

## Chapter One

**February 25, 1997**

**Dateline: Washington, CNN...8:32 PM EST**

Con Air Flight 209 from Paris, carrying an estimated 500 passengers and crew, including more than 300 Americans, exploded over the Atlantic Ocean at 5:45 PM as it began its descent into JFK airport in New York City. Witnesses report that the plane erupted into a ball of fire as it appeared to collide with a streak of light that lit up the night sky. CNN correspondent Miles Tanner is on the scene and reports that thick fog and darkness are hampering rescue efforts. Early reports indicate that wreckage and remains have been strewn across miles of freezing water. Due to the force of the explosion and the location of the crash, there is little hope that there will be any survivors. Representatives of the FAA and NTSB say that it is too early in their investigation to speculate on what caused the downing of Con Air Flight 209.

Terrorist warnings have been numerous, and transportation facilities have been in an elevated state of alert since fundamentalist Islamic groups in the Middle East threatened a demonstration of force during Easter week. When asked if the crash was the result of terrorist activity, officials declined to comment, saying that an official statement would be issued after the investigation is complete and the plane's black boxes are recovered and examined. No terrorist group has claimed responsibility.

**February 25, 1997**

**Dateline: Washington, CNN...11:48 PM EST**

In an address to the nation moments ago, a grim-faced President Wade Kincaide announced that a known terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the destruction of Con Air Flight 209 from Paris that went down at 5:45 PM in the Atlantic Ocean. This same group, led by reputed terrorist, Ashraf Nusair, was responsible for the bombing in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia that targeted U.S. military personnel at the headquarters for the U.S. Air Force's 4404th Wing. The Con Air flight was carrying 485 passengers and crew, all of whom are presumed to be lost. The President's voice shook and he wept openly as he expressed his condolences to the nation, but he was resolute as he issued this warning:

"At this hour, a comprehensive team of experts is on its way to the crash site to conduct an investigation into this disaster. I vow to you, my fellow Americans, and to the world, the deaths on Flight 209, as well as those in the Khobar Tower bombing at King Abdul Aziz Air Base on June 25, 1996, will not go unpunished. I want this warning to be heard in every corner of the globe: any country that harbors the despicable terrorists who committed this heinous act, or any terrorists, will pay the price. Anyone involved in any way will be hunted down and brought to justice. This is my personal promise to the leader and to those responsible: you cannot hide. Look over your shoulder; look into the eyes of the person standing next to you. From this day on, uncertainty will rule your lives. Now, you are the hunted. I give my solemn word to the families of those who died today, and to all who have lost loved ones to an act of terrorism, these contemptible deeds will not go unavenged."

**Late March 1997**

Due to an accident at the FBI's practical problem training area at Hogan's Alley, Liberty arrived at her Defense Tactics class a few minutes late. She tried to slip into the gym unnoticed, but the instructor had eyes in the back of his head. From day one, it had been obvious to Liberty and to the other NATS, the new agents in training, that he didn't like Liberty. He went out of his way to single her out to harass and to deliberately make the training difficult for her. During the first week, the instructor's opinion that women didn't belong as field agents or at the FBI Academy, particularly women like her, was also obvious.

Liberty cringed when she heard his bellowing voice.

"All right, listen up NATS! I need a volunteer. Sheffer, you'll do. Agent Starr, front and center!"

Liberty made her way to the mat, ignoring the snickering that she heard coming from a few of the male agents. She could see the look of dread mixed with pity and anger on the faces of the other female agents. The best of the class in martial arts, Sheffer was homophobic and just plain mean. He was a stereotypical jock with the attitude that a woman was too weak and too emotional to be a good agent, and that any woman recruit took a spot at the Academy that a "good man" should have. He and some of his cronies had been giving Liberty and the other women a hard time since the beginning of the seventeen-week FBI training. With every step Liberty took toward the mat, she had a sickening feeling that she wasn't going to like the outcome of this exercise. *This ought to be interesting.*

*She had barely completed the thought when Sheffer landed a kick that broke her nose and sprayed blood across the mat. A follow-up sweep landed her hard on her back. Dazed, she was trying to clear her head when she felt the boot to her side and heard the sound of ribs cracking. Swimming up through the fog in her mind, she heard a female voice.*

*"Hey! Wanna try me? Or does it make you feel more of a man to land a sucker punch, then kick an agent when she's down?"*

*Sheffer chuckled and winked at his buddies. He didn't recognize the woman as Yancy Bane, Special Agent in Charge of Training. Yancy had been absent from Quantico until that morning, and the agents in training had only heard the rumors about the infamous SAC who was as hard and as tough as nails. When Sheffer turned to see what woman was stupid enough to oppose him, he saw the fire in the confident eyes staring back at him. By the time he positioned his lead leg to throw an offensive kick, it was already all but over. Two swift moves from the lissome powerhouse — one, a kick to his kneecap and the second to his groin — had him face down. Howling in pain, with a knee pressing hard between his shoulder blades, his arm was pinned behind him. Everyone could hear the bone on bone sound of his shoulder dislocating.*

*The stolid redhead leaned over and whispered in his ear, "I never said I couldn't fight dirty. If you can dish it out, you'd better learn to take it, Agent Sheffer." With that, she removed her knee and released Sheffer's arm and stood up.*

*By this time, Liberty had made it to her knees and was numbly staring at Sheffer lying on the ground in front of her. She was trying to stop the flow of blood from her nose when she felt a cloth pressed against her shoulder and what sounded very much like an order.*

*"Pinch."*

*She grimaced as she pressed the cloth against her nose, then instinctively used her forearm to splint the pain she felt along her ribs on the left side. Before she could catch her breath, the redheaded agent knelt in front of her and steadied her head with one hand, while with the other she pushed her nose back in place. It happened so fast that all Liberty could do was gasp and bite her lip to keep from yelling out in pain as she tried to focus on a pair of sympathetic green eyes. Gritting her teeth, her shaking hand held the hanky to her nose. She managed to get to her feet without any help, but the pain in her ribs prevented her from straightening up. "Shouldn't you have let a doctor do that?" The minute the words came out of her mouth, she knew they sounded too harsh. This woman was the only one who had stepped up to stop what no doubt was meant to be a message that women couldn't cut it and weren't wanted.*

The SAC turned and looked steadily into the eyes of each NAT, one at a time. "I will say this only once, so you all better listen up. I am a woman, and I am also a damn good agent. I won't go away, so get used to it." A few lowered their eyes in shame, but the Bubbas sneered and looked at her bold-faced. She turned to face the instructor with a look in her eyes that gave a new meaning to the epigram "hell has no fury". She went over to a writhing Sheffer, bent over, then asked with a hint of sarcasm, "Do you want me to put your shoulder back into place?"

Sheffer hissed, "Not on your life, bitch!"

"Suit yourself, but if I were you, if you plan on completing this training, I wouldn't be so damned insubordinate to the SAC. I might really lose my temper." Yancy straightened up and barked, "Get it taken care of, Agent Sheffer, before it swells and becomes more painful." The SAC turned to the instructor, who had paled. "I don't think that there is any point of continuing this exercise today. I will see you and Agent Sheffer in my office at 0600 tomorrow."

Liberty watched with her mouth agape as the dynamo of a woman took charge with few words. The SAC walked past the line of trainees that were now standing at attention, stopping when she reached Liberty.

"Come on, Agent. I'm taking you to the ER."

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