the door of the Blackhawk, staring at her.

"Lt. Brookes, do not let any of those men out of that chopper," she snapped firmly, eyes locking with his. "As co-commanding officer of First Platoon of S.E.A.L. Team Omega, I am ordering you out of this area ASAP."

Suddenly Brookes stared at her, understanding for the first time just who this young woman was.

"I'm sorry, Rafael. Take care of Ethan and the others." she stepped further back, and then ran off.

"Cassidy Renee, get back here!" Chavez yelled into the wind even as O'Brien and Adams were grabbing his belt.

"You jump from this height you'll kill yourself." the Platoon medic snapped, not having any real trouble restraining his friend.

Fletcher had no choice but to go as shots came his way and he swore under his breath.

"Reese, you have to go back!" Casey couldn't believe this was happening. "We can't leave her!"

"And I'm under orders. I can't go back." Fletcher snapped bitterly. "Cass was smart by issuing those orders. I can't go back and neither can you guys."

Brookes swore, jerking his cap off. "Damn it! Why the hell didn't one of you tell me who she was?"

Rafael distracted and distressed as he was, shrugged. "She didn't want you to know yet. She said you probably wouldn't take it too well."

"I'm not taking this too well." he snapped, still seeing the look in her eyes. "She's up to something."

"Kyle's clear." Aiden West called through his radio as bullets clang off the armored hull of the Eagle, Eagle Rock's own super helicopter. He hated having to ride with Lightning Team but it wasn't as if he had a choice when Sean Grant had grabbed him by the hair.

"Good, then get clear yourself, mate." Cassidy Marshall ordered, firing the last round from her Browning Hi-Power at one particular foe who was determined to shoot a hole in the chopper.

West had caught something in her tone and was about to say something when Eli let out a shout.

"Holy jumping green cows! Cass is still down there!"

"Cassidy, what are you doing?" West demanded as Jared Taylor came from the front with an outraged Grant behind him. "Hold on and Evan will toss the ladder down."

Even from this distance, he could see his friend shake her head. "No good, mate. Someone on board needs to trigger the explosive charges I had Rafe and Jake plant and I'm the one with the remote. Now get going because this tub is sinking in a few minutes."

"What in hell is she playing at?" Grant demanded, his blood running cold. "Jared, get her out of there!"

Luke Fabrizio swore as a 7.62 rifle shot hit the bulletproof hull. "I can't stay this close."

West forced the words from his throat. "Don't do this, Cass."

"I started this mess, Aiden and I told you that I'd live or die by that choice. It's my choice to die here because I couldn't stand losing everything else. Get away, Aiden and tell Ethan I'm sorry."

Cassidy jerked her radio away, letting it drop on the deck. She knew she was an open target and that was what she wanted. Get them centered on her then...she heard the first beep and took off running for the side of the ship that was facing away as the second beep was heard and as she balanced on the rail with bullets whizzing by, she pushed the detonator and was diving even as the first explosion blasted thru the trawler.

The blasts and explosions were so severe in force that all three pilots had to fight to keep from being pulled down.

"Aiden, she ordered us not to go back." Reese's voice was quiet as he reported to his leader. "Aiden, what do I do?"

West still stared at the now blazing ship that was slowly sinking. He could hear his friend and the voices of the others but his thoughts were centered elsewhere. "Damn it!" he jerked his radio off.

"We have to go down, she could have..." Casey Gibson cut off, eyes burning and not caring. "LT, we have to..."

Brookes met the pilot's grim eyes, both understanding. "Head back to the Liberty, Reese. They'll send out search squads."

The young blond haired Idaho native stared at his leader. "We can't leave her."

"Casey, even if she survived the blast, there is no way the choppers could get close enough with that blaze." O'Brien spoke slowly, knowing his friend's feelings. "We need to wait."

Channing was leaning over to look out a window, grim. "Tremayne is not going to be happy about this," he proclaimed, already knowing this.

Chapter Eight

The water boiled with the heat of the flames of the now sinking trawler as Cassidy Marshall surfaced several feet from the wreckage.

Silently pleased that the demo charges she had had her boys plant actually had worked it was several minutes before she noticed the pain of her wounds, both old and new.

Fighting to stay afloat in the water, she looked around and just hoped neither the boiling water nor any sharp pieces of metal had punctured the small single raft she had freed from the side of the ship before diving.

However, there was the raft floating only about a foot away from her and she managed to pull herself inside, lying still as more blasts could be heard.

She knew a Navy salvage team could get to the sealed hold and take out the uranium containers so that risk was covered. With the SEALs rescued either Grady Shaw or her two inside men in Washington should be able to get the Mavericks cleared of any wrong doing, at least she hoped so.

"You think it's so simple?" a voice spoke from near her.

Too weak from loss of blood and shock to really lift her head, Cassidy managed to open one eye and frown slightly at the young man sitting on the edge on the raft.

"You really think dying will erase all this?" he asked mildly, clucking his tongue at her. "Cowardice really doesn't suit you, Skipper."

She had already decided on the boat that she wouldn't survive this mission. However, she hadn't counted on a smart mouthed spirit or hallucination of a former teammate either.

"Back talking me wasn't your strong suit either, Dylan," she murmured, staring at the night sky and wincing as pain shot through her.

Dylan Fuller had been a founding member of S.E.A.L. Team Omega until his death in combat. Now he sat on the side of the raft, chuckling, his straw colored hair blowing in the cool wind.

"What're you gonna do, chief? Court martial me?" he teased, growing serious. "I know what you did, Cass. We all do. This wasn't your fault."

"If I had stayed with the platoon, they would not have been in the water with that storm." she sighed, finally lifting her head to look at her right arm to see the burns and blood. "I had to save them."

Fuller lightly flicked some hair off her face. "You didn't tell Rafe those charges were rigged to a remote device. You knew you would have to stay behind to work it. So, was it guilt or fear?"

Silence answered him even though she knew exactly what he meant. "It would have caused too much trouble if I had gone back, both for Aiden's lads and ours. This way Shaw can get the Mavericks cleared and the SEALs won't be in the middle of any fight between me and Washington." she finally replied.

"Got it all figured out, right? You planned it all right down to the last goddamn detail." Fuller's eyes held hers. "Except for one thing, did you factor in Ethan's reaction?"

The former radioman seen a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes and grinned. "Did you consider how the Skipper would take it when he wakes up and learns the full outcome? Did you think of how he'll feel when someone has to tell him you sacrificed yourself for them...for him?"

Cassidy forced her eyes closed, fighting tears of pain and guilt. "It's best for him, Dylan," she whispered, feeling the breeze pickup and seeing a light coming closer. "If I die, then he isn't caught between knowing his mother hates me and what he wants. I can see Sully and the others, you."

Dylan Fuller smiled sadly, as he touched her hand. "Yeah, but it's not time for you to come Home yet because Fate has other plans in store." she didn't hear his last words as darkness swirled around her, nor did she hear the sounds of the approaching helicopter.

"We are so screwed." A black man in his middle thirties in jeans and a sweatshirt kept muttering, his fingers holding tightly to the seat's armrest.

His companion, a young man with short blond hair and deep blue eyes took enough time to look away from the binoculars to glare at his friend. "Shut up Shaun. We'll find her. We have to find her."

Both men were in their mid-to-late 30's and very different. Shaun Richardson was a lean black man who had grown up in the projects of Chicago and spent his formative years as a thief until a chance encounter turned his life around so now he was a specially elected Congressman from that state.

His companion grew up in a wealthy military family but Steven Michaelson had struck out early to make his own way. Now the youngest full Colonel in the Marines, he strived to make sure both sides of his life stayed sane.

Not some thing that was easily done when his actual employer, Cassidy Marshall, and her crazy merc team pulled stupid stunts like they had recently done.

The two best friends were making a trip toward the U.S.S. Liberty with a detour past the sight of the now sunken trawler in hopes of seeing survivors or anything.

As Steven glanced down at the still water, he refocused on a particular section and felt his heart freeze. "Call!"

The pilot waved back that he had seen the object in the water and was picking up the homing beacon signal.

As the chopper got close enough to let down a ladder, two Marines in wetsuits went down and very easily reached the raft.

As soon as the first man reached the rubber craft, he immediately thought the young woman lying still inside was already dead but as he automatically felt for a pulse, he laughed aloud.

"Tell those fools up there to lower a stretcher, our girl's still kicking but barely," he yelled to his partner.

When the pilot passed word back to his two high ranking VIPs, Steven slumped back on the seat. "She's alive," he whispered in relief, hearing Shaun release a breath but both men were wondering the same thing.

For how long if one considered the rumors circulating in Washington, D.C.?

U.S.S. Liberty Infirmary

The U.S.S. Liberty was used to tense or stressful situations but nothing like it was seeing now.

Once the three helicopters had returned and the injured men sent to the ship's sickbay, it seemed like all hell broke loose.

"I should break your face!" Sean Grant was still yelling while a white smocked Navy doctor looked at a graze on Aiden West's arm. "This stunt was..."

“...stupid, lame, dumb, harebrained, etc, etc.” West finished for him, voice expressionless as he sat, body, and mind numb. “I’ve heard it all before, Sean.”

Grant started to explode but backed off slightly as Grady Shaw entered.

“Cool it, Grant. As far as anyone can now prove, Cassidy and the boys were working under my orders so if you’ve got a beef with them, take it up with me, outside.” The NSA man stated, not bothering to mention just how many favors he had to call in to get that rule written.

While Grant bellowed, Ira Well and Sloan O’Brien were trying to help the stressed out Navy doctors.

“Look, Ethan, be reasonable about this and I’ll get you a cookie.” The Israeli raised mercenary medic promised, using his most patient tone with a very upset SEAL.

It hadn’t taken long for Ethan Tremayne to come around to full and coherent consciousness. What took longer was calming him down when he learned what had happened.

“Leave it, Ira,” he snapped, wincing as a medic applied antibiotics to a wound on his back. “Get somebody to tell me again how in God’s name you let her do this.”

The pain was evident in his voice and eyes but it wasn’t all from his injuries.

“None of us expected it, Ethan.” Logan Brookes spoke grimly, sighing. “I take full responsibility for it.”

“No one takes responsibility for Cassidy *but* Cassidy, Logan.” Tremayne replied, shaking his head. “She has a head full of ideas on how she needs to care for everyone else but refuses to let anyone care for her.”

A sudden shout had heads turning as Casey Gibson skidded to a halt, ignoring the glares of the medics.

“I was up with the Admiral when he got the call from the Marine Recon unit,” he was gasping, eyes bright. “She’s alive, hurt pretty badly, but alive.”

It was several hours before they heard anything else, despite Weller’s best attempts to threaten the Navy doctors.

Ethan Tremayne was laying in sickbay where most of his men had been restricted until their return trip to their home base.

While he knew his injuries were serious he hated just laying around when he wanted to be doing something, anything.

Since the Marine chopper had arrived, Cassidy had been in surgery for five hours and they had just brought her out but put her in a different section of sickbay than the SEALs were in, which bothered him.

“That is one lucky young lady.” A doctor spoke quietly to another as they walked through. “One bullet that close to her spine and that other one was lucky enough not to have ripped her guts apart. Once she heals from the burns and gets some therapy, she should be fine.”

The other man shook his head, a long time believer that no female belonged in the military.

“From what I hear, her troubles are just starting. Injuries notwithstanding, a lot of powerful people want an example made of her and those boys.”

Ethan sighed, still not sure what all the trouble was over but knowing he would do whatever he could to see his friends cleared.

He waited for both men to leave the area before getting up silently to go see his friend.

Cassidy was lying in a bed surround by wires, looking smaller than he remembered.

He knew she had suffered burns from the water as well as bullet wounds but what concerned him was her emotional wounds. How would she handle the events to come when even he wasn't certain what those would be.

"Oh, baby, what have you done?" he whispered, pulling a chair closer so he could sit and gently lift one hand in his and swearing he and his platoon would see this through with her.

The U.S.S. Liberty, sometime later:

"Olsen calls the dogs off or I get in touch with my man at the United Press and start to remember some things I shouldn't."

A mass a voices and another mass of numb pain is what brought Cassidy Marshall out of blissful oblivion.

She dully recognized Aiden West's voice and sort of wondered whom he was snarling at.

"It's not that simple, Aiden." Jared Taylor spoke calmly, looking around. "You and I both know that."

"Shaw got us cleared. There are no loopholes in his paperwork." West snapped, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper. "I will be damned if they'll haul her off in chains."

That brought her around more. She remembered more of recent events and forced her eyes open to look around.

She was in a bed in a sickbay but had no clue as to where or just how much time she had to get her people out of here before they could be arrested.

A dull sick panic set in as she tried to sit up, things going blurry as her eyes crossed with pain and shock, but was determined to move.

"Hey now, Whoa, little Skipper." Sloan O'Brien soothed, catching the girl before she fell and easing her back on the bed. "You aren't going anywhere."

Cassidy shook her head. "Have to get out...can't let 'em..." her words jumbled together as the big man looked up. "Rusty, get the Skipper."

Kayayan nodded and took off running to find his commanding officers.

West saw what was happening and swore. "Cass, calm down." he urged, shooting Taylor a look. "You're safe."

The British woman continued to struggle against O'Brien until finally she collapsed back, exhausted.

"Aiden...you can't let them...we need to get out." she struggled to find the words.

"No one is taking you or the boys anywhere, Cass." Tremayne's voice was the first and only one she responded to.

Ethan had been meeting with Grady Shaw and Admiral Lawrence when Rusty had found him.

Now he entered the sickbay with his gaze centered on the one bed, crossing over to sit on the bedside.

"It's alright," he promised, reaching up to gently touch her face and saw she was still in shock. "You're safe here and I'm with you."

Still unsure, the girl did relax somewhat until Shaw walked in with men she didn't know.

"Ethan?" her hand tightened around his as Aiden swore violently.

Jared Taylor stepped into her sightline, his features grim but calm.

“The SEALs are taking a different flight back to their base in Coronado,” he explained to her, seeing her eyes change and recognizing the caution. “You and the Mavericks will come back with the Team and me.”

“Prison, huh?” her voice didn’t betray the fear in her heart because she knew no matter what her brother had been at one time, that would be what happened.

“No, but some people do have questions.” Taylor replied, trying to reassure her to ease some of the fears he saw.

Tremayne had fought against this and he planned to fight more as soon as he got back to base. Even if it meant calling on his father to see what he could do.

“It’ll be o-kay, baby,” he whispered, seeing her eyes as she looked at him. “A few days and then you can come out and yell at Casey and the guys.”

She saw that Ethan believed that but then he was still naïve about a certain part of the world but that was what she loved about him. “I love you,” she finally murmured, seeing no choice but to accept fate.

There was something in her tone that worried Ethan but a shout that the platoon’s flight would be leaving the carrier soon made any further conversation out of the question.

“I’ll see you soon,” he promised from the door.

Cassidy smiled weakly but it didn’t match her eyes that looked grimly over at Aiden West who seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“I doubt it, luv,” she whispered.

“It’ll be fine, Cass.” Taylor assured her, missing Aiden West rolling his eyes. “Adam’s told me it’s a simple debriefing.”

Aiden just shot a dry look at his second in command. Both men knew that nothing was ever simple in the covert world of Washington, D.C. and that Cassidy had too many foes to be able to count on this being simple.