

Chapter One

USS *Mobile Bay* (CG-53)

Off the coast of Southern California

Damn the torpedoes.

The immortal phrase inscribed on the warship's superstructure was nearly impossible to read through the inky darkness as it rose with a cresting wave. The *Ticonderoga*-class guided-missile cruiser shuddered as her bow plunged into a trough, showering her five-inch gun and forward vertical launching system with frigid seawater. Had the ship's bell not been secured, even its clanging would have fallen silent under the tempest of the sea.

In her stateroom, Captain Bethany Lewis smoothed her hair back, then perched the dark blue baseball cap on her head and pulled its brim low to shield her tired eyes. She stared at her reflection in the mirror, unable to keep her gaze from wandering to the gold embroidered scrambled eggs on the bill of her hat. This wasn't her first command, but not moving up from executive officer brought its own unique challenges.

Taking command of a warship on its final voyage even more so.

She took a deep breath and scanned down the length of the mirror, inspecting her uniform before leaving her sea cabin. With twenty-two years in the Navy, most spent waging an uphill fight in the traditionally male-dominated battle space, she knew appearances mattered. It was why she worked out daily, watched what she ate, and paid particular attention to her uniform standards.

Unlike the service dress uniform she wore while in port, Beth had donned her normal "at

sea” attire of a blue one-piece coverall. The khaki-colored nylon belt cinched tight around her trim waist identified her as an officer or chief petty officer, though as one of only two dozen women aboard the warship, there was no confusing her with anybody else.

“*You* are the captain,” she said, as much a pep talk as a reminder of the burden she carried.

The newly pinned and matching silver eagles, whose heads pointed forward, adorned her collars and stood vigil on either side of the lump in her throat. After two decades in the Naval Service, Beth had finally made it to the pinnacle of her surface warfare career.

There was a knock on her door, and she cleared away the lump before speaking.

“Enter!”

The door opened, and Master Chief Ben Ivy stuck his head through the crack, blocking out the dim red glow from the passageway beyond. “Ready, ma’am?”

Beth reached up and flipped the switch to extinguish the fluorescent light over the mirror. She turned for the door, and her momentary hesitation vanished. “Let’s go.”

Master Chief Ivy was a large man with ebony skin who glided through the passageway like a phantom, his size-thirteen steel-toed boots placed quietly and deftly on the polymeric resin-coated deck as he listed with the gentle rolling of the ship. His quiet demeanor had earned him a solid reputation among the ship’s sailors, but his unyielding loyalty to their new captain had earned him her respect. She had always believed that Chiefs ran the Navy and saw no reason to change tack now.

Master Chief led the way, simultaneously ducking while stepping over knee-knockers. Beth stood tall, following in his wake while only lifting her feet. He towered over her by more than a foot, and the few sailors they encountered in the passageway stepped aside to watch their

diminutive new captain walking with self-assuredness. A few murmured shy greetings as she passed, but most only offered polite nods in recognition.

“Captain’s in Combat,” Ben said as he led them into the Combat Information Center’s cramped quarters. Only the Tactical Action Officer, Lieutenant Martin Schaeffer, acknowledged her presence by turning to welcome her to the darkened space.

“*Abe* just entered flight quarters and will begin the launch at the top of the hour,” Martin said, motioning to the large red numbers on the digital clock mounted on the bulkhead.

“Very well,” she replied, taking her place in the captain’s chair at the center of the room.

Martin sat in the seat next to her, ignoring the hulking Master Chief’s presence as he strolled behind the operators at their consoles. The upcoming evolution was their capstone exercise and would set the tone for her command. She had to be better than perfect. “Latest intel shows enemy forces marshaling north of San Clemente. They will attempt to circumvent our air defenses to make a run at the carrier.”

Beth grinned, remembering her time as TAO aboard the USS *Stockdale*. She recalled with fondness the war games she had participated in during the pre-deployment workup cycle and knew they were always more exciting than real-world operations. Martin was young and enthusiastic, and she envied his ability to look upon the looming exercise with wonder.

“I would expect so,” she replied. “How many air contacts do we have?”

Martin gestured to the large screen across the cramped space, showing an expanded view of the airspace around the *Mobile Bay*. His Operations Specialists manning the radar consoles catalogued each of the air contacts in their operating area, defining them as either hostile, friendly, or unknown. “Nine contacts holding north of the Desired Commit Line and an additional three unidentified within Whiskey Two Ninety-One.”

He referred to the Warning Area above them that was set aside for military air training. Most of the carrier strike group sailed in what was known as SCORE, or Southern California Offshore Range, while completing a series of tests that evaluated their ability to deploy. Of all the ships in the strike group, none was more important than the aircraft carrier. But her little cruiser came close.

“Keep an eye on them. They’ve disguised hostiles as white air before,” she replied, knowing exercise planners sometimes hid adversaries within the flight profiles of commercial aircraft.

“Yes, ma’am, that was our thought too,” Martin said.

She nodded. Her predecessor had trained his crew well, and she had inherited a combat-ready team more than prepared for the upcoming test.

A commotion near one of the radar consoles caught her attention, and she craned her neck to observe two young sailors chattering and gesturing at the screen. One of them turned to Martin with a panicked look. “Lieutenant!”

Before Beth could inquire about the problem, the portable radio she carried everywhere squawked to life with, “Captain to the bridge! Captain to the bridge!”

Master Chief Ivy also heard the radio call and intercepted her at the door. She knew her way around the ship, but the protective Master Chief wasn’t about to let his new skipper face whatever problem awaited without his wise counsel at the ready. Only this time, he was the one trying to keep up, listening to Beth’s size-six boots pounding on the steel deck.

Once on the bridge, she didn’t announce her presence and walked straight to her executive officer, a Navy commander who had been her Plebe at the Naval Academy. “Talk to me, XO,” she said.

“I don’t...”

He trailed off, and Beth followed his gaze through the open hatch on the starboard side of the ship. Instead of the pitch black she had expected, a half dozen bright lights glowed through the thick fog just above the horizon, swirling and dancing as they multiplied and circled the warship. Her mouth fell open.

“What the hell?”

“Ma’am?”

Beth had spent years of her life sailing the world’s oceans and had seen strange and unusual things, but nothing could have prepared her for the unexplained phenomenon at a pivotal moment in her career. As she stepped out onto the bridge wing, she craned her neck upward and watched the glowing orbs swirling in the late evening mist like massive fireflies.

You are the captain, she reminded herself.

“Ma’am?” her XO prompted again.

“Radio the *Abe* and have them suspend the launch,” she ordered. “And call away the SNOOPIE team. I want to know what *the fuck* those things are.”