

unwritten

M.C. Henson



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To the men and women
who serve a grateful nation
in the armed forces.

Go Navy!

Thank you Jesus.
To my mother, who always pushes me farther.
To my father, your quiet ways inspire me.
To my Johnny, I love you.

Suzanne- thank you.
Is there anything in the head?

To all of you, too numerous to list,
who have touched my life.

Arrestor Cables- There are four cables on a carrier deck. In a perfect landing, the aircraft's tailhook will touchdown and catch the number three cable. Catching the number one is bad. It means the aircraft cleared the aft end of the deck by three feet.

Article Thirty-Two- pre-trial investigation, used to determine if there is sufficient evidence to proceed with a court martial

ATARS- Advanced Tactical Airborne Reconnaissance System

bird- anything that can fly

bird farm- aircraft carrier

bulkhead- a wall

CAG- Carrier Air Group commander, responsible for everything that flies

COD- Carrier Onboard Delivery

cover- hat

DEW- Directed Energy Weapon

fruit salad- ribbons worn on a uniform

head- bathroom

hatch- door

JAG- Judge Advocate General

Martin Baker- contractor who provides ejection seats for aircraft

Miramar- Marine Corps Air Station, near San Diego, home of Fighter Weapons School (Top Gun)

Officer Rank- For the Navy

Ensign	[ENS]
Lieutenant, Junior Grade (J.G.)	[LTJG]
Lieutenant	[LT]
Lieutenant Commander	[LCDR]
Commander	[CDR]
Captain	[CAPT]
Admiral, (Rear, Lower Half)	[RDML]
Admiral, (Rear, Upper Half)	[RADM]
Vice Admiral	[VADM]
Admiral	[ADM]

For more information on uniform insignias and ranks visit:

<http://www.navy.mil/navydata/ranks/officers/o-rank.html>

Peanut Butters- Service khaki uniforms

RIO- Radar Intercept Officer

scuttlebutt- gossip, rumors

scrambled eggs- braiding and embellishment on a Commander or Captain's cover (also worn by Admirals, but even more embellished)

screwed-the-pooch- to make a big mistake

SEAL- special forces for the Navy, stands for SEA, AIR, LAND

SECNAV- Secretary of the Navy

six- what pilots refer to as their tail, rear-end

TAD- Temporary Additional Duty

UCMJ- Uniform Code of Military Justice, the law book for the Military

Zulu- Military term for Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)

chapter one

miss blaine goes to washington

Tuesday, May 18
Summer House Farms
Franklin, North Carolina

Caroline Blaine gazed upon the fifty acres of growing grape vines in the valley below. The view from the barn on the hill, where she stood, was breathtaking. She was completely surrounded by the land she dearly loved. Her family farm had seen many changes. Over the last one hundred forty years, their land had played host to cattle, horses and most recently, tobacco. The valley was now covered with countless rows of grape vines, silhouetted in the late afternoon sun.

Blaine was thoughtful, dedicated, kind, and generous. She was truly a southern woman, with the exception of her temper. She could put up a terrific argument when the occasion called for it. Her intelligence was apparent upon engaging her in conversation. She was the kind of woman who commanded respect and attention. Not just because she served her country in special service to the Navy, but due

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to her integrity.

Today started out like most other days, early. She'd had trouble sleeping for some time now. Although she was tired after working in the fields with her extended family, she found herself lying in bed with her mind elsewhere. Blaine, at thirty five, felt like two different people somehow. One side of her was the normal woman, complete with a lonely heart filled by the only person she wouldn't allow herself to admit she loved. The other half was a deadly enigma due to her job and all the atrocities she personally had caused or seen. Her job kept her away for months, with only the odd phone call to her family to inform them she was safe. She couldn't fully disclose her secretive job to them. In essence, she was divided. What kept her grounded was God.

The Navy demanded almost all of her time. Consequently, she could not devote herself, as much as she would have liked, to the farm. The full-time care for the vineyard had fallen on John and Holly Wheaton, her adopted family and neighbors. John was like an older brother. Holly was her confidant, much more like a sister. Blaine's only true sibling, her older brother Mark, had been severely injured in a farm accident two years ago. It was expensive to have him in a private facility with his own dedicated nurse. Her income was needed to support Mark's long-term care and run the farm in lean years. Mark's presence was missed everyday, and they visited him often at the care facility, an hour away.

She began walking back to her home just up the hill from the barn. Since she had arrived back in North Carolina on leave one week before, her concentration had been entirely absent. Her days consisted of working in the fields as a diversion. She had checked the Navy records from home on the day she arrived for a certain Commander and his status. She could practically go through the process in her sleep to access his record, she had done it so often over the last two years. She couldn't seem to get him off her mind no matter

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how hard she tried. Today certainly wasn't an exception. Everyone in the family had noticed her distraction while working the fields. The growing grape vines were simply something to occupy her hands, not her mind.

As dinner time approached, they had ended their tasks. Blaine and Holly had already left the field to shower. Everyone was to meet at Blaine's home for dinner later. The men would soon follow. Rib-eye steaks were waiting to be grilled, along with fresh vegetables.

Caroline sat in the porch swing after dinner, on the deck of her modest home, nestled in the mountains of western North Carolina. Her family surrounded her. Freshly showered and fed, she looked upon the tired bunch. John Wheaton, his wife Holly and their eighteen year old son, Daniel, sat in Adirondack chairs sipping cold drinks. Noah Wheaton, John's younger brother, soon joined them with a glass of sweet tea in his hand. Noah was staying with John and his family while there- as usual. They had worked hard all afternoon in the fifty acres of grapes that would yield their harvest within the next few months. It was only a short time later that Daniel bid his farewell for the evening, opting to spend his time with his friends.

Noah sat down beside Blaine in the swing and put his glass of tea next to hers on the deck rail. The six foot two, brown eyed charmer, pulled her closer to him on the swing in a friendly gesture. He was in for a few days, just as always. Working for the FBI meant you didn't get many days off. But since being transferred back east from San Francisco to Asheville, these days were more frequent. Noah stared down at the woman resting her head on his shoulder. She was the backbone of the family. She was a strong woman, and he knew it. She was two years younger than him. He had always tried to protect her. He wasn't as close to her as they had been as children. Noah never really took to winemaking like the rest of his family,

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instead opting for all star basketball and college. He had fled North Carolina for Stanford. He had gone to California for college to find himself, and then promptly joined the FBI. It had broken his heart to leave her, but he chose his own path. Things had not been the same since. He knew she was in love with him when they were teenagers. They were so young then, and he was unsure of himself. She had mentioned someone in the Navy most often now. Her affections had changed, and this Navy man had her attention. Noah wondered who his competition was exactly. In the five years he heard her speak of the mystery-man, he still had yet to lay eyes on him.

Blaine was lost in the darkening sky. The last few days had been tiring but great. She and Noah had buried a few hatchets and were on good terms once again. They had visited Mark together in Asheville yesterday and later sat up talking most of the night.

Noah regarded the look on her face. He could tell her mind was elsewhere. It had been for days now.

Her thoughts were, yet again, on a man hundreds of miles away in Washington. The memory of the Navy Commander haunted her mind daily like a ghost. It had been over two years since she had seen him last. Every day, her mind replayed his face to her.

The shrill ring of her mobile phone broke the silence. She answered the phone in a quiet manner. Only the occasional word yielded her southern heritage.

The disembodied voice of a man very familiar to her informed her she had been reactivated.

“Yes Sir. I understand Sir.”

The call lasted no more than a minute. She put the phone away and looked into the disappointed brown eyes sitting next to her. Everyone sat and stared as she ended the call. They all knew what to expect. It had happened before.

“I have to go. I’ve been recalled from my leave.”

Noah began to protest. “I thought you got thirty days?”

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“I thought so too. But I knew it wouldn’t last.”

Noah rose from his seat and held out his hand to her. She took it and got up to go inside, leaving John and Holly alone. She grabbed her black travel bag and began throwing in necessities. She pulled out her garment bag and threw it on the bed. It held all her uniforms and a few changes of business attire. Noah went into her bathroom and gathered up her toiletries. He had done this with her before as well. He knew just what to put in her bags. While Noah was in the bathroom, Blaine went to her closet and pulled down a lock-box, carefully removing the weapon inside. She quickly tucked it into her bag under some clothes, before Noah could see the weapon. She also put her bullet proof vest in the bag. The whole process of packing was accomplished with silent expediency.

Less than ten minutes later, they returned to the deck. She hugged John and Holly-wishing them well.

“Don’t look at me that way John. I can’t tell you where I’m going and you know it.”

John nodded. “I know. It doesn’t mean I don’t worry about you. You’re the closest thing I have to a sister, Caroline Blaine.”

Holly smiled at her. “We both do.”

“I’ll call you when I can. Tell Daniel I’ll try to come back for graduation on Saturday if I possibly can. I love you guys. Bye.”

John, Holly and Noah bid their own goodnight.

Noah drove her to Asheville to catch a plane, in his restored classic convertible silver Porsche. From the time they left Franklin, until they reached Dillsboro, not a word had been uttered. He would drop her off and go back to his apartment in Skyland.

“Doesn’t that leave you with twenty-one days?” Noah finally broke the silence.

“Yes.”

“So come back soon.” He smiled. “I still owe you a caramel and vanilla latte.”

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“You do, don’t you. Sorry for showing you up on geography knowledge, but you knew I’d win that bet.”

“Who knew there was such a place as Vladivostok?”

“It’s a Russian town. It’s the last stop on the Siberian railway. It’s also a very large port.”

“So you said.”

Noah shook his head. He had, indeed, looked it up. Her navigation skills and cartographic knowledge were frightening.

The tension had eased somewhat between them. Things had been awkward for years since high school. They had both gotten pretty drunk the night before he left for college. They had snuck off to the barn to hide from John and Lizzie, Caroline’s mother. Confessions had been made due to imbibed alcohol. Blaine had begged him to stay and not leave her. Their inhibitions were taken away, and they had kissed for what seemed like hours. Then it went further than either had intended. They hadn’t spoken of it since then, not until yesterday. Things were better between them now, than they had been in years. Noah didn’t want her to go yet, just when the air between them had finally been cleared.

He pulled up at the curb in front of the baggage area to drop her off.

“Be safe training those pilots Caroline. Call me when you get back.”

“I will. You be safe too.”

She looked at him carefully. She knew he harbored feelings for her. She had carried a torch for him most of her life. But the flame was gone now. Her heart belonged to another, and he would have to accept that. She would save that talk until later. Right now her mind was on a trip to Washington. She had left someone important there. She sat physically in the car with Noah, but her mind already had her in the capital city, searching out the man she had stood up on a dinner invitation to the Willard Hotel.

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They hugged as best they could over the console. Noah kissed her cheek lightly. Her bags were retrieved from behind the seat as she exited the vehicle. He pulled away into the night with one last wave. She stopped by the public restroom to strap on the protective vest. The plane back to Washington was a private jet, but she would still have to pass her weapon through security.

As she arrived in Washington, she received another call. She would indeed be assigned to a senior JAG officer to help with an intelligence breach and provide armed security. Her heart skipped a beat as she went to her car to meet up with a man she couldn't forget, whom she would now protect.

chapter two

reflections and orders

2157 Local Time
Judge Advocate General Headquarters
Washington Naval Yard
Washington, D.C.

Commander David Reese sat at his desk, illuminated by a dim lamp while reviewing his case load for tomorrow. The office was quiet this evening. Only the occasional pop from the coffee machine in the room next door and the copier broke the silence. He rose from his desk and propped himself against the door frame surveying the room. The lights were low in the main room where clerks and assistants were burning the midnight oil. He had forgone dinner to wait on an important call from the Secretary of the Navy. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. All the paperwork this evening had blurred his vision. A break was in order.

Reese walked into the next room to pour himself a cup of coffee. He guessed you could call it that. It hadn't been made that

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long ago, but Admiral Grant Anderson's aide tended to brew pots that could strip wallpaper, they were so strong. Such was a pot of Navy coffee. His own assistant, Lieutenant Mason, entered the room just as he finished adding some creamer.

"Sir, I have those depositions copied and ready when you need them."

"Thanks, Mason. Didn't you have a final review tonight for the bar exam?"

"Yes Sir. But I knew you needed those depositions. I also finished the research for the article thirty-two hearing on Petty Officer Barnes next week. I have it in the computer and arranged for his transport here."

Mason looked intently at the Commander. His thoughts seemed far from his job this evening.

"Sir?"

"I'll look at the case in the morning. You've done enough this evening. Go home. I'll see you tomorrow."

Reese took his cup and made his way out to his office. Mason followed and picked up his belongings to leave. He secured his area and noticed the Commander sitting at his desk staring blankly at the papers in front of him. He had been concerned over Reese as of late. The Commander was more than a work colleague. Reese had encouraged Mason all through law school and helped him prepare for the bar himself when he had time. They had known each other for six years now, three professionally at JAG. Mason respected the senior attorney immensely. He was brave and stood for the truth, always. The Commander embodied the Marine phrase *Semper Fi*, always faithful, even though he was Navy. He cautiously approached the Commander's office.

"Sir, I don't mean to pry, but are you okay?"

"I will be, Mason."

"Can I get you anything before I leave, Sir? Maybe some din-

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ner? I think I heard your stomach over the copier a few minutes ago.”

“No, thank you. Tell Cassie I said hello. See you in the morning.”

The Commander lowered his head a bit and began turning pages in a file.

“I will. Good-night Sir.”

Mason knew the Commander well enough to know he would talk when he was ready.

Reese watched the retreating form of Lieutenant Chad Mason. He couldn't just lay it out there, at work, to Mason. He couldn't say that he felt something was missing from his life as of late. At forty-two, he knew something had been missing for a while. In actuality, some one was missing. His career was what he had wanted. He could depend on it to be there for him. But in truth, his career was all he had. He envied Mason sometimes. Mason had managed to secure his future with the Navy and have a loving fiancée. They were to be married next year. He had seen the two of them together. They were so in love. He wanted that for himself. That meant letting someone in, and that wasn't something he was good at.

After losing his parents and growing up with Aunt Margie in Georgia, he had trouble getting close to people. He figured if you only let someone so close, it wouldn't hurt as much when they left. That had been his philosophy since he was eight. Few people really knew who David Reese was. Women who got close enough to him and his life, scared him. If they didn't end it when things got too comfortable, he did. It was how he protected himself. Loving someone meant being vulnerable to them. Loving someone meant trust from both sides. He had never had that.

Only one woman had managed to infiltrate his defenses and she had disappeared from his life two years before. She was wrapped in a mystery and cloaked in a conundrum. She appeared when he needed help on a case, helped to solve the problem and would

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promptly leave. He was desperate to find her again. He needed her like he needed air to breathe. His waking hours left him clinging to the hope that she would come breezing through his door. His sleep consisted of the dream of having her in his arms.

Petty Officer Duke St. Clair, the Admiral's aide, knocked on the open office door. Reese raised his head.

"Sir, the Admiral would like to see you. SecNav cancelled the call. He's on his way."

"Thank you St. Clair."

Reese retrieved his dress blue jacket from the back of his chair and slipped it on. He held up his right cuff and looked at it. He had worked hard for those three stripes. He was up for promotion to Captain soon, and another would be added. His stripes and the mill rinde, the JAG symbol, were constants to him. He straightened his tie and made his way to the Admiral's office. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Reese stood at attention in front of the Admiral's desk. The Admiral's chair was turned away from him.

"Commander Reese reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease, Commander. I'm sure St. Clair informed you that the SecNav is on his way." Admiral Anderson spun around his chair to face Commander Reese. "What he didn't tell you is that at seventeen twenty hours this evening, a crate of missiles were taken from a base in Germany that were on their way to Washington. Intelligence is on it right now."

Reese's face dropped.

"Have a seat, Commander."

The Admiral was a by-the-book Navy man through and through. He had weathered his time on submarines and destroyers. Fifteen years before, after losing his taste for having sea spray in his face, he decided to use his law degree and transferred to JAG. He was in command of the Naples office-before arriving in Washington eight

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years later. He was tall, fair skinned and having a bald head suited him perfectly. He liked everything cut and dried.

Reese sat down as the Secretary of the Navy, Thomas Regis, came bursting into the office. Regis was in his middle fifties, of average height, dark hair, and piercing green eyes that seemed to look right through you. His temples were showing the first signs of gray. He wore glasses that were streamlined rectangular frames that fit closely to his wide face. Regis was a no-nonsense man whose face never betrayed his emotions-despite what he might be thinking. His presence in a room alone was enough to command your attention.

“Gentleman, we have a highly intense situation on our hands, and it calls for extreme measures.” He sat down quickly beside Reese and nodded his head to acknowledge the two men. “The two missiles in question just came from research and development and are used in conjunction with Navy attack fighters. They have the latest guidance system imbedded in their software.”

The Admiral’s brow furrowed. “Why are you telling us this? Isn’t this something the CIA and Navy Intelligence can handle?”

“Ordinarily, yes. But these missiles were in a guarded warehouse that only two people had access to. One of them was a Department of Defense official over Navy projects, Cole Peterson, who has gone missing. I want Commander Reese to be on the scene handling the investigation personally. Our Navy Officers in Germany are facing serious charges over this. I want my JAG officers on it, not just the one’s in Germany. I also want someone to go with him. We don’t know all the parameters of the situation, and he’ll need someone to watch his back and help with the investigation.”

Reese smelled something fishy. “What aren’t you telling us Mr. Secretary?”

Regis knew better than to hold back from Reese and Anderson. They would get it out of him one way or another. They had before.

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“These missiles can be loaded with chemical weapons set to detonate over the intended target with precision accuracy. When the missiles left R&D, they were loaded with a biological payload to be brought back to the United States and stored. They were under rigorous security because of it.”

“What kind of payload?” Reese’s face gave away nothing.

“I’m not sure.”

Admiral Anderson had jumped to his feet. “What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“I’m not sure. It could be anything. The lab they were testing at has any number of agents.”

“Like?” Reese continued to stare at the SecNav.

“Like H1N1, Sarin, Anthrax, you name it.”

“No wonder you want these missiles back so badly.” The Admiral sat back down, his face a mask of anger. “Why would they leave a payload like that inside a missile? It should have been shipped back separately.”

“It was done together to save time and money. Our budget cutbacks have been enormous. You know that.”

“Why send Commander Reese?”

“Truthfully?”

“That’s the only answer I want right now, Regis.”

“Commander Reese was an aviator. If we can recover the missiles, they’re to be flown back. The same person I’m sending to help will brief him on the way.”

“You want me to fly these things back?” Reese was shocked. “I haven’t landed a Navy bird in...”

“But you have been flying, on your own time. Yes?”

“Yes. I still don’t see why you couldn’t get another man.” Reese swallowed hard.

“Commander, you’re the best here at JAG. You’re also a pilot.” Regis zeroed his gaze on Reese. “A damn good JAG officer and a Na-

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val Aviator is what we need. Are you willing to do this to get yourself back into a cockpit officially?”

Reese took in the words, processing them slowly. Did he have the courage to get back in a plane after what happened in Nevada? He hadn't been an active pilot in twelve years after surrendering his wings and going to law school instead. He missed the feel of being in a jet. He yearned for it every time he set foot on a carrier for an investigation or the smell of jet fuel hit him square in the face. He had been up in a Navy bird several times on investigations but only when it called for it. He was still listed as an inactive aviator. An F-14 was an expensive machine and couldn't be handed over to just anyone. He had dreaded knowing the Tomcat's were to be retired soon and he would be unable to fly one anymore, period. He would be a relic of the past with his plane gone. All he could do now was borrow a friend's civilian bird and take it up once in a while.

“Commander?” Secretary Regis was waiting on an answer.

Reese deferred to the Admiral. “Sir?”

“It's up to you. It's your ass on the line in a plane if they find the missiles.”

Reese licked his lips quickly and wheezed out, “I'll do it.”

chapter three

into the night

2304

Home of David Reese
Georgetown
Washington, D.C.

Reese had managed to get back to his apartment and pack in record time. He threw only minimal civilian clothes into a bag and several changes of uniforms. You didn't have to worry about packing most of the uniforms since they were made of polyester. The wrinkles tended to fall out easily enough. He was just grabbing his shaving kit when there was a knock. He cautiously opened the front door.

He stood open-mouthed looking into the face of someone he had seen and talked to on numerous occasions in and out of court, on and off bases and carriers, and dreamed of for years. Always lurking just out of sight, but always in-the-know and willing to share necessary information. There she was. A five foot five, gray eyed, short curly brown haired woman stood in front of him wearing a smile that

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disarmed him completely. She was a spook that disappeared into the night.

“Caroline Blaine?”

“Surprise.” She laughed softly at the look on his face.

Reese wasted no time as he stepped forward and pulled her into a bear hug.

She was so nervous coming up the stairs, and here she was. She’d wanted to see him for so long. Now she was being held firmly against his lithe body. Reese was holding on for dear life, and she was too.

Blaine finally could draw a breath when he let go.

“Long time no see, Commander. I’m here to pick you up and go to Germany.”

Reese looked like a cod fish he was sure, standing in the open door with his mouth gaping. He had wished for this woman to appear to him for so long that he couldn’t articulate a response.

“I...come in. I’m almost ready to go. Make yourself at home.”

He walked away from her to the bedroom. He had to get control of himself, and he couldn’t do that right now if he was in the same room with her. He couldn’t believe she was here. He had looked for her for months after she had disappeared the last time. He had searched every database he had privy to and spoke with every connection he had and found nothing on her. It was like she didn’t exist.

Blaine entered his apartment, noting how tidy he was. She was suitably impressed. The lower two floors of the four story building were a bakery. Reese had the top floor to himself. He had helped the building’s owner win a lawsuit and was given the top floor to convert into an apartment almost four years ago. He lived there rent free. She noticed that the wide wooden stairs leading up to the entrance had been completely refinished and the hallway repainted recently. The apartment had a nice airy feel with plenty of space. The kitchen was enormous and had very expensive appliances. It was much differ-

into the night

ent from her place, and she liked it. She realized she was actually glad he had left the room. It had given her a chance to reign in her emotions from seeing him again.

Reese had left her on her own to retrieve his bag.

“How did you know where I lived?”

“I’ve known for three years since the Twenty Nine Palms case. I had to watch your building after you received a death threat unless you backed off prosecution.”

“You what?”

He came back from the bedroom to find her walking around his kitchen.

“I like what you’ve done with your kitchen. The range is nice. How did you get that commercial range up those stairs?”

Reese was thrown off a bit and shook his head.

“I had help.”

Blaine smiled. “I was ordered to watch your every move while the trial was going on. You didn’t even know, did you?”

“No. I didn’t think I warranted a bodyguard. I remember seeing you in the courtroom every day.”

“You kept me going. I didn’t exactly like getting up at five thirty to tag after you while you ran. I was grateful when your knee gave out, and you took up speed walking.”

“I don’t want to know the rest.” He shook his head again and smiled.

She already knew that smile. It had melted her more than once. She couldn’t help but return it however. Her phone rang. She nodded while affirming information a few times before quickly hanging up.

“We had better go. Plans have changed. The missiles are on the move. They think they’re in Dijon, France. We’re on a plane out of Andrews in half an hour. I don’t know how Regis managed a private jet.”

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Blaine took off her light jacket. The holster holding her Beretta gained his attention immediately.

“I know why. You wouldn’t get through security carrying that thing.”

She acknowledged the gun and nodded.

“Since when does the CIA issue thousand dollar guns like that?”

“The CIA doesn’t. It’s mine, Commander.”

“Just what agency do you work for? You’ve helped me on dozens of cases before but...”

“I’m on the same side as you. Let’s just leave it at that. We always have.”

Reese agreed and grabbed his black duffle as they headed out of the apartment. He locked the door. They made their way out. Just as they were about to get inside Blaine’s silver Jeep Grand Cherokee, a black limousine pulled up to the curb. It was the Secretary of the Navy. They gave their duffle bags to the driver and proceeded to get in. Reese noted Blaine’s reaction to the car. He’d ask her later. Reese was surprised to find Admiral Anderson in the black limousine with Secretary Regis.

“Miss Blaine, it’s good to see you again.” Admiral Anderson smiled and shook her hand.

“You too.” Blaine directed her attention to the SecNav. “I just received a phone call Sir. The missiles are believed to have been taken to Dijon, France. Our pilot has already amended the flight plan and is—”

Regis cut her off, “waiting at Andrews. I know.”

Admiral Anderson started in next. “Mr. Reese, your case load will be redistributed tomorrow morning. As of now, this is your only case. Hopefully, if we can keep everything contained, it won’t garner media scrutiny. Until you return, the only commanding officer you’ll be answering to outside JAG channels, is Miss Blaine.”

into the night

Reese's eyes grew wide for a moment as he turned to look at Blaine on his right.

SecNav Regis regarded them both for a moment. "Miss Blaine is to help you with your investigation in any way you need. If you should require anything, ask her. I'll see that you get it. She is also your protection. I can't stress how important it is to get these missiles returned along with you both. I know you're used to having your own hand, but this time you listen to her. She's the expert on intelligence and staying alive. You're the lawyer, and if need be, the pilot."

"Aviator, Sir. If you want a pilot, find yourself a racecar driver."

Blaine finished the remark as though the term 'pilot' had offended her.

SecNav Regis gritted his teeth a bit and continued. "Yes, aviator."

Reese had to control the smirk threatening to come through on his face. Blaine had brass interrupting the SecNav and correcting him like that.

"If she gives you an order, listen to her. Are we clear, Mr. Reese?" The Admiral waited on his response.

"Yes, Sir."

Blaine and Reese sat there staring each other down.

"Alright then."

The Admiral didn't know just how this was going to work. He liked both Blaine and Reese. They were good at their jobs, but they were both fiercely independent. Sharing control of this situation would not be easy for either of them. Reese had certainly met his match in her. The Admiral had seen that five years ago when they were first introduced. He had heard them argue over involvement in cases and seen Reese swallow his pride over a few lost battles with Blaine. They would find a way to get along, he was sure of it- or Blaine would return the pieces left in a body bag. Admiral Anderson

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turned toward the window and smiled to himself. Yes, this would be interesting.

Wednesday, May 19

0109

Somewhere over the Atlantic

The jet had taken off almost forty-five minutes earlier headed for an airstrip outside Dijon. Blaine sat across from Reese-oblivious to the fact that she was being watched. Her mind was on the maps in front of her and the intelligence briefings she had been handed when they boarded the plane. She took a sip from a bottle of water and noticed Reese finally.

He spoke softly. "I waited for you that night at the Willard."

"I know you did. I wanted to come."

"Then why?"

"I left for Okinawa. I was ordered there immediately after the Ramsey case. I couldn't tell anyone. Not even you."

"So you left because of your job and not because of me?"

"I didn't stand you up for dinner willingly, no. I'd never stand up a man in dress whites."

Reese smiled. That comment made him feel some better. He didn't know what it was about this woman. She had always made him feel like he was giddy on jet fuel whenever she was around. They had never kissed but he always wished for it. She certainly had a way to light his afterburners with an argument too. She made him feel alive.

"I wondered what had happened to you too, Commander. I check your record often to see how you are. I felt terrible about leaving you to wonder after not showing up that night." Blaine exhaled and sat the water bottle down. She went over to sit beside Reese. She opened her mouth to say something to him, but hesitated.

into the night

“I guess I was almost relieved too. I knew what that dinner would mean.” She saw his face, and began again before he had the chance to interrupt. “I got too emotionally involved with you while working on the Ramsey case. I can’t do that and still do my job. It’s not that I don’t find you attractive, Commander, because I do. I have to be willing to walk away from everything I know and love. There aren’t that many people I love, or have loved. It’s how I keep them safe.”

That made Reese completely forget what he was about to articulate. Did she really mean that? That scared him because he knew he felt the same about her. A part of him had grown to love her as well.

“I tried to stay away to keep my brother safe. But he got in the crossfire back in North Carolina two years ago. Now, he’s in a long term care facility. He doesn’t know his name or where he is and lives on a ventilator. I don’t want that for anyone else.”

She turned away from him and made to get up, but he stopped her.

“I didn’t know about your brother. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

Reese held her gaze. “If you ever want to talk again, I’m here. I’m very familiar with the term classified, you know.”

Blaine smiled. “I’ll bet you are. I’ll keep that in mind.”

She did get up this time and grabbed the mess of papers from her other seat. She returned to his side and began to go over their strategy on this assignment.

Sometime during the flight, Blaine had fallen asleep over a map. Reese had removed it from her lax hand and was about to place a pillow behind her head when Blaine’s reflexes kicked in. She had him pinned under her on the floor of the plane before he realized it.

“Take it easy. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She let him go, and they both got up. “I know you didn’t. Just

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be careful. You know I do things without realizing it. I don't want to hurt you."

"I have at least a hundred pounds on you and a foot in height. I don't think you could do too much damage before you'd realize it's me. How many times are you going to sweep me off my feet?" He flashed his grin at her as he resumed his seat.

Blaine turned away from him, grinning herself, pretending to stretch. He had to stop doing that. His grin had the tendency to make her forget her name. It always had. That, coupled with his broad muscled shoulders and solid build on his six foot four frame had fueled her dizziest daydreams since she met him. He kept himself in chiseled shape. Being behind a desk had certainly not made him soft. He still had all the characteristics of the Top Gun that he was. Dark chestnut hair, almost black, covered his head. He kept it cut short, spiked most of the time. He had a steel blue gaze that could tear right through you too. She had seen him in the court room enough to know he could be a formidable opponent. Blaine had lost her heart to this man years ago. She could admit that now. She laid herself across two seats and tried to sleep a little. She knew he was watching her.

Reese and Blaine had continued to chat for a while as she lay there with her eyes closed. They were catching up with each other after a two year absence, but it was like no time had passed at all. Soon, they fell into the comfortable easy way they had with each other again.

He had gone through the intelligence reports and was getting sleepy. Blaine had the right idea. He needed a few hours rest if he was going to be any good for anything when they landed. He had seen this woman across from him erratically over the past five years. She had shown him fortitude with her character and embodied all the things he admired in someone. What time they had personally, over the years, he had cherished. Sure their arguments could fuel a nuclear

into the night

reactor, but they had shared tender moments as well. She was what he was missing. The thought jarred him as his eyes continued to droop. His brain began to fog as sleep claimed him. He knew he was in trouble with his heart where Blaine was concerned. He had been for years now.

1347

French airspace

Blaine awoke a few hours later with a stiff shoulder and neck. The seats were empty across from her. The co-pilot they had met before take off was sleeping in a seat at the back. She headed toward the cockpit to find Reese in the co-pilot's chair, headset on with the yoke in hand. He was chatting with the pilot. Blaine shook her head. She wondered how long it would be before he managed to talk his way into the cockpit.

Reese turned to face her with eyes flashing.

"We've been cleared to land in Dijon. We should be touching down in about twenty minutes. You might want to strap in soon."

Blaine laughed and patted his shoulder.

"Alright, Captain."

She continued to laugh. Just before she turned to leave she added, "Just remember this jet doesn't have a tail hook, okay flyboy?"

Almost twenty minutes later exactly, they touched down smoothly in Dijon. Upon disembarking with their meager luggage, they were met by two French intelligence officials on the tarmac who offered them a ride to the nearest hotel. Reese listened to Blaine as she spoke in rapid French with the two men. They smiled and nodded as she continued her conversation without missing a beat. After they were dropped off at the hotel, Reese couldn't stand it any longer. He had to know what they had said. At one point during the conversa-

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tion, Blaine had seemed embarrassed.

“They told me what they knew on the movement of the missiles. They’re sure they have been moved again overnight and gave me a contact in Burgundy. We’ve got a train ride ahead of us tomorrow, and I have lots of phone calls to make this evening. I don’t know anything about the hotel we are staying in so don’t mention any sensitive information in the room. It could be bugged.”

“And?”

“And they wanted to know if we were together. They wanted to buy me dinner.”

“Uh huh. I thought so. You seemed a little flustered for a moment.”

Reese smiled at her.

“That’s just a Frenchman’s way- they flirt with anything female. I can handle Frenchmen just fine.”

He grabbed their luggage and headed to the room they had been assigned. “You’ve always known how to handle me just fine.” He walked away from her a few steps.

Blaine stood there a moment and shook her head before following him.

Upon entering their room, she announced loudly, “I always find I feel better after a shower. I wonder how well the hot water works here?”

Reese knew the drill. He waited while she pulled him into the bathroom with her. She motioned for him to stay quiet as the shower was turned on, full blast.

Blaine moved to him and began to whisper. “Stay in here for a few minutes. I’m going to go sweep the room for bugs. I’ll be right back.”

She returned a few moments later to find Reese sitting on the toilet waiting.

“The room’s clean.” She shut off the water.

into the night

“Good. I’m not. Fancy a shower after all?”

Reese stood and pulled off his shirt.

Blaine quickly lobbed a towel at his head playfully. “Knock yourself out, sailor.”

She shut the door behind her. His torso was much better in person than what he looked like in her dreams.

As she stood on the other side of the door, the water came on. She heard the rest of his clothes hit the floor as he removed them off. Then shower curtain being pulled forward. He didn’t even have clean clothes in there. She picked up his kit and eased the door open slightly to speak through it.

“You might need your bag. I’ll just slide it inside.”

The bag was eased on the floor through the open door.

“Thanks. I just want to wash the grime off and shave.”

His voice echoed to her from behind the shower curtain.

“Could you open the left side compartment and hand me a razor, please?”

“Sure. I don’t mind the Harrison Ford look you know.” She couldn’t see it behind the curtain, but Reese was grinning madly.

“I do.”

Blaine entered the bathroom as steam began to collect quickly. Her face was beginning to cool off from seeing him with no shirt on. Knowing he was completely naked behind that curtain made her breath hitch. She pulled his razor out and the shower gel. She handed them cautiously to him without really moving the shower curtain. She turned away just in case and beat a hasty retreat to the other room. Her breathing had sped up, her face was flushed again. She needed to calm down.

Twenty-seven minutes later, he came out clean shaven and smelling of the shower gel she had handed him. He placed his bag next to the bed. He had on civilian clothes, just like last night at the apartment. She was sitting on the bed talking to someone on the

chapter three

phone.

Reese noticed the Beretta resting within reach. She had kicked off her shoes and looked semi comfortable. There were no chairs in the room, only one full size bed. He sat down on the end of it and waited. She hung up after a few minutes.

“You sure do take your time in a shower don’t you?” She smiled. “Did you leave any hot water for me?”

“I think so.”

He smiled mischievously at her. He had thought about coming out in a towel just to see her reaction, but had no reason to do so. She had brought his bag to him.

She rose and made her way to the head with her own bag in tow.

“I’ll get cleaned up, and then we’ll go find something to eat in this town.”

It was only eight minutes until Blaine emerged in a pair of slacks and a button up shirt. She put on the holster and returned her weapon back into place. Reese noted she had on loafers instead of heels.

Blaine noticed his glance at her feet.

“You know I don’t wear heels. I can’t stand them. I barely wear makeup.”

“I know. It’s one of the things that makes you unique.”

“In a good or bad way?”

Reese smiled at her. “In a good way. Come on, I haven’t had anything to eat since lunch yesterday. I’m starving.”

They walked to the end of the street to a local café and filled themselves on French fare. Blaine ordered for them, of course, but their waiter had heard them speaking in English and decided to be nice. She got up at the end of the meal to take a phone call outside. Her phone was on vibrate now. When she returned, there was a strawberry tart waiting for her.

into the night

“You remembered.”

“Of course I remembered. Strawberries are your favorite.” He picked up a fork and proceeded to feed her a bite. “Well, that and chocolate.”

She accepted the succulent bite and giggled through a mouthful of tart.

“I’ll share, you know.”

They nibbled on the tart and finished up their late lunch.

1656

Hotel Dijon

Dijon, France

Reese and Blaine had walked through the town to let their meal settle. Reese collapsed onto the bed upon entering and lay there staring up at the ceiling. He knew they’d flip a coin soon for who got to sleep on the bed. He’d most likely get the floor tonight.

“So, what’s our next move?”

Blaine decided to lie down on the bed and turned toward him.

“We’re waiting on a French intelligence officer to call me back. We don’t move until then.”

Reese had listened intently last night on the flight as Blaine told him of reconciling her friendship with Noah after so many years, and of the record crop they expected this year if the rainfall stayed even. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to imagine this Noah. Blaine had spoken of him so often Reese didn’t know what to make of it. He managed to keep his jealousy hidden from her regarding Noah. He still had his reservations about the whole situation. She spoke of Noah with such affection in her voice sometimes. He must be a good Agent though if Blaine said he was. He did think John

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sounded interesting. Retired Navy SEALs were quite the characters. John was the wine master. He had the same coloring as his brother, Noah. They both had brown eyes and brown hair. They also shared their height. John had just celebrated his forty-sixth birthday. He knew how to blend the wines to get the best taste and color. John had paid attention to his father and grandfather growing up. He had passed his knowledge on to Holly and Blaine too. Reese thought perhaps one day he would meet them along with Daniel, her nephew of sorts. Blaine doted on her 'nephew.' He couldn't believe how easily he remembered everything she told him. He had trouble remembering case-files from two weeks ago, but things she had shared over the course of five years, he could recall instantly.

The bed shook as they awoke with a start. Someone was knocking on their door. They had dozed off. Blaine was on her feet with her weapon drawn on the door.

Someone whispered at the door. "Caroline? It's me, Jack."

She cautiously opened the door a crack and verified the owner of that voice. She pulled the chain off, and a gray haired man entered wearing civilian clothing.

"You know better than to do that, Jack."

"I know, but you weren't answering your phone, and I got concerned."

"That's my fault. It was on the floor with my shoes. I put it on vibrate and then fell asleep. Jack Madison, Chief of Intelligence, this is Commander Reese. Jack's my boss if you will. He prefers being hands-on rather than sit in an office."

The two men shook hands.

"That's what she calls me, but I'm not foolish enough to think she actually listens to me. She reports mainly to the SecNav."

"You watch my back incessantly."

"I promised your Dad I'd keep an eye on you-like he did on me in Vietnam."

into the night

“To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit, Jack?”

The three of them sat on the bed as Jack told of the plan to get the missiles back into U.S. custody. It was good, indeed, they had not landed in Germany. Two JAG officers heading up the investigation had been killed last night. The missiles had been tracked to a small barn on the outskirts of Burgundy. Peterson was still missing. The missiles were being guarded by four men, and they expected them to be moved tomorrow afternoon by a truck to the south French coast and be transferred to a boat for shipment via the Mediterranean Sea. They were being sold for their navigation system. Apparently, the thieves had no idea they were sitting on chemical weapons as well.

Blaine’s face contorted. “There’s only one catch. The Navy carrier close enough for us to fly out on at this end of the Med is the Franklin Pierce. The only birds they have are F/A 18 Super Hornets. They’ve already retired their F-14’s”

“So? Isn’t that why they sent you?” He motioned to Reese.

“Technically, yes. They sent me to investigate in Germany also, but that fell through before we landed. I was supposed to fly us back with the cargo to Washington. She’s my guard.”

“What’s the problem, then?”

Blaine looked into the disappointed eyes of Commander Reese.

“He’s not checked out in Hornets, only Tomcats.”

She flipped out her phone and dialed a number. She put the phone on speaker and laid it on the bed between them.

“Secretary Regis, this is Caroline Blaine. I’m with Jack Madison and Commander Reese. I’m sure you’ve been briefed on the current situation.” She waited.

“Yes I have, Commander Blaine. What do you suggest?”

Commander? Reese couldn’t believe his ears. Blaine was civilian intelligence assigned to the Navy. She couldn’t be a Navy Of-

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ficer, or he would have known by now. Why would the SecNav have referred to her as ‘Commander’ if she wasn’t Navy? He was confused as he looked first to Jack to confirm this.

Blaine simply shrugged and turned red. She mouthed the word ‘later’ to him.

“I say we go ahead as planned,, Sir. I will need your permission to train Reese on the Hornet since he’s not active. If we get those missiles back to the Pierce tomorrow night we can be back in Washington by the following morning.”

“One or the other of you can be a second then if something should happen. That’s the point. Can you get him up to speed on the Hornet that fast?”

Blaine eyed Reese thoughtfully. “He’s sharp, and he knows his avionics, Sir. I can have him up to speed by tomorrow afternoon. They have everything we need on board. I just have to condense thirty days into a few hours.”

“That’s settled then. Work with our intelligence officers on the scene and get those missiles Jack. Blaine, you and Reese get back to Washington with them. I’ll arrange for you to be picked up in Dijon by a helo and then taken to the Pierce. You can update Reese there. Once you have the missiles on board, they are to be separated from their chemical cargo. We do know that it is a gas. So wear a suit and dispose of it safely. Anything else?”

“No Sir. See you in two days.”

She pocketed the phone and grabbed her bag quickly throwing anything she had taken out back in.

“Jack, keep me apprised of the situation. You’re going to have to recover the goods without us. I’ll meet you on the carrier tomorrow night.”

Jack stood up to leave, wishing them well. Blaine moved through the room, pulling Reese’s bag with her to follow Jack out the door.

into the night

“Come on, Reese. Get your six moving. I don’t have time to explain. We’ve got a date with a Hornet.”

All the noise from the multiple helicopter rides didn’t leave much time to discuss this new revelation regarding Blaine. Reese felt dizzy with the new information about her. He had so many questions for her. By the time they reached the Franklin Pierce and settled into their staterooms, it was well after midnight.

The Skipper had expressed his concerns over the missiles being brought onboard tomorrow. He had been ordered by the Secretary of the Navy to ask no questions. The Cag was also unhappy about two intruders leaving the carrier with one of his birds. He knew both Blaine and Reese and respected them, but he didn’t have to like it.

chapter four

the need for speed

Thursday, May 20
0649
USS Franklin Pierce
Mediterranean Sea

The next morning Blaine was banging on the hatch of Reese's quarters.

"Get your six outta bed, or I'll catapult you off the deck myself!"

That made him laugh. He reached for the hatch and pulled it open. He was already up and had on a flight suit. He noticed the gold wings imprinted on the suit when he put it on. It had been a long time since he had been behind a pair of wings-imprinted or otherwise. Blaine came through the door and regarded Reese in the suit. He was eyeing her as well. He wondered what she looked like in her uniform but the green flight suit would do.

"Those wings look good on you, Commander." She smiled as

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she traced the imprinted wings on his flight suit.

“You too. So should I address you as Commander as well or is it Lieutenant Commander?”

“It’s Commander and no, call me Blaine or Caroline. The only time I’m used to being addressed as Commander is when I’m training hot shots at Miramar or out on a carrier when I’m not playing a spook. Those hotshots do it with so much sugar on it I feel like I’m drinking a glass of sweet tea at home.”

“You never said anything about training at Miramar or even...”

Blaine smiled at him and interrupted

“Come on. I’ll fill you in over dinner on me when this is all over, I promise. We have too much to do today.”

He followed her to the mess to get some coffee and something to eat. He didn’t know exactly what they would be doing in the next few-hours so eating a big meal could be bad. If he went up in a plane, he didn’t want to risk seeing his food again so soon. He wasn’t used to the hard g’s a fighter could pull anymore. He only knew what to expect. She ate quickly, and he did the same, noting she had eaten light as well. It had been two years since he had been in a Tomcat because of an investigation, and that had been as a RIO.

They went to the Officer’s Ward Room to have some relative peace and quiet. Blaine pulled manual after manual to the table that she had brought in earlier. He glanced at the front cover of one before she opened the large tome, the F/A-18 F Super Hornet.

“Two words- air superiority. Head-to-head, the Super Hornet can outperform the Tomcat any day of the week. It’s a multi-role attack fighter and a bomber. More-over, it’s a precision strike fighter. It has two engines that produce almost fifty thousand pounds of thrust combined and can land itself on a carrier as well as take off unaided. Unlike your Tomcat, the Super Hornet can carry every tactical air-to-air and air-to-ground weapon in the Navy’s inventory on eleven avail-

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able pylons. It has enhanced radar, ATARS and advanced onboard sensor fusion capability. It can fly twelve hundred seventy-five miles for a combat mission or sixteen hundred sixty ferry with external fuel tanks fully engaged. It can fly further, carry more weapons and still be over eight hundred pounds underweight versus the Tomcat. Because it can hold more fuel it has a forty percent larger mission radius over the F-14. They cost forty percent less to run per hour of flight time versus your bird. It is mid-air refuel capable, and we'll be using that on our cruise home. The Hornet comes in single and dual seaters too. But you and I will be flying in a duel seat Super Hornet with side-winders and mavericks plus our special cargo. It can reach a maximum of Mach 1.8 and the ceiling is Angels fifty plus. She's one sexy bird."

They poured through manuals for almost three hours without a break and watched videos on flying the Super Hornet and ejection procedures.

"How much do I have to cough up if I break one?"

"Fifty-seven million, Commander." She smiled as his jaw dropped. "Now come on, let's get to the simulator and introduce you to the Super Hornet."

Reese climbed in to the mock cockpit of an F/A-18 F Super Hornet. It fit like a glove on his tall frame. Reese had on the new paired helmet for the Super Hornet. He could see everything he needed while looking into his visor. All the necessary information was available at a glance in the heads up displays. He could use his eyes to watch it all, paint his target, and fire. She explained the layout, computers, color displays, the new radar, and how the plane could out maneuver the Tomcat he loved so well. The Hornet was nose directed. She was discussing tactics and wildly using her hands to animatedly explain turns and rolls. She had taken him through a run and talked him through the response he would use.

"But what about inverting in that situation to avoid negative

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g's?"

Blaine never answered the question because she was interrupted by the Cag calling to her from the hatch.

"You need to get ready. I've got you a plane waiting in thirty."

"Thanks, we're done."

Reese had spent four hours sitting inside the simulator with Blaine standing next to him outside it.

"That's it?"

Reese was wondering if he really could do this. He had so much to remember. The two planes were so different. A lot was riding on him. He had so much to live up to. Was he ready?

He climbed out of the simulator, finally. They walked to the preflight area and entered the locker room. Other pilots were readying to go up. Blaine pushed past the others and two men immediately recognized her. Reese stood back to watch the exchange.

"Attention on deck!" One of the young Lieutenants recognized the arrival of the ranking officers.

"Sticks?" One of the men caught her shoulder and spun her around.

"Midnight!"

She hugged the RIO and quickly shook his pilot's hand standing next to him. "Bumper, I hope you got that rash under control!"

The whole squadron was laughing then.

Bumper was laughing himself. He knew he would pay for her remark later.

"Well Ladies, I'd like to introduce you to the only woman who can out fly me and out drink me."

One of the other men remarked, "And you're willing to admit it?"

Another came forward and shook her hand. She noted his call sign was Nightwolf.

"I'd like to shake the hand of the woman who nailed Bum-

the need for speed

per's ass five days in a row at Miramar! So, why do they call you Sticks?"

Bumper spoke up quickly.

"Because if it has one she can fly it! I've never seen anything like her in the air."

Blaine felt herself turning red.

"Thanks, Bumper. That means a lot coming from the man who couldn't stop scratching in public because of a heat rash."

Blaine found Reese's sightline and cleared her throat to stop laughing.

"Gentleman, I'd like to introduce you to Commander Reese. He's a fellow aviator and a -"

"JAG lawyer." Nightwolf added before Blaine could finish.

"He saved my six last year when I was brought up on charges. Thanks again, Commander."

Reese stepped forward beside Blaine and nodded to Nightwolf.

"Well fellas, I've got work to do. Reese will be joining the land of the active with his first flight today in a Super Hornet."

Bumper sobered in front of the ranking Commanders.

Reese was surrounded with a room full of Lieutenants at least ten years his junior, and he was slightly uncomfortable with the notion of performing badly in the Super Hornet. He had to put his fear elsewhere about climbing back into a plane today.

The Cag met them outside the locker room and pulled Blaine aside.

"Do you think he can do this?"

"I'll bet my wings on it."

"You just might have to live up to that Blaine. Get ready to go in fifteen. You're going up with Bumper and Midnight. I don't want you up there alone until we see how he's going to do."

"I'll go up first and see how he reacts. If I think he's okay, I'll

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take a walk around the block before I trap and let him take the front seat.”

“Fine. I don’t like it, but I know I don’t have any say in this.”

“Respectfully Sir, no you don’t. I do appreciate this and so does the SecNav.”

“Just go.”

1458

USS Franklin Pierce

Mediterranean Sea

Blaine was sitting on the number one catapult being put in place with Reese strapped in behind her.

“Are you okay, Reese?”

“I’m great.”

She smiled as she opened up the engines for take off. They were roaring. The next moment they were off the carrier deck in three seconds at well over one hundred and fifty miles an hour. She began a steep climb and came up beside Bumper at ten thousand feet. Her mask couldn’t hide the smile on her face.

“Nothing like the view huh, Commander?”

Blaine knew he was nervous about his own flight next. A good aviator knows that fear can be useful. Blaine looked into her visor as something caught her eye.

“Hey Bumper, you see what I see?”

“What’cha got?” Bumper waited.

“Two blips.”

“We saw some Iranian F-14’s yesterday in the area. They didn’t engage and maintained their distance. I still can’t believe we sold them our birds.”

“That was years ago when we were still on good terms with

the need for speed

Iran. They haven't been maintained like our birds were and their pilots are not our Navy pilots. Don't forget, it's not the plane itself Bumper that makes our Navy deadly- it's who's flyin' it."

Reese watched the radar too as the two bogies came closer. "They're movin in."

Blaine was hoping they would fly away from them and give them a nice quiet flight.

"It looks like their curiosity is up today. Two F-14's right four o'clock level, continue right turn."

"I've got your back, Sticks."

"I don't think we need to worry, Bumper, they just don't seem that interested. Their air speed is too slow."

"Pierce, this is Hornet one fourteen, I've got a visual on two Iranian Tomcats. Anything I should know about?" Blaine waited.

"Hornet one fourteen you are advised to keep your distance. Do not engage. Repeat, do not engage."

Bumper and Sticks continued their flight pattern for thirty miles and then broke to turn back. Only a moment later, the radar went crazy in Blaine's cockpit.

"Bumper, I'm being painted!"

Reese was beginning to sweat as he heard the cockpit come alive with alarms. He was looking at the radar and watching actively out of the canopy for the Tomcat's he knew were out there. He missed this feeling of being in the thick of things in a jet. He was right at home.

"I'm on your six, Sticks."

Bumper was flying just behind her to the side.

The carrier called on the radio. "One fourteen climb to angels fifteen and begin return to the deck."

"Roger. One fourteen's on the way." Blaine paused. "Let's see if these guys are serious. Reese?"

"Yeah?"

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“Any suggestions?”

“Not yet.”

He chose to remain quiet while he continued to scan the sky. He shouted into the radio.

“He’s on the low side!”

Blaine saw the Tomcat pulling closer just below her. She increased her speed and moved away. The other Tomcat was several miles away between her and the carrier. It caught up just as she banked and turned again for another pass at the Tomcats.

“Something’s rotten in the Med, Bumper. He’s just playing with me. If he had wanted to fire, he would’ve by now.”

“I agree, Sticks. What do you want to do?”

“Well, if I can’t engage him, and he wants to play, I say we have a little fun with him before we head back. I need to get Reese back up here fast and let him wet his feet on this bird. On the next pass as they’re going away, follow my lead. They may be in a Tomcat, but they sure-as-hell can’t fly it like our Navy can.”

Bumper laughed. “Yes Ma’am.”

On the next flyby with the Tomcats, Blaine inverted her plane and flew over the top of the Iranians waving as she passed.

“See you later, suckers!”

She righted her position as she made radio contact with the carrier to land.

Reese was laughing loudly. “I can’t believe you just did that!”

Blaine was laughing herself.

Midnight heard Bumper laugh loudly.

“What’s so funny?”

“She inverted and flew over those Tomcats. I’m sure she gave ’em a friendly wave.”

“Guess we’ll have to do as she does!”

Bumper agreed with Midnight and inverted as he flew past leaving the pilot in the lead Tomcat scratching his head. Bumper and

the need for speed

Blaine were long gone.

“See you in ten, Sticks! Sure you can handle being in the backseat?”

“I’ll let you know, Bumper.”

Reese spoke up from the back.

“She can handle anything you throw at her, Bumper. Bottle of bourbon if we catch the number three?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Get the glasses ready because here we go. Landing gear is down, hook is down...” Reese was running through the landing procedures.

The disembodied voice on the carrier came through.

“One fourteen you are on the glide path three quarters a mile, call the ball.”

A moment later they were on the deck with a jerk. Blaine had caught the number three arrester cable.

Reese reached around the seat and patted Blaine’s shoulder as the canopy began to lift.

“Thanks for the drink later if I forget to tell you. Nice trap!”

Blaine smiled as she climbed out of the plane on to the deck. Reese joined her and looked up at the Hornet he would be piloting in only a few minutes. His stomach rolled, then settled.

“Are you ready to go supersonic again, Commander?”

“Can Pavarotti sing?” He flashed his grin at her, and she knew he was fine.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go.”

They climbed back in and waited to be cleared. The plane was taxied on the catapult without a hitch. Reese was waiting.

“Just a like run on the beltway, you’ll be fine Commander.”

“I hope you’re right. I don’t have fifty seven million in the bank.”

“It’s a plane. It’s still a fighter jet, just a different flavor. If

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something goes wrong, we'll both renew our membership in the Martin Baker tie club."

She laughed and could hear him laugh as well.

They were launched off of the deck. Reese pulled the stick to climb high. He was back in the saddle for today at least. He couldn't thank Blaine enough for it. She had stuck her neck on the line with the Cag and the SecNav. He would find a way to make it up to her. He just had to keep her trust and get them back on the carrier deck safely later.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Oh yeah!"

Reese pulled through the clouds and hung slightly behind Bumper at fifteen thousand feet.

"Bumper, we're gonna hot dog it for a while to let Reese get to know this bird. Hang back at fifteen. We're gonna climb to save some fuel."

"Yes Ma'am."

"It's your bird, Commander. Kick it! You know you want to."

"Up up and away!"

Reese climbed higher and higher as he pushed the aircraft through the air and the clouds. He went through lazy rolls and hard turns for about ten minutes. Another ten of being rolled and going into roughly pegged nine g turns. Blaine thought he was a pro now and finally spoke.

"Comfortable now, Commander?"

"I'm great. I forgot for a minute about you being back there. You've been so quiet."

"I'm fine, Reese. But this joyride is gonna end soon. We had just enough fuel for a couple light runs, and we're comin' up on bingo fuel."

"I know. Let's turn and burn."

They met up with Bumper again. He opted to let Reese land

the need for speed

first in case there were any complications.

The landing gear was down, along with the tail hook.

“I hate traps. I almost forgot how much.” Reese was tensing up.

“You can do this. You’ve caught on so fast today. Don’t let this throw you. If you get uncomfortable let the plane reel you in. It will.”

“No. I’ll do it.”

“One fourteen you’re below glide path, three quarters a mile, call the ball.”

Reese pulled up and increased the power.

“Ball, eight point seven.”

The Hornet touched down in radio silence between Reese and Blaine. He had grabbed the number one arrester cable. That wasn’t good but at least he had made it. He didn’t shoot it long and miss all of them. Considering it had been so long since he had made a trap, he couldn’t believe Blaine was even willing to risk her life in a possible ramp strike.

They taxied the plane and stopped. A few moments later they were on deck getting heckled by Bumper and Midnight as they entered the carrier.

“Sorry, Commander, but Sticks takes the bourbon on the landing.”

“I agree. I can’t believe I grabbed the number one.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Reese. Your six may have cleared the deck by three feet, but you cleared it. For it to have been as long as she says, I’m surprised she even laid her six on the line for you. You did it!”

Bumper smiled as they made their way to the locker room.

Blaine laughed. “Welcome back to active status you antique! We just need to work on the landings.”

Blaine punched his arm playfully as the other guys in the locker room started in on her encounter. Scuttlebutt had already

chapter four

made it through the ship that she went inverted and left the Iranians in her jet wash.

“Sticks, you got brass!”

Nightwolf slapped her shoulder as she pulled her belongings together to leave and hit debriefing with Reese.

“It wasn’t that big of a deal!”

“Yes it was. You went up with an antique and came back to tell the tale!” He broke into laughter. “Sorry, no offense Commander.”

Reese broke into a laugh as well.

“None taken. I was beginning to think she’d gone off the deep end of the ship too for agreeing to it.”

They all left the locker room and waited for debriefing with the Cag. The entire squadron waited outside leaning against the bulkheads while the Cag reamed Blaine for her antics and Reese for almost causing a ramp strike because he wouldn’t let the bird land itself.

Bumper had a bottle of bourbon to own up to and Nightwolf had something to give Reese from the rest of the squadron.

Blaine came out and put her hand on her butt, feeling around.

“Just checking to see if there was anything left.”

Everyone laughed and then became serious immediately. Nightwolf walked up to Reese and saluted. Reese saluted back confused- he wasn’t under cover and they were indoors. Nightwolf held out his hand to Reese.

“On behalf of the Screammers- welcome back Commander.”

Nightwolf dropped a pair of gold wings into Reese’s right hand. The whole squadron saluted him in the hall, including Blaine.

chapter five

return actions

1737

Officer's Ward Room

USS Franklin Pierce

“So, Blaine, where should I send the bottle of bourbon? Miramar?”

Bumper awaited her answer.

“No, send it in care of Commander Reese, JAG headquarters in Washington. I'll pick it up from him.”

Blaine smiled as she finished off the bottle of water in her hand and dealt cards around the table. Reese looked at her puzzled.

“Yes Ma'am.”

After several hands of poker and jet jock stories with the guys, the young Lieutenants had forgotten their place. She should have known better than to get too jovial with these guys. Reese excused himself and went to the head.

Midnight had slipped off to her quarters and taken one of

return actions

Blaine's bras. He came back into the room and produced the lacy white garment flailing it around in the air just to tease her.

Blaine lowered her head and got up. She walked behind Midnight and grabbed her bra from him. The room had been filled with laughter at the joke. She stepped away from the table and waited a moment.

Reese came near the hatch just in time to hear her voice.

"Snap to."

Reese eased his head around the hatch and watched the scene unfold. He could see a bra in her hand and could only guess what had happened.

The six Lieutenants in the room jumped up from the table and lined up near the wall at full attention. Blaine circled the table and stopped in front of Bumper, the squadron leader.

"Was this your idea, Lieutenant?"

"My apologies, Ma'am. We just thought it would be nice to have a souvenir to keep after having flown a mission with you on the Pierce."

Blaine smiled in his face and then her look went flat fast.

"You and your squadron will remember that while I'm on this carrier, regardless of our past history, you will show the respect due a ranking officer. If you can't, I'll eject you off the deck and feed your ass to the fish! Is that clear?"

"Ma'am, yes Ma'am," came the answer from the squadron.

Reese turned away from the hatch and walked away with a smile on his face. He couldn't let her find him peeking in on her reprimand. She might be short but she packed a punch in her own way.

Blaine left the group and returned her garment to her quarters. She went to find Reese.

chapter five

1811

Flight Line

USS Franklin Pierce

Reese and Blaine made their way on deck to meet up with a helo coming in soon. Jack and his team had recovered the stolen missiles. The wind on the carrier deck was blowing very hard. Blaine's short curls were being swept around her heart shaped face. Reese reached over to brush one out of her eyes. His hand lingered on her cheek for a moment before he pulled it away.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a flight instructor? Regis didn't need me to fly us back to Washington. I just don't understand. You could do it with your eyes closed."

Blaine waited for him to finish. She had wondered when he would ask.

"Regis already knew I'd need a second if we recovered the cargo. Anything can happen. I never told you about being able to fly because I knew you couldn't anymore. It would've been cruel. You may be out of practice with flyin' jets and makin' traps, but you were great at it once. Any aviator would miss it. I've seen you're face when I've helped on investigations with you involving Tomcats. You get excited whenever we've been near jet fuel for crying out loud. I knew how badly you wanted it." She paused. "I also knew it would help you get past what happened in Nevada if you could go up again."

Reese stared at her silently. The hair on his neck stood up as he recalled going down in the desert. He tried to turn away from her, but she reached out to prevent it.

"I know all about the accident. I read the report. You were great at flying. You had the right stuff, otherwise they wouldn't have picked you for a black ops mission or had you testing a new spy plane. It wasn't your fault that Radar died. It was a bad batch of fuel that killed the engines. You almost died, even though you ejected.

return actions

Your chute sat you right in the wreckage, and you couldn't get far enough away with Radar's body before the plane exploded. You spent a month semi-conscious from head injuries. It took you almost a year to get your mobility back. You couldn't get active flight status because they wouldn't clear you medically or psychologically. And you were afraid of going back up, so you went to law school instead."

Reese got indignant. "I was not afraid!"

"Yes you were. I would've been too. You were afraid to get back in a plane because you didn't know what would happen. You still blame yourself for Radar."

He did turn away from her this time. His protective walls went up.

"Don't shut me out, please. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything about Nevada. But I meant for you to have the choice to get back into a jet. You deserved it, and I wanted it for you. I'd fight the Cag or Regis any day of the week if I had to. You do what you can for those you love."

She turned to walk away from him. Reese stood there, stunned by her admission. He felt like a heel for lashing out at her. She was right. He still hadn't forgiven himself. He didn't know if he ever could.

Reese could hear a Seahawk approaching. Blaine and a few others were near the pad, waiting for it to touch down. Reese was still off to himself-watching the activity from the other side of the deck. The crates were lifted out of the helicopter and guarded off to the side. Jack and Blaine were chatting near the missiles. A safe distance was determined for other crew members on the carrier, and only necessary personnel were allowed to stay on deck near the arrestor cables at the other end. Blaine had disappeared to get ready. She reappeared, wearing a protective suit covering her from head to toe. She approached the crates to relieve the missiles of their chemical arsenal.

chapter five

Two people were also wearing suits some distance away carrying fire extinguishers just in case.

Reese was pacing around amongst the onlookers. If something happened to her before he had the chance to apologize, he would indeed never forgive himself. He watched as everyone but Blaine backed up even farther. She went to work opening the missiles one at a time. She pulled out two canisters from each missile, labeled CS, and placed them in a box on her right. He was amazed by the knowledge he had seen her actively demonstrate. All air traffic had ceased until the missiles were taken care of. Everyone left on the deck- was watching intently.

Blaine pulled off her mask suddenly and yelled.

“It’s okay. It’s just tear gas. No Sarin.”

Reese let out a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding.

Jack Madison’s face rumped in relief. He turned to go inside and start making phone calls. He would be leaving along with his team on the helo soon and this would give them time to refuel his ride.

The missiles were mounted on the Super Hornet they would be flying back to Washington. Reese and Blaine went to their quarters for a few hours of rack time. It wouldn’t do to fall asleep while over the Atlantic tonight. The late afternoon sun was already sitting low.

2326

Female Officer’s Quarters

USS Franklin Pierce

Reese made his way to her stateroom after sleeping for three hours. He had already dropped his bag up top to be placed in the Hornet. He swallowed his pride and stepped over the knee knocker through the open hatch door into her room.

return actions

“I’m almost ready, Reese.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“You tiptoe louder than most people tap dance, and I could smell you coming. Your cologne tipped me off.”

He smiled as she turned around from packing her bag.

“Listen, I owe you an apology.” He took a step forward toward her.

“No- you don’t. You asked for the reason I wanted to train you, not an accusation and a psychoanalysis.”

“You were right though.”

Blaine smiled, trying to cover. “About you being an ace? You are. I’ve seen guys ten years younger than you that don’t catch on that fast.”

“No, I meant about being afraid.” He swallowed hard. It had taken a lot for him to admit that, and from the look on her face, she knew it.

Blaine spoke softly. “I’ve been there too, afraid that is. You offered to listen if I ever wanted to talk again. That goes both ways you know.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Reese didn’t object when Blaine closed the gap and hugged him. He could smell the perfume she wore. That scent had haunted his waking hours at times. Someone would pass wearing it, and he would feel his heart skip, hoping he would turn and find her. Every time she had mysteriously left Washington a part of him went with her. He felt at home with her in his arms pressed against him. If only he could keep her there. The hug lasted longer than he dared hope, but they finally pulled apart.

Reese took the bag off Blaine’s bunk.

“Come on, I’ll get this. Our chariot is waiting.”

“You’re flying us back Reese so don’t argue with me. You need

chapter five

the flight time and the landing practice.”

He mock saluted with his free hand.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Blaine smiled at him warmly. She proceeded out in the hall with Reese following a couple of steps behind her. They made their way onto the flight deck for the journey home.

The flight back over the Atlantic fostered no surprises thankfully. They had both held their breath while refueling in mid-air, but that was normal. They talked incessantly only pausing briefly between discussions. Reese enjoyed hearing her voice on the radio. He was just hoping when they landed she wouldn’t disappear again immediately. Reese really needed to talk about something specific that happened two years before. When they neared the States, a military escort came alongside them over Maine and followed along all the way into Andrews.

2301

Andrews Air Force Base

Washington, D.C.

Reese landed smoother this time. He stood on the tarmac by himself, looking up at the Super Hornet. He might as well get one last look before it would be flown to Pax River next week. He couldn’t thank Blaine enough for the chance to fly again. His thoughts drifted once more. It was getting late on the east coast, and all he wanted now was a hot shower and some sleep. But that would have to wait until the missiles were secured safely by the stationed Marines on the base. The SecNav was on the scene as well- discussing the whole endeavor with Blaine just out of earshot. They were walking back toward him.

return actions

“Commanders, I’ll offer you a ride back if you’ll give me one moment.”

Regis walked away from them as Blaine rejoined Reese beside the Hornet.

“Where are you headed?”

“Back to your place with you. My Jeep’s parked outside your building, remember?”

“Oh yeah. It’s probably covered in flour now.”

“What?”

“Flour. The bottom portion of my building is a bakery. You knew that. They pump flour in very early in the morning. The cloud settles on everything. I have to wash my Acura about twice a week or it sets like concrete when it rains.”

“Acura?”

“Yeah, I picked up an RL at a government seizure auction a few months back for a song. It’s not even a year old.”

“Nice. I wondered how you managed to afford an Acura on your salary!”

She ducked as he playfully swung a fist over her head.

“Hey now, play nice. You’re the same rank as me. Don’t beat me up over my salary. We both know we don’t do this for the money.”

Blaine nodded and shifted on her feet with a guilty look. She was hiding something.

Reese noticed it. “How much do you make?”

“Does it matter?”

“No.”

“Okay then. Let it go.”

“You’re not just a Naval Officer- Miss Spook. So you probably don’t draw a standard Commander’s salary.”

He smirked at her as she turned a little red. She quickly pinned his arm behind him as the limousine pulled up.

“Alright, I’ll shut up now.”

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She let go. He noticed the look on her face again regarding the limo. He had forgotten to ask her about it.

“Why the face about our ride? I noticed it before.”

Blaine laughed a little just as the driver shot out to open the door for them.

“I guess it’s being raised in the south Reese. The only time you see a black limo is when you’re going to a funeral. I associate them with funerals. Just call me a country girl.”

“You’re no country bumpkin Caroline.”

2358

Home of David Reese

Georgetown

Washington, D.C.

Regis dropped them off at Reese’s apartment. He had thanked them for a job well done. They walked up the stairs together carrying their bags. Reese unlocked the door and they went inside.

“Mind if I use the head for a minute? I want to get out of this flight suit.”

“No, go ahead. You want something to drink? I’m not sure what I have to eat. I haven’t been to the market in a few days.”

“If you have any tea bags, I could really use a cup of tea. I don’t think I can handle coffee right now.”

“I think you’re part British sometimes.” He grinned. “I have some somewhere. I’ll look.”

After a few minutes, Blaine emerged from the head in jeans and a Fulham Football Club t-shirt. She had no shoes on. Reese found that both amusing and provocative. He had a cup of hot tea sitting on the kitchen counter for her. He had set a pot of honey next to the cup and a spoon, remembering she liked it in her tea. He was

return actions

standing near the refrigerator nursing a beer.

“Feel better?”

“Yes. I do. Thanks for the tea.”

“No problem.”

Reese wanted to know if she was going to leave or not, but thought it best not to pry. Temptation finally got the better of him.

“Are you staying in D.C. for a few days?”

Blaine took a sip from her tea to check how sweet it was after adding the honey.

“Yes. In fact I was told to go to work with you tomorrow and write up my after action report. The SecNav’s scheduled a meeting in the conference room at JAG at ten hundred. Lots of people will be there. So we both need to get some shut eye.”

“Ten hundred huh? No rest for the wicked I suppose. Too bad we can’t get a day off.”

Blaine laughed. “I guess not. I need to finish up my tea and get out of here so you can go to bed.”

“You don’t have to leave. You can stay.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It’s probably not, but humor me.”

Blaine considered it for a moment.

“Please Caroline. I don’t want you slipping off into the night just yet.”

“I hadn’t planned on it.” She smiled.

“Good. So you’ll stay?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how comfortable your couch is.”

Reese laughed. “I have a spare room with a comfortable bed.” He pointed to the door directly behind her next to his bedroom door. “My Aunt comes here once in a while to see me, and she set the room up with a good bed. She has a bad back you know.”

“Alright sailor, it’s a deal. I’ll try to not to snore too loudly tonight.”

chapter five

Reese snorted through a sip of beer.

“There’s only one catch. I have one working shower. I haven’t finished the other bathroom attached to your room. I’m waiting on a tub for it. Only the sink and toilet work.”

“I think I’ll manage. I’ll just use yours if that’s okay.”

Reese smiled. “That’s fine.”

It was going on two in the morning before they made it to bed. Regardless of the late hour, they still had an early commitment. They were expected at the regular time, zero eight hundred hours.