

Chapter 1

They were flying into the setting sun, full throttle at twenty-six thousand feet, with the light spilling blood red across the cloud floor beneath them. Kate steadied the plane, and stared out at the glowing horizon. Steep clouds appeared, forming a deep purple ravine, and she banked evenly to the left to avoid them. At two hundred seventy knots, the controls were solid yet still maneuverable, as only a new Swiss plane could be, and she drove it fast through the immaculate sky.

“Look at this,” she whispered to her co-pilot. They sailed into a tunnel of fissures with violet and orange light shooting around them. He nodded without speaking, both of them watching with the same calm hunger for the far curve of the earth.

They had taken the plane that morning from the factory in Lucerne, out of a dust of snow across Mount Pilatus toward the hot desert coast of Africa. They had loaded four passengers off an unpaved landing strip near the Moroccan border port of Tarfaya. She glanced now through the open door at these men in the back cabin. Three of them sat in loose formation around steel grillwork that contained the fourth man. Two were uniformed Phoenix Ravens in charge of the security of the plane, and the third, a DIA agent for prisoner transport, was dressed so casually in jeans and a Yankee baseball cap, that he might have been headed for a Saturday barbecue with his family.

The man in the cell was dark and short, with long arms and a thin body like tough black wire. One of the agents on the ground in Morocco had called him ‘*affe*’, German for monkey. He sat now with his chest hunched over his knees, perspiring heavily and reeking from two days in a holding cell.

Kate had seen hundreds of captured criminals in her career, and they all had one thing in common: this angry, pagan look in their eyes, as unpredictable as a ticking bomb. As she stared at him, he began to cough, hacking down hard through a clot of thick phlegm blocking his airway.

“His lungs are about to give out,” the co-pilot said. “Even up here I can smell the cigarette stink on his clothes.”

“He had a pack of Marlboros when I searched him,” Kate replied. “Ironic, don’t you think? American cigarettes killing him.”

She took the controls of the plane back, and pulled it straight out over the water toward a necklace of islands they could not yet see, relaxing back into the newly-sewn soft leather seats and the burning blur of light and movement above the horizon line. She had not piloted for a living since Hill Air Force Base in Utah where she was stationed when she flew F-16’s, and being in control of even this little turbo reminded her why flying would always be her first love.

A few moments later, a voice spoke to them through the radio headset on the covert frequency.

“Juliet Golf Oscar five eight seven, this is Gabriel one.”

“Go ahead Gabriel one,” Kate said.

“We have Lieutenant Colonel Jacobits for you.”

“How’re you guys liking that little airframe?” the Colonel asked.

Kate smiled immediately when she heard the warm, Chicago growl.

“Amazing, Sir,” she replied.

He chuckled and added, “Okay, Captain Cardenas, give me a sit rep.”

“The asset is secure, Colonel,” she replied. “We’re about an hour out of Lajes.”

“Perfect. Now, listen up. We got a report from the analysts at Bolling and they still got no friggin’ clue why he was trying to get onto the continent yesterday.” He paused, and then laughed abruptly. “By the way, our colleagues at the CIA have never even heard of him. Gotta love those guys. Anyway, the only thing our people know is that he spent some time at our favorite little summer camp in Waziristan. But we’re just the taxi here. Sign him over at destination and go home. Let the CIA figure out what he was up to.”

“Yes, Sir,” Kate said.

“And be cautious. The Pentagon thinks our air base at Lajes is secure, but who the hell knows anymore.”

“Gotcha, Sir,” said Tim.

“*Gotcha?* What kind of friggin’ response is that? Captain Cardenas, can’t you keep your co-pilot under control?”

She smiled, and although Jacobits could not see it, he knew he had made her laugh; he knew them both, and all his team, as though they inhabited his own mind.

Once they had passed the coastal atmosphere, they flew for an hour straight out over the Atlantic, until a heavily accented voice spoke to them in English from the airfield a hundred miles away. Kate responded and brought the power to idle. She lowered the nose of the plane to start their descent, and they slid down through the clouds leaving the western sun behind.

A storm was dying across the ocean, and once underneath the cover, the horizon was grey and murky. Before them, the slopes of the Cume hills draped deep emerald across the blue volcanic cliffs, and the lush pasture-land was criss-crossed with stone walls built from foraged lava rocks.

The wings of the plane began to tremble, and Kate leaned forward in her seat.

“Sometimes the winds at Lajes are out of limits in the spring,” said her co-pilot. “They might try to reroute us to Santa Maria.”

“The controller didn’t mention anything. It won’t be smooth, but we’re okay.” She shrugged. “When did you spend time here?”

“First Lady’s jet aborted mid-Atlantic. Jacobits called me in Heidelberg to go get her. Took her to Ramstein, waited around a couple days, brought her back. She thought I was a white knight. But the Azores are mostly cold as heck. And whatever you do, never eat their food. Portuguese islanders cook up some strange-ass things. Pots of weird smelling stew that you really only want to bury.”

“You get all the easy assignments, Tim,” she laughed.

“Ya think?”

“What’s our call sign again?”

The co-pilot smiled. “Want me to take it?”

“Not on your life. I haven’t flown an airframe this new for years. I feel like I’m dancing.”

“You are, baby. Gliding on butter.”

She manipulated the yoke to change their altitude again, and lowered the nose slightly as they approached the tiny elliptical island.

In the center of the deep green landscape she saw a black crater, dark like hell, and reminiscent of the Bikini crater she had over-flown years before at the atoll in the Pacific.

“Why did you stop flying, anyway?” he asked. “I heard they even sent you to test pilot school.”

She glanced over at him and hesitated. “They did. But when I got back I realized I just hated Utah.” Her voice was suddenly brittle, and she smiled at her friend sharply.

“I’m just askin’, Kate. Not cross-examining.”

She nodded, lowering the landing gear and pulling the turboprop around for final approach.

“The NATO strip feeds at forty degrees into our runway over on the left,” he said. “And private jets come into a terminal on the other side of that.”

Kate looked down to the flatlands beside the churning gray sea. The U.S. air base spread out adjacent to the Portuguese facility, but she lined the Pilatus up with the civilian area.

She leaned back gently on the throttle until she heard the pitch of the engines shift, like a tuning fork beginning to throb. Just before they touched the ground, Kate flared the nose of the plane about ten degrees so that they would land on the main wheels. She brought it to a stop as directed, far out on the wet flight line near a solitary baggage truck. Beside the vehicle stood the destination agent with his driver.

She unstrapped and stretched her arms. “Civilian runway, huh? Interesting.”

Tim looked up from the landing paperwork. “Well, what did you expect?”

“Listen, I just want to get home tonight.”

“Wheels down, wheels up. You’ll be in your bed by midnight, Kate. The quicker we get the fuel truck out here, the quicker we can take off.”

“I’ll deal with that. You sign off on this guy and get us some coffee.”

“Oh, sure,” he replied and smiled. “Send the minion into the rain.”

“And check the flaps while you’re out there. They felt a little stiff.”

Tim adjusted the Glock pistol in his shoulder holster, and followed the passengers down the stairs to the flight line. The storm had begun again, and the rain was pelting sideways into his face, hammering across the nose of the plane. He was drenched when he finished checking the flaps, but he waited in the gloomy, rain-swept cold while the plain clothes agent loaded the prisoner into the baggage vehicle and then finalized the jurisdiction transfer.

Tim leaned into the open side panel of the truck.

“Can I hitch a ride to the terminal?”

“We’ll drop you closer, but we’re not heading there.”

“That’s fine,” he replied, and swung up onto the cold, wet seat next to the driver. He turned to the Ravens who remained by the Pilatus and shouted across the storm, “You guys want some coffee for the trip back to the mainland?”

Across the tarmac, the rain was falling hard into new pools, boiling and splashing silver up from the tires. He chatted to the uniformed security driver about Azores weather, and glanced back at the agents and at the prisoner, who was now stretched flat on the floor, his wrists and ankles secured with flex-cuffs.

The new agent sat on a wide shelf meant for luggage and leveled a gun steadily at the man, who lay absolutely still except for the grinding of his teeth and his slow, deep gulps of saliva.

“What are we doing on the civilian runway?” Tim asked.

“Don’t know. Probably some exercise on the military side,” replied the driver.

“Or maybe the Air Force just doesn’t want to take responsibility for the arrival of your ghost.”

“They never do.”

They neared the terminal and Tim moved toward the open door, putting his face out into the weather again. As the truck slowed, the prisoner began grinding his teeth harder, scraping and crunching the brittle enamel together as though his life depended on it.

Suddenly, he coughed sharply and shuddered. His face was glossy with sweat, and his blood-shot copper eyes opened wide. His body jack-knifed forward as silent voltage snapped through his chest, and he whispered the word, *Inshallah*.

A cradle of absolute stillness fell over the vehicle, and Tim watched as the man's body disintegrated in front of him.

Before the others could move, a great light filled the cavern of the truck, and huge plates of shrapnel blasted out across the airfield scattering molten metal. The thunder hit after the flash, quaking the far runway where Kate waited in the Pilatus.

The truck flipped to its side leaving the tires spinning in the rain as smoke billowed above the flames. Portuguese and American security police ran toward the crater, and the medic van and fire trucks circled the smokescreen within seconds with their sirens shrieking.

From the cockpit of the Pilatus, Kate saw the fierce light followed by clouds of dust and debris. She raced down the steps of the plane past the Ravens, and out toward the terminal. As she neared, she saw her co-pilot lying prone on the burning flight line where he had been thrown clear from the exploded vehicle.

She could see his bleeding fingers scraping across the asphalt as he tried to drag himself from the blast area. She shouted for a medic, and when none came, she knelt beside him.

"Hang on, Tim. You're okay. Hang on." She held his hand, and saw that his wedding ring had melted into his finger from the heat of the blast. Under his torn shirt the flesh had been seared away revealing his blackened ribcage and the bloody shreds of muscles still clinging to the bones.

She put her face alongside his, her mouth against his ear, and forced her shaking voice to calm.

"The medic will be here in a second. You'll be okay," she whispered to him, but they both knew this was a lie.

She had run from the plane without even a jacket, and now had nothing to cover him from the rain. When at last his breathing ceased, she crossed herself without thinking, and continued to kneel alongside him until the Portuguese ambulance finally arrived. She watched as they took his body and drove it through the falling darkness toward the rippling glow of the terminal lanterns.

When she lost sight of the vehicle, Kate grabbed her cell phone from her belt holster and flipped it open. She pressed a single button, and was connected instantly to the same deep, rough voice that she always trusted.

"Whaddya got?" Jacobits asked.

"The ghost is dead. And everyone else." She put her hand over her mouth and took a breath, waiting. The back of her throat was filling with saliva, and she continued to breathe slowly to keep herself from vomiting.

"And Tim?" he asked.

"Yes."

He paused, like through a kind of bleeding, then said gently, "Give me a sit rep, Kate."

“The airframe is unharmed and secure with the Ravens. The asset was no longer in our jurisdiction. He was being transported by the CIA agent. An explosion took down the truck, the passengers, everything.”

“Any hypothesis yet?”

“No, Sir. No idea. I searched him myself before we loaded him. It may have been an IED on the CIA truck.”

“IED on a CIA vehicle? Hell, even the CIA can find something like that.”

She waited in the pelting rain for a long time, her shirt soaked to her skin, until Jacobits spoke again.

“Okay, Kate, I’ll get onto the analysts at Bolling and find out what the fucking hell is going on. Make sure the air base commander knows that I want Lieutenant McEwing’s remains brought home. Deniable or not, we’re not leaving our own behind.”

“Roger,” she replied.

“And be safe, Kate. Remember, you are just the taxi.”

Late in the night she finally pulled her little Peugeot onto the muddy back-road to her home near the town of Salon-de-Provence in southern France. Inside, she lit the furnace and poured a single finger of brandy into an old tumbler. She sat at the kitchen table beside a lamp throwing soft shadows around her shoulders, and sipped in the dim light until the exhaustion began to soak through her muscles.

She remained there while she typed her mission report, sending it finally into the hub server of the Defense Intelligence Agency at the Pentagon, but long after she had powered down, she continued staring at the black, inert screen of her computer.

Upstairs, she removed the rubber band holding a tight bun at her neck, and shook her hair loose. She undressed and stood at the window for a moment, staring out at the glistening, moonlit field beside her cottage. The shimmering light from the sky fell across her naked body, and she paused a moment to examine two narrow dark scars across her stomach, memories left to her from past missions.

She had been in the Air Force her entire life, the only child of an enlisted Master Sergeant. He had tried to teach her about accountability to the team, but what Kate had learned was that the easiest assignments were the ones where she worked alone, responsible only for herself. In college at the Air Force Academy she had grown accustomed to being solitary, because being alone and under the radar was the only way for a woman to be safe. But, when she flew F-16’s the men had expected her to be part of their team, to laugh when they pulled out the squadron porn drawer, and to join along when they forced each other into drinking binges of Jeremiah Weed. Although she had never had the courage to explain this kind of team to her father, eventually she called out defeat, and left the pilot community altogether.

When she lay in bed, she closed her eyes almost immediately, and was instantly surrounded by her visions of green smoke and milky shapes, her personal currency, the kind that became crisper the longer she stared through night vision goggles. She opened her eyes, and saw that she lay in her own bedroom, with the familiar bolt of dark red Kevlar parachute cloth spreading over her bed, and the smell of the lavender field next door seeping through the raised window. She closed her eyes again, the green light now gone, and this time she slept.