

## Chapter One

Diamond 100

Navy FA-18F Super Hornet

East China Sea

Lieutenant Sierra “Doc” Crowe reached across the cockpit with her right hand and twisted in her seat to watch the Chinese fishing trawler go down their port side. It was little more than a blur as the Super Hornet hummed through the humid air a scant one hundred feet above the water. She glanced back at the large moving map display in front of her and noted their position in the East China Sea—well outside Chinese territorial waters.

“Did you see the name?” her pilot asked over the intercom.

“Was I supposed to?” Doc looked forward and saw the pilot’s grin in one of the three mirrors along his forward canopy bow. “Quit busting my balls, Colt.”

To outsiders, a comment like that coming from a woman would have seemed odd. More than odd, even. But, to Colt Bancroft, Sierra was just one of the guys. He abruptly banked right and climbed away from the water. “Tiger, Diamond one hundred.”

The E-2D Hawkeye controller replied immediately. “Go ahead.”

“The vessel’s name is *Fu Yuan Yu Leng*.”

“Any numbers?”

Colt paused. “Five hundred or six hundred. I’m not entirely sure.”

In a matter of seconds, Colt had piloted their Super Hornet up to five thousand feet above the water and entered a shallow orbit over the blue-and-white ship. It wasn’t the only one in

those waters either, and they had spent the last thirty minutes circling a turbulent patch just north of the Senkaku Islands—swooping low and zooming past one fishing trawler after another.

“Copy,” the Hawkeye controller replied. “Intel can review your tapes when you get back.”

“What’s so important about these ships?” Doc asked. Unlike the weapon systems officers who were accustomed to riding in the back seat while manipulating the myriad of sensors the Super Hornet had at its disposal, she was an air wing flight surgeon who had only wanted to go for a ride.

“Maybe nothing,” Colt replied. “But China has invested heavily in a fleet of fishing boats that some think is part of a maritime militia.”

“A maritime militia?”

She saw Colt’s helmet bob. “They have a history of using these boats to stake a territorial claim in contested waters—like around the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.”

“Or the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.”

They made eye contact in the mirror again. “I thought they paid you to be a doctor.”

“And I thought they paid *you* to fly planes,” Doc jibed.

Colt laughed. “Now you sound like a real *wizzo*,” he said, referring to the WSO who normally occupied Doc’s seat. “I’m just a stick monkey to you, aren’t I?”

Doc leaned back in her seat and reached up to unclip the oxygen mask from her helmet, letting it dangle to one side. She propped her elbows up onto the canopy rails and relaxed as if she were nobility and the seventy-million-dollar fighter jet her royal carriage.

“Diamond one hundred, Tiger,” the Hawkeye controller said.

Doc saw Colt bring his oxygen mask to his face before answering. “Go ahead.”

“Got another one for you, bearing three five zero degrees for ten miles.”

Doc watched Colt manipulate the cursor on their displays, directing the AN/APG-79 AESA—active electronically scanned array—radar into surface search mode. He found the contact and designated it as a target, then turned to point the Super Hornet north.

“Five bucks says it’s another fishing trawler,” Doc said.

So far, their SSC—surface surveillance and control—mission had been utterly boring. During the Cold War, carrier air wings employed the S-3B Viking with radar, sonar, and magnetic anomaly detection equipment to find and track surface and subsurface vessels. But after the Viking’s retirement in 2009, the surface search mission fell to the air wing’s Hornets and Super Hornets.

“No way I’m taking that bet,” Colt replied. Obviously, he agreed that their mission amounted to little more than a joy ride without much tactical or strategic value. “Starting down.”

Doc reached up and clicked her oxygen mask into place, then craned to look around Colt’s ejection seat as he nosed the Super Hornet over and made his approach toward the vessel from the stern. Doc could just make out the white froth of the vessel’s wake, but the ship was still obscured from view.

“One mile,” Colt said.

Again, Doc reached across the cockpit and braced herself. As Colt increased his pull, puffs of vapor formed along the Super Hornet’s LEX, or leading edge extension—the wide, flat surface along either side of the canopy that stretched back to the wings. Again, the jet hummed through the air, and Doc couldn’t help but smile at her good fortune.

*If only my dad could see me now!*

As the vessel came into view, she chuckled. “That’s five bucks.”

“I didn’t take...”

Colt fell silent, and Doc looked forward to see what had distracted the pilot. Suddenly, the jet banked hard to the right, and she caught sight of a dark object floating from right to left across the canopy. It disappeared under the LEX and was followed a moment later by a sudden jolt and a sickening screech of metal.

“What the hell was that?”

But Colt didn’t answer.

“ENGINE LEFT...ENGINE LEFT.”

Doc tensed with the first of several audible bangs that sounded like somebody was taking a ball peen hammer to the side of their jet, and her eyes were drawn to the left display when the first caution appeared.

“What’s going on, Colt?”

“Fuck,” the normally calm pilot replied.

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In a matter of seconds, Colt had processed the flood of information assaulting him from every direction—the dark speck that caught his attention as they reached the stern of the fishing trawler, followed closely by the engine surging, rising exhaust gas temperature, and loud banging and violent shaking consistent with a compressor stall. He didn’t even need the cautions to help him diagnose the problem, because the remedy was the same.

*Throttle affected engine – Idle.*

He pulled the left throttle back while beginning a climbing turn away from the trawler to put altitude between them and the water.

*Speed is life. Altitude is life insurance.*

“What the hell was that, Colt?” Doc asked.

“Looked like a drone,” he said, but his focus was on his engine indications that showed a steady increase in temperature and decrease in RPM. Without thinking about it, he raised the left finger lift and pulled the throttle to OFF, cutting fuel to the engine.

“A drone?”

Colt understood Doc’s confusion, but he had more important things to worry about. Foremost was the presence of a miniature drone flying in the middle of the East China Sea that brought back memories of a swarm of mysterious lights swirling around a Navy cruiser off the coast of Southern California. He had never learned what the lights actually were, but the memory of losing control of his F-35C Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter immediately after seeing the orbs was more than enough to give him a healthy dose of skepticism about unidentified aerial phenomena.

“Diamond one hundred, Tiger, status?”

Colt shook his head to clear away the memories. “Tiger, I’m declaring an emergency,” he said, keeping his tone calm and measured. “We hit something and took damage to our left motor. I’ve shut it down.”

“Copy,” the Hawkeye controller replied.

As Colt continued climbing away from the water, he noticed long lines of contrails made by commercial jets arcing across the sky from the east, destined for China’s most populous cities, like Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangzhou. Shaking away the thought that the airlines’ passengers were oblivious to the dangers lurking beneath them, he glanced back over his shoulder at the blue-and-white fishing trawler and noted that it looked almost identical to the others they had rigged during their SSC mission. Maybe it was coincidence, but it sure looked

like there was truth to the claims that China was flooding disputed waters with a fleet of fishing vessels.

“What did you hit?” the controller asked.

Colt didn’t answer right away. “Doc, what did you see?”

“Not much. Just a speck, really.”

“Was it a bird?”

“I don’t think so,” the flight surgeon replied.

Colt keyed the microphone switch on his right throttle. “Tiger, we think it was a small commercial drone.”

“Copy,” the controller replied again.

“Why do you think there was a drone flying way out here?” Doc asked.

But Colt didn’t have a definitive answer for her. On the one hand, it was entirely possible that fishermen were now using drones to help guide them onto a school. But, on the other, if the fishing trawlers were employed in a military or intelligence-gathering capacity, the drones could be used in a more nefarious manner.

*Like the ones around the Mobile Bay?*

“I don’t know,” Colt replied. “I’ll let intel figure that one out. How about we focus on getting ourselves back to the ship in one piece?”

“You don’t think they’ll divert us?” Doc asked with a slight tremor in her voice.

Honestly, Colt thought it was fifty-fifty and depended on who was in the tower and had the Air Boss’s ear. Ultimately, it would be the captain’s decision to either recover them aboard the carrier or send them to the divert at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa.

But before he could answer, the Hawkeye controller spoke again. “Diamond one

hundred, push button twenty for your rep.”

“One hundred,” Colt replied, then reached up to select the right channel on his secondary radio.

“Colt, it’s Rucas. You up?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” he replied.

“What’s going on?”

Colt ran him through what had happened, including each of the cautions that had appeared on his display.

“Has the compressor stall cleared?” Rucas asked.

“Affirm,” Colt replied. After shutting down the left engine, the RPMs had dropped and the banging and accompanying vibration stopped.

“Copy that. Do you feel comfortable bringing her back single engine?”

“No problem,” he said, adding a touch of bravado for Doc’s sake.

“Okay, I’ll let the Air Boss know. He wants to bring you back, but he’s talking it over with CAG and the captain now.”

Colt understood that the decision was out of his hands. If either the commander of the air wing or the carrier’s commanding officer felt it was safer to divert him, they wouldn’t hesitate to send him to Kadena. It was almost a certainty that if he had been a first-tour nugget, that decision would have already been made.

But Colt was a senior lieutenant with several hundred traps under his belt. Aside from the deployments he had made during his first sea tour, he had volunteered to support air wing training while instructing at TOPGUN—the US Navy’s Fighter Weapons School—and had flown from aircraft carriers in both the legacy and Super Hornet as well as the new Joint Strike

Fighter.

“Standing by,” Colt said.

“Diamond one hundred, Tiger. Switch strike.”

“Diamond.” Colt switched from the Hawkeye’s control frequency to check in with the ship. “Strike, one zero zero, Mother’s two eight zero for fifty-five, angels twelve, state nine point oh. Emergency aircraft, single engine.”

On board the carrier, a sailor took note of his side number and annotated his fuel state as nine thousand pounds while another sailor interrogated his transponder code. Only after ensuring he was squawking a friendly Mode IV code and that his side number matched the transponder’s Mode II would they permit him to enter the fifty-nautical-mile Carrier Control Area.

“One zero zero, sweet, sweet. Mother is VFR, case one. Contact Marshal.”

“One zero zero,” Colt replied, then switched to the Marshal frequency.

He reached up with his right fist and slapped down on the handle near his right knee to extend his tailhook as he repeated his check-in with the Marshal controller.

The controller’s reply sounded rote. “One zero zero, case one. BRC is zero one five, expect to Charlie on arrival. Report see me.”

He reached down to the Course Select switch and held it to the right, watching a needle swing through the symbol for the ship’s TACAN—or tactical air navigation station—on the display between his legs and steady up on the ship’s heading, or Base Recovery Course, pointed north-northeast. Then, he pointed directly at the ship and scanned the ocean’s choppy surface for the speck of gray they expected him to land his seventy-million-dollar fighter jet on.

He leveled off at two thousand feet and angled his jet to the right to enter the holding stack above the carrier on the downwind leg. Crossing inside ten miles, he spotted the aircraft



carrier and reported it to Marshal. “One zero zero, see you at ten.”

“One zero zero, switch Tower.”

Colt switched to the tower frequency.

The voice of the USS *Ronald Reagan*'s Air Boss boomed over the radio. “One zero zero, Tower.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

“Charlie.”