

Chapter One September 11

Colonel Deanna Peterson concentrated on the words displayed on her computer monitor. Her jaw muscles flexed as she re-read each line, word by word. The sorrow visible on her face was evidence of the fact that it was the most difficult letter she had written during her entire Army career. She scrolled through the letter one final time and then hit the print function.

“Well,” she said to herself as she sat back in her leather chair, “the fat lady is singing.”

A tall woman, Dean was nearly six feet with the build of an athlete. Her long dark hair was fashioned up, per military regulation. Her tan, the result of a week of leave from which she had just returned, accentuated her eyes. They were a magnificent blue, almost sapphire. Even the crow’s-feet that radiated from the corners of her eyes could not diminish their magnetism.

Dean looked around her spartan office, taking in the few keepsakes she permitted herself to display. She stood and walked to the credenza where a triangular case held a tattered American flag, partially burned but folded officially, that she had salvaged from one of her first undercover operations. She had recovered it from a dead terrorist who had put his lighter to it, just prior to departing this plane of existence. A neat hole in the middle of his forehead evidenced the lethal accuracy of her aim. Her next three shots took out his team who were about to blow up three captive soldiers.

There were also a few photos, mostly of her in her early Army years. There were snapshots with her buddies as they finished an obstacle course, outside the barracks, and of her in jungle camouflage, grinning into the camera. Another photo was of her pinning silver first lieutenant bars on Bill Jarvis. She sighed at the thought of leaving her protégé. She had met with Bill earlier in the day to tell him of her decision. Though he knew she was taking the right course of action, he hated her decision and had tried to talk her out of it.

Bill, what am I leaving you with? Have I taught you enough to deal with the enemies that seek to destroy us?

She picked up a photo taken in the Oval Office as the President pinned a Purple Heart on retired Major Tracy Kidd for the wound she received while pursuing a terrorist in the Bahamas. Dean remembered every detail of that operation, including Tracy’s remark as she pulled her out of the sinking helicopter: “You really know how to show a girl a good time.” Dean laughed, as she always did when she remembered that moment.

And there was Katie, the woman with whom she had fallen totally and irrevocably in love, the woman with whom she would spend the rest of her life. What a team they had been on that operation. Katie received the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service for her role, and Bill was awarded an Army Distinguished Service Medal with a promotion to the rank of captain. Dean grinned. She had gotten her own kudos, too: a promotion to full colonel and the Silver Oak Leaf Cluster for her Distinguished Service Medal. She wasn’t the youngest person ever to become a full colonel, but she was close.

Dean walked to the window and looked out into the courtyard of the Pentagon. Sighing, she thought about all the things she would miss about the military...and then some of the things she wouldn’t miss. Moving over to the printer, she removed the letter. In a mere whisper, she said, “Well, Dean, it’s hard to believe that you’ve survived in this life for twenty years. It’s a good time to be proud of what you accomplished and walk away.”

Back at her desk, she was putting the letter into a file folder when her door slammed open so hard and fast that it banged against the doorstop with a loud thwack. A staff sergeant snapped to attention and shouted, "Colonel, you're needed in the IOC immediately!"

She didn't challenge his having opened the door without knocking; the terrified look on his face was enough to convince her to follow him without the slightest delay. Dean dropped the folder on her desk and followed the sergeant out the door. Knowing they could reach IOC faster by the stairs than by using the elevator, they ran to the stairwell. As they rounded the first landing, Dean's thought was that something had happened to Bill. He and his partner, Dirk, had been there all night, working hard to make it unnecessary for her to write the letter of resignation. As they took the stairs down two at a time, she asked, "What's happened?"

"An airliner has crashed into one of the World Trade towers," the sergeant said in a breathless voice as he skidded to a stop at the landing door and held it open for her. "Smoke and flames are blanketing the impact area."

Dean was fully aware that there were annual training exercises being operated by Stratcom, the US Space Command, and NORAD, but only the planners were privy to the various scenarios. "Is this part of a *Guardian* scenario?"

"No, ma'am. It appears to be a genuine incident. We could see the damage on the big screen as we did our satellite scan of the East Coast...and the civilian news agencies are starting to broadcast it."

"Was it a military or civilian plane?" she asked as they ran through the unusually deserted corridor.

"They think it was a commercial jet," the sergeant supplied.

"Where's Major Russell?"

"Not sure, ma'am. Captain Jarvis asked me to get you ASAP."

At the Intelligence Operations Center, the sergeant held the door open for the colonel to precede him. As she entered, the hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle, definitely not a good sign. The activity level was in high gear as personnel rushed to and fro, answered ringing phones and typing furiously on their keyboards. The big screen on the back wall flashed off, then a snowy screen appeared, and finally a satellite feed provided them with a real time view of New York City. Smoke was billowing from the site of the World Trade Center.

Watching intently as the scene unfolded before her, Dean strode to the console that controlled the big screen. "Sergeant, get in tighter on the tower." She looked at the clock above the screen. It was 0858 hours. "When did the impact take place?"

"Right around 0845 hours, ma'am. We were doing our scheduled scan of the East Coast as part of the *Guardian* exercise and detected the smoke trail."

As the sergeant scanned closer, Captain Bill Jarvis appeared at Dean's side. The view on the screen focused in on the city blocks occupied by the World Trade Center. The upper third of the north tower was obliterated by smoke.

"This is it, ma'am," Jarvis said softly. "This is what those bastards were planning."

"We should have been able to stop this," Dean snapped as they surveyed the carnage depicted on the screen. "You were right on target with your take of the situation, Bill. Everything pointed to this type of action, but without hard evidence, all we were able to get the authorities to do was for the FAA to send out toothless warnings to the airlines. No one planned for an attack on our turf. All that time spent on exercise scenarios and worthless warnings, when we should have had people running down all the intel and looking for chinks in our security."

The sergeant at the console punched a few keys and then looked up in panic. "Colonel, there's another plane entering the area." His fingers flew as he quickly typed in some codes and the view on the screen focused on another commercial airliner. They could just make out the United Airline designation on the fuselage.

"It's headed for the other—" Everyone in the IOC watched in horror as a second airplane crashed into the south tower and exploded.

"God damn it!" Dean growled. She placed her hands on her hips and turned to face Captain Jarvis. "Where's Russell?"

"He said he was going to be in around 0900. He was stopping at Fort Belvoir to check on the garrison control exercise before coming in, and then he has a meeting with the general at 0930."

"Russell and his damn games," she muttered. "This isn't just random...it's a coordinated attack. Has the Air Force scrambled their fighters?" Bill nodded affirmatively. "All right...get in touch with the FAA and find out what they know. See if there are any other surprises out there. I'll be in Russell's office, talking on the phone with General Carlton."

At 0920 Captain Jarvis entered Major Russell's office. "Colonel, the FAA is going to shut down all New York City area airports. They're also reporting that eleven aircraft are not communicating with FAA facilities or are flying unexpected routes."

"Christ! Do they know where the hell they are?"

"Ma'am, it sounded like pure chaos at the FAA," Jarvis answered.

"Are the planes still sending their transponder signals?"

"American Airlines Flight 77 is not sending their transponder signal. It stopped around 0856 hours, and they lost radar contact shortly thereafter."

"Where did it depart from?"

Bill looked her in the eye. "Dulles."

The colonel and the captain stared at one another for a brief moment, and then both looked at the clock above the large screen. The time was 0922 hours.

"It's headed back to D.C.," Dean barked. "Have Sergeant Gaines get the satellite image switched to the D.C. area." Jarvis nodded and left at a dead run for the IOC.

Dean snatched up the phone and dialed General Carlton's office. As soon as the line was picked up, she said, "Give me the general, Tibbitts."

"Yes, ma'am."

The call was transferred and the general immediately came on the line. "Colonel, what did the FAA have to say?"

"There's at least one other plane out there and I believe it's headed to D.C."

There was a hesitation on the line. "The President is in Sarasota, so I doubt if they're headed to the White House," General Carlton said softly. "Where do you think they'll hit?"

"Impossible to know at this point. There are a number of strategic targets here, ma'am. I'm pulling up the satellite of D.C. now."

"Right. Major Russell is here with me; we'll call it in to the emergency response center. Call me when you get the feed up."

"Yes, ma'am." Dean slammed the phone back in the cradle and rushed to the ops center.

At 0935 hours, Sergeant Gaines was entering code into the computer as fast as he could, zooming the view down to the D.C. area in big chunks at a time, each time looking for commercial aircraft. Each view change seemed to occur in slow motion as the pixels appeared on the screen and then slowly sharpened into focus. They located the plane just

in time to watch in horror as its flight path curved sharply and headed directly toward the Pentagon.

Dean hit the speed dial to the general's phone and pressed the receiver to her ear. When the general picked up, she calmly said, "Target's the Pentagon, ma'am. God help us." The room was silent for a brief moment, then all hell broke loose as evacuation procedures were implemented. Potential safety was several long corridors away.

The Pentagon was composed of five rings, with five main corridors connecting each ring. The A ring, or inner ring, looked into the inner courtyard, and the E ring was the outer ring. The IOC was in the C ring, near corridor 5. At 0938, American Airlines Flight 77 hit the west side of the Pentagon at an angle between corridors 4 and 5. As soon as the IOC, on the outer edge of the impact area, stopped shaking and the pieces of debris stopped falling, Colonel Peterson slowly got up off the floor and looked around the room in the faint emergency lighting. Many of the personnel were injured and bleeding, but most seemed to be mobile. Smoke was filtering through the ceiling and there was a definite rise in temperature.

"Let's get everyone out of here, Bill, then we'll do a search and rescue."

Those who were able helped the injured out of the IOC. In the hallway, they could see that the primary impact area was at the edge of the Army section and slicing into the Navy area beyond. Smoke was billowing from the west side, so they sped toward corridor 6. As they rounded the corner toward the Mall side of the Pentagon, they met another group of staffers who were helping the injured exit the building.

"Get everyone out of the building, fire drill procedures; form up outside the main entrance!" Colonel Peterson ordered. She turned to Captain Jarvis. "C'mon, Bill, let's see if we can get to General Carlton's office."

The two officers raced toward the west side of the building, taking corridor 5 back toward the A ring at a run. Staffers, both military and civilian, all of whom were injured or shaken, were picking their way through debris toward them.

"Anyone see General Carlton?" Dean asked as she passed by the officers in the group.

"No, too much smoke," one coughed.

A civilian employee put a restraining hand on Dean's arm. "There's heavy smoke and fire and the debris is still falling as you go past the C and B rings. I don't know if you can make it to A."

Dean tersely nodded an acknowledgement, but she and Bill proceeded toward the A ring. At a restroom, she said, "In here," as she pushed open the door. The water lines had ruptured and the faucets didn't work, but there was still water in the toilets. She pulled down several paper towels and soaked them in a toilet bowl. Wringing out the towels, she and Bill flattened the sheets and put them over their noses and mouths to filter the smoke. By the time they reached the intersection for the A ring, they could barely see and their eyes were stinging from the smoke and acrid fumes. They were crawling on the floor trying to stay below the smoke, but it seemed to be everywhere. Thick and black, it rolled over them as they crawled. The debris smelled of burning jet fuel, PVC, and electrical cables. Turning a corner, they touched two bodies. They rolled them over and recognized the general and Major Russell.

Dean checked the major's carotid, while Bill sought a pulse on General Carlton. "He's alive," she said, yanking his arms over her shoulders and maneuvering him back the way they had come.

"General's alive, too." Bill took the general's wrists and pulled her onto his back. Grasping both of her wrists with his one hand, he replaced the damp towels over his nose and mouth with the other and he too started back toward safety. Given the weight and

awkwardness of their loads, they weren't able to crawl, but picked their way as quickly as they could through the debris and the dense smoke.

The route was slow and treacherous, and as they passed the C ring intersection, they could hear voices from the other side calling for help. "Hang on. We'll be back for you," Dean shouted, and they redoubled their efforts to get the major and general to safety.

As they turned the corner toward the C ring corridor, heading back to the Mall side of the building, they spotted a fire rescue squad moving toward them. Dean stopped and propped the major against the wall.

"You guys got here fast," she commented as she straightened and stretched out weary muscles.

"We were doing a crash simulation on the helipad when the plane hit," the first fireman explained.

"Score one for Russell," she said under her breath. "Get these two out of here," she commanded, and then turned and ran back toward where they had heard the cries for help.

Two rescuers took the general off Bill's back, and two others grabbed Bill by the shoulders and started to haul him away.

"No!" He pulled free of the man's grasp. "I need to go with her! I promised to watch out for her."

"Sir, you need to get out of here. We'll get the rest of them out...and the colonel." The men reclaimed the captain and handed him off to other firemen that were coming down the corridor. As he was forcibly maneuvered toward safety by the rescuers, Bill craned his neck to look behind him. He watched in desperation as Colonel Peterson's form was enveloped by the heavy smoke, then he broke free and ran past the fire crew, following the colonel into the smoke filled corridor. "I've got to go with the colonel," he shouted over his shoulder. The firemen nodded in acceptance and followed after him.

Still holding the towels over her nose and mouth, Colonel Peterson shouted, "Where are you?"

"Over here," came the gasping reply.

Dean turned toward the sound and felt rather than saw her way toward the rasping voice. The heat was becoming unbearable and the smell of burning jet fuel and charred flesh was stronger as she went into the room where the voice was coming from.

"Okay, I'm coming to get you," she said as she clawed through the debris of fallen ceilings and pipes, over barriers of concrete and smashed furniture. The heat coming from the floor below was oppressive, but the flames were providing some light. The smoke was still thick but seemed to be thinning just a bit as the fire spread. Dean had a fleeting thought that it was similar to walking through a battlefield at night, with only one's senses of touch and hearing to guide the way. She reached a doorframe where the door was torn from its hinges and lying on a pile of desks and chairs that had been blown across the room. She could hear coughing and ragged breathing.

"Hold on, I'm almost there," she said by way of encouragement as she started to tear at the rubble.

"Let me help you with that, Colonel," Bill said as he grabbed the corner of the desk she was trying to move.

"What are you doing here?" she shot quickly and then shook her head, a crooked smile appearing on her face. "Glad to have you at my side, Bill. C'mon, let's get the rest of this rubble cleared."

It took a couple of minutes, but they managed to remove the heaviest of the debris that was on top of the fallen soldier. Lifting the final collapsed piece of wallboard, she

saw that it was a young private; she recognized her face. "Hawadi. What are you doing here?"

"I just transferred here this morning, ma'am."

"Damn bad luck, Hawadi." Dean did a quick check of the young woman, who appeared to be in fairly stable condition, considering she'd had half the office furniture thrown at her. Her severely broken leg was going to make extrication not only difficult, but painful. "Is anyone else in here?"

Private Hawadi shook her head. "Most had just left on a break. There was another soldier waiting over there." Hawadi pointed out a section of the room where the wall and ceiling had fallen in. A bloodied hand was protruding from the pile of rubble.

"Bill, go check on him," Dean commanded as she finished her quick exam of Hawadi.

The captain moved cautiously over the wreckage and checked for a pulse. "He's dead."

"Do you see anything we can use for a splint?" Dean coughed hard as the smoke got thicker.

As Bill looked around for something to use as a splint for Hawadi's injured leg, the building was rocked by a series of small explosions, and chunks of steel and concrete fell all around them. "Nothing useable." He removed his belt and went back over to Hawadi. He tied both of her legs together with the belt. "This will have to do."

"Look, this place is getting ready to go. Your leg is badly broken and this splint won't help much but it's better than nothing. We need to get out now. I'm going to have to grab you and go."

The young woman nodded her understanding and Dean slid her hands under Hawadi's arms. "Okay, are you ready? This is going to hurt."

"I am ready; please hurry." Another chunk of concrete thudded to the floor between them and Bill.

Dean grabbed the private firmly under the arms and Bill supported her legs. As gently as possible, they lifted her quickly. To her credit, Private Hawadi muffled her scream.

"You're a good soldier, Hawadi. Just a bit further and we'll have you clear." As soon as they were clear of the last of the debris, they backtracked carefully to the doorway. Hawadi was a lot lighter than Dean had expected and they were able to get her out of the office without much difficulty. By the time they exited the doorway, two firemen appeared, holding powerful flashlights. They took the woman from Dean and Bill.

"You men are a welcome sight," Dean said as they reached her. She leaned against the doorway, gratefully relinquishing Hawadi to the fireman. "Get her out of here."

"You too, ma'am. Follow us out."

"Right behind you." Dean turned to find Bill; he was about to go back inside. "Captain," she called, "let's get out of here before this place falls apart completely." She coughed violently as another wave of dark smoke rippled through the area.

"I'll be right with you. I just want to get that soldier's tags," Bill rasped as he disappeared into the office.

The first fireman took the private in his arms and the other stepped forward to assist the colonel. As the coughing wracked her body, Dean staggered away from the doorframe. She walked unsteadily into the hallway, the rescuer's flashlight playing on her soot smeared form. From the floors below, a rumble started its way up the devastated building, causing the floor to shift and buckle. There was a loud crack, and the walls and ceiling began to crumble. The exterior wall of Hawadi's office collapsed inward, blocking the doorway completely. A large chunk of crossbeam came down from the ceiling, clipping Dean across the back of the head, neck, and back. It dropped to the

floor, trapping her legs as she fell forward into the outstretched arms of a fireman. Dazed, she blinked as the beam of the flashlight hit her eyes. For a brief moment, she thought she saw Katie rushing toward her and she reached out... Then everything went black.

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