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# STEEL FEAR

A THRILLER

BRANDON

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**WEBB & MANN**

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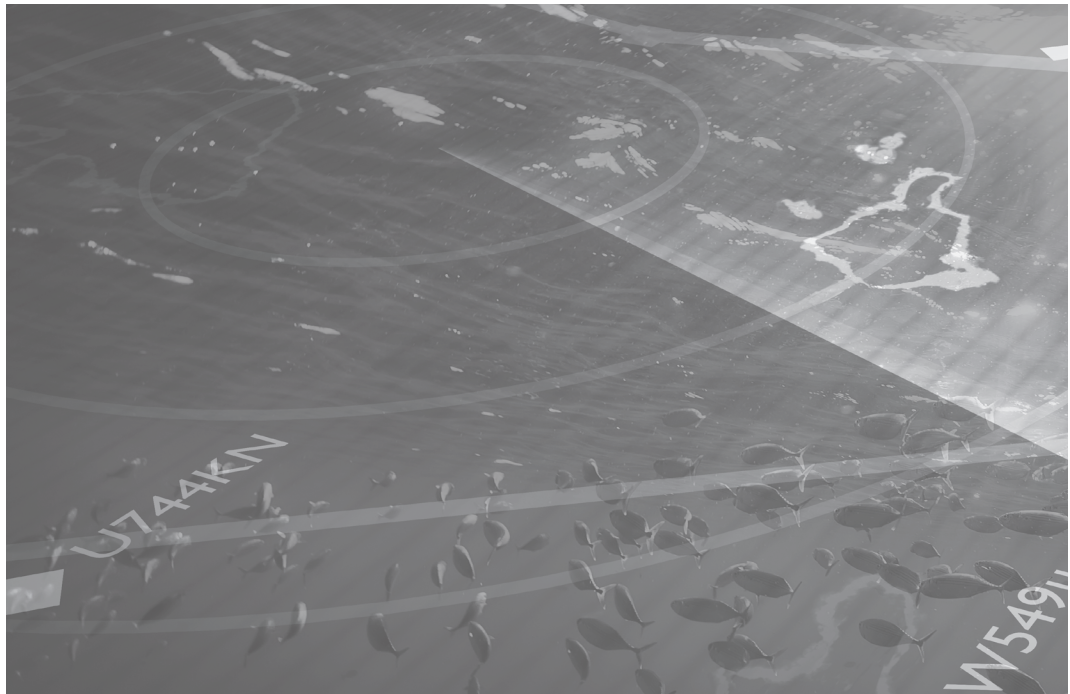
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*Steel Fear*

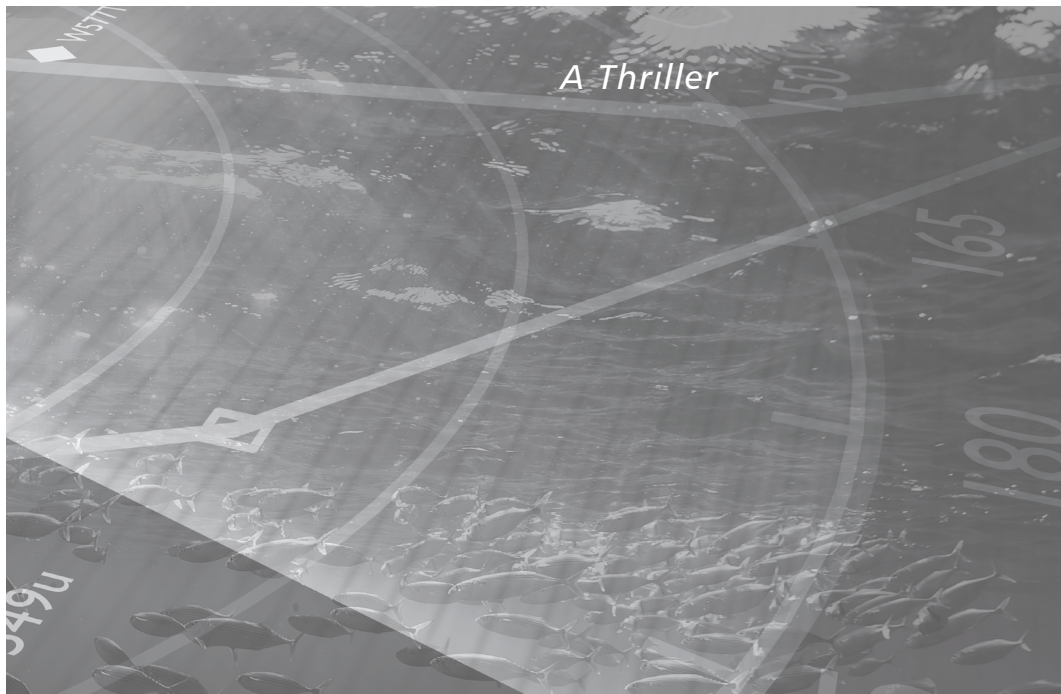
# STEEL FEAR



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Brandon Webb & John David Mann

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First Edition

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For my dad, Jack, always the little voice in my head, nudging me to untether the sailboat and take the journey. —*B.T.W.*

For Ana, who always believed; for two decades you've been telling me I should write novels, until I finally believed it too. —*J.D.M.*

## Contents

I. The Seam of the Weld	1
II. Bolter	77
III. Crossing the Line	123
IV. Monster	181
V. The Other Shoe	239
VI. Rubik's Cube	297
VII. The Storm	359
Epilogue	411
Note from the Authors	421



# The USS Abraham Lincoln (CV72)

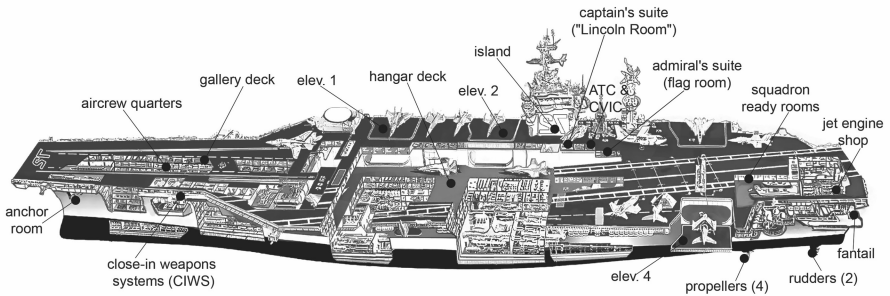
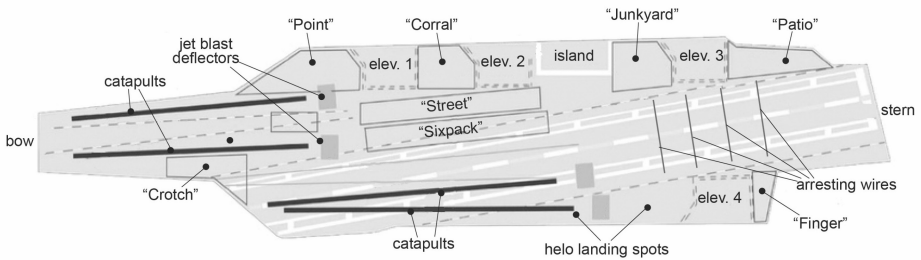
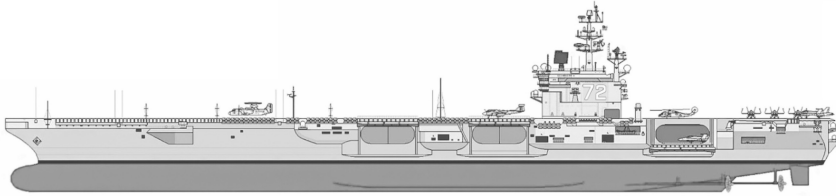
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football field (300)

USS Abraham Lincoln (1092)

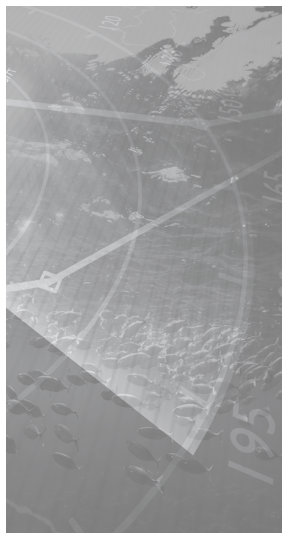
Eiffel Tower (984)

Empire State Bldg (1250)



# I

## The Seam of the Weld



# 1

Shivers rippled over Monica Halsey's naked skin as she peered into the steel mirror and splashed water on her face. Monica needed to be on her game tonight. She was close to earning her helicopter aircraft commander qualification, and tonight's hop was a critical step in that process.

Because Papa Doc was flying with her.

She shivered again. Lord, why did they keep the AC up so high in this place? She pulled on a red-and-black undershirt—squadron colors—then fished out a tan flight suit, stepped into the legs, pulled up the suit, and slipped her arms into the sleeves.

His name wasn't really Papa Doc, of course, it was Nikos Papadakis, and he was a control freak and a bully. Which was unfortunate, because he was also her commanding officer.

Papa Doc didn't like her. She didn't know why. Some security issue, probably; his daddy hit him or the big kids teased him or Lord knew what, but whatever the reason, it was a problem, because he held the keys to the kingdom—the kingdom in this case being Monica's HAC qual.

Which Papa Doc had the power to quash.

She zipped her flight suit up the front to mid-sternum, rolled up the sleeves to mid-forearm.

Focused on her HAC, and on what lay beyond that.

A tour at the Pentagon, some high-profile posting, maybe an admiral's aide? Tough job to get, and well worth it. If she did an excellent job there (and she would) she'd have people in high places looking out for her. Proceed to O-5, commander, and then O-6: the promised land. As a captain all sorts of posts would open up to her. Command of a ship. A

cruiser. Even a carrier. Why not? And after captain came admiral. There'd been plenty of female admirals in the navy by now, even one full-ranked female four-star. The admiral of their own strike group was a woman. Not impossible at all.

*Eyes on the prize.*

The most important event shaping Monica's life occurred ten years before she was born. In 1983 a thirty-two-year-old astronaut named Sally Ride flew the space shuttle *Challenger* and became the first American woman in space. On a third-grade school trip to the Houston Space Center Monica learned all about Sally Ride, learned that girls could actually become astronauts, and at the age of eight she fell in love. From that day on she wanted to fly more than anything in the world.

She bent down, slipped on her brown oxfords, and began lacing them tight.

In junior high she learned about Kara Hultgreen, the first female navy combat aviator, and her ambition shifted from astronaut to fighter pilot. She also learned that the USS *Abraham Lincoln* became the first Pacific Fleet carrier to integrate female aviators into its crew in 1993, the year Monica was born. It was on the *Lincoln's* flight deck that Hultgreen flew her F-14 Tomcat.

Monica looked again at her reflection in the polished steel. "And here we are," she whispered.

The USS *Abraham* freaking *Lincoln*.

She glanced around the dimly lit stateroom. Anne, one of her roommates, lay back on her rack, headphones on, murmuring incomprehensible phrases. Anne was sucking another foreign language (Mandarin, this time) into her voracious brain. Kris was on flight duty, gunning her F/A-18 somewhere up there through the Mesopotamian murk. The fourth rack, the one above Anne's, was empty now. Monica forced herself not to look at it. The sight still put a knot in her stomach.

She reached for her toothbrush and squeezed on a pearl of toothpaste.

She'd learned a few more things in junior high, too. She learned about something called the "Tailhook scandal": eighty-three navy women assaulted or sexually harassed. (That one happened two years before she was born.) That in 1994 Kara Hultgreen also became the first navy female aviator to die, right off the *Lincoln's* flight deck—and that the crash



that killed her was blamed on “improprieties” in qualifying her for flight status, “given her gender.”

For Flying While Female, in other words.

And Sally Ride? In a press conference just before that historic first flight in '83, reporters asked her if space flight would “affect her reproductive organs” and whether she cried when things went wrong on the job.

“Shit fire and save the matches,” was Gram’s comment when Monica told her about it.

Monica was fifteen when she read about that humiliating press conference, and that was the day she formulated the guiding philosophy she’d held to ever since.

*Never back down.*

She looked in the mirror, gave her hair a few quick brushstrokes, and snapped everything into place with a hair tie.

Ready for battle.

## 2

She opened the stateroom door, ducked her head, and began threading her way through the labyrinth. The nighttime safety lights provided her just enough illumination to see her way, their faint red glow giving the painted steel passageways an even more claustrophobic feel than usual. A lattice of wires, exposed pipes, and conduit brushed by overhead, like strands of web in a giant spider's lair.

Eerie how quiet it got in here at night.

If you put all the ship's passageways end to end, Monica'd heard, they would stretch out more than twenty miles. She'd asked her crew chief once just how big a carrier was. He told her about two brothers he knew who'd deployed at the same time on the same ship. From the day they left port to the day they returned seven months later the two never once bumped into each other. "That's how big," he said.

More than three thousand ship's crew, plus nearly three thousand more with the air wing on board: some six thousand souls packed into this steel honeycomb. Like a small city folded in on itself. She'd heard of crew members getting lost even after weeks on board.

Monica never lost her way, not once.

Though she did crack her head a lot those first few weeks.

As she ducked through another doorway Monica thought again—for the thousandth time—of the inconvenience her height saddled her with here on the *Lincoln*. It was like living in a hobbit shire, only this particular hobbit shire was interlaced with a thousand narrow, nearly vertical steel staircases—"ladders," in Navyspeak, never "stairs"—and punctuated by compact, capsule-shaped doorways with openings raised a few

inches off the deck, so you had to remember to high-step through. Look down to make sure you cleared the edge and *SLAM!* Another whack to the head.

She ducked again, then on through a few more doors, down two steep, narrow ladders, and into her squadron's ready room for a cup of hot Black Falcon coffee. Best coffee on the ship.

Quick op brief, then into the riggers' loft, where she and the other crew donned their inflatable vests—"float coats"—and white flight helmets.

Moments later she was out in the labyrinth again with Papa Doc and two other crew members. Up another steep ladder and through a heavy hatch to the outside—where they all paused, momentarily immobilized by the blast of saturated heat.

Even at night the Persian Gulf was sweltering.

The four stood for a moment on the steel catwalk, eyes adjusting to the darkness as their bodies adapted to the heat. Looking down between her feet into the darkness, Monica could hear the ocean rushing by five stories below. Sailors who jumped from here with suicide on their minds might hope to drown, but only those few sorry souls who survived the fall got their wish.

She followed the others up the five steel steps and out onto the *Lincoln's* massive flight deck, where every day was the Fourth of July.

*WHAM!* She was expecting it, but still the sound made her jump. A hundred yards from where Monica stood one of the flight deck's steam catapults slammed against its stock, sending a fighter jet screaming off the bow end of the deck and into the air with a *whoosh* and disappearing into the dark.

*CRASH!* A second jet pounded into the deck's stern to her right, its tailhook snagging one of the four arresting wires strung across the deck like booby traps. The cable shrieked as it stretched out into an elongated V, slowing the jet from 150 mph to zero in a two-count to stop it from careening off the deck's angled landing strip.

Goggled and green-jerseyed handlers rushed forward to chock and

chain the beast. Monica knew them all by their gait and gestures, had each one's physical signature memorized. Her crew's lives depended on these guys.

*WHAM!* Another cat shot, and *whoosh!* another jet disappeared into the dark.

*CRASH!* Another 25-ton beast pounded into the deck.

Insanity.

Her big brother had told her that the contrast between below decks and above was like night and day. That didn't even come close. Life below was like living in a steel ant colony. Up here, everything was a mass of exploding chaos—yellow-jerseyed “shooters” signaling jet launches with their elaborate ballet; white-shirted “paddles” feeding the incoming pilots chunks of complex data with a wave of their glowing light sticks; green-jerseyed Martians swarming everywhere, checking and double-checking every facet of the machinery before takeoff. The roar of jet blast as the next pilot rammed the throttle forward, sending a blaze of blistering exhaust back into concrete-and-steel blast deflectors raised on their servo motors just in time to catch the inferno. The air boss up in the tower, all-seeing, his amplified voice booming above the din, directing everything like a benevolent Eye of Sauron.

And that smell! That heady mix of diesel fumes, jet fuel, and salt air. Every time Monica stepped off the catwalk and out onto the deck it hit her again, like echoes of a first high school kiss. She couldn't get enough of it. Wished she could bottle it.

Launching and landing these jets was the most dangerous job in the world—and it was up to Monica to provide the safety net. The *Lincoln* carried forty-eight fighter jets and just six helicopters, but the helos were always, *always*, the first to lift off and last to land in any launch cycle, circling the ship's starboard side in three-hour shifts so there would always be at least one helo in the air with a rescue swimmer on board, suited up and ready to plunge into the drink in the event a plane went down.

Every helo squadron had its own motto. “One Team, One Scream.” “Train to Fight, Fight to Win.” “Our Sting Is Death.” All of which sounded to Monica more like they belonged to jet fighters. Not the Black Falcons,



though. The day she'd been assigned to the Falcons and learned what their motto was, she'd felt immediately at home.

*"That Others May Live."*

Their helo was coming in now, winding up its final loop, another already in the air to take its place. As it settled onto the port edge of the deck in front of them, Monica thought again how much the Knighthawk resembled a praying mantis with its big cockpit-window eyes.

In the seconds before takeoff, she always said a silent prayer herself.

She'd be damned if anyone else on this deployment lost their lives. Not on her watch.

### 3

A pair of fuel handlers in their purple jerseys—“grapes”—rushed in dragging their long lines to gas up the bird as the two crews made a hot swap, Monica and the others buckling themselves into their seats, testing their comms, checking the digital readouts.

One of the grapes ran up to the pilot’s window and held up a small glass jar. Fresh fuel sample for visual inspection. Papa Doc nodded: no visible contamination.

Tonight they were making an unscheduled ferry run to pick up a passenger in Bahrain. Pilot and co-pilot would trade off, one taking the stick while the other rode shotgun and worked the radio.

“Halsey. I’ll fly her out. You take the stick on the leg back.”

“Yessir.” Normally the formal “Yessirs” and “Nosirs” were relaxed while flying, unless the pilot was a prick. Papa Doc was a prick.

Monica wondered once again what it was about her that Papa Doc so resented. Maybe it was her height; at six one she towered over his five nine.

Or maybe he just wasn’t comfortable with her Flying While Female.

*“Hotel Sierra two zero six, Log Cabin, you are cleared for takeoff, spot one.”*

“Roger, Log Cabin,” Monica replied. “Hotel Sierra two zero six, cleared for takeoff.”

From here on the dialogue was pure mime: hand signals and glow-sticks from the brown-jerseyed plane captain on the deck in front of them. Nothing like the elaborate takeoff dance for a jet—no yellow-jerseyed shooters, no slamming catapult, no blasting off the deck like a rocket. Their plane captain pointed directly at them—*Ready*—as two

green shirts pulled out the forward wheel chocks and scurried off with them to the side. He spread both arms out to his sides in a T, then brought them straight up over his head, repeating the sequence several times in a series of overhead claps. *Lift off.*

Papa Doc pulled up on the “collective” (thrust lever) and Monica felt them lift with a whisper, tilting away to the port and leveling into their southbound flight path, where for the next hour they would chop away at the wet chunks of night air between them and their destination.

Monica stared out into the black nothing. Checked all her instrumentation. Out into the nothing again.

Flying in the Knighthawk was like being in a cave: the close confinement, condensation dripping from overhead pipes, everything draped in shadows from the glow of instrument lights, the steady soporific *whump-whump-whump* of rotors that could just about lull you to sleep.

Not a word from Stickman, their lanky rescue swimmer, in back. Nor from Harris, their crew chief.

This was the hardest part of flying, the part you never saw in movies: the monotony. The long stretches of empty time, having to stay sharp and alert even when nothing was happening. Mostly they would eat up the time with idle conversation, though with everyone on comms it was like having a conversation with the voices in your head. On some runs they’d ramble on for hours, pausing only when necessary to confirm a procedure or communicate with ATC. But Papa Doc frowned on too much chatter. On his watch, flights tended to be less like sitting around a campfire and more like going to church. Sit silent in your seat, join in from the hymnal when the time came, then sit back down. *Yessir.*

Monica steered her thoughts away from Papa Doc and onto the reason for their flight: their passenger, a Navy SEAL from Black Squadron, was coming on board solo, for what reason none of them knew.

Nor cared, as far as Monica was concerned.

SEALs: Sea Air and Land. Cream of the crop, elite of the elite, blah blah blah.

Monica had met quite a few SEALs and had taken an instant dislike to each and every one. As far as she could see, they were all arrogant, profane, and self-absorbed. The ultimate macho-supreme assholes.

Worse than Papa Doc?

Call it a tie.

She inadvertently glanced over in her CO's direction, then quickly looked away again. *Lord, I hope he can't hear my thoughts.*

The hour bled out in silence.

*"Hotel Sierra two zero six, Muharraq Airfield Control. We have you on visual, continue on course and maintain current altitude until advised."*

"Two zero six, roger that," replied Monica.

Through the Knighthawk's windshield Monica could make out their destination, a small landing strip where they were to rendezvous with their SEAL guest and his officer escort.

The Bahrain tower spoke up again. *"Hotel Sierra two zero six, you are cleared to land."*

As the bird lowered to the tarmac Monica spotted the two men walking toward them, illuminated by runway lights.

Even from a hundred feet off she had zero trouble identifying the SEAL. He was tall, muscular, powerful, carried his fully loaded backpack as if it weighed no more than a paper boarding pass. He didn't stride so much as he loped, moving with a dangerous grace that made her think of the mountain lions she'd seen back home.

Perfect specimen.

*Asshole.*

As they drew closer she could make out the officer lagging behind the SEAL in his desert cammies, lugging the other man's kit bag and gun case. This little guy was totally eclipsed by the SEAL, not just a head shorter but almost a different species: thin wiry limbs, knobby joints, oversize eyes. *He looks like a marsupial*, she thought.

In the navy, rank was everything—who outflew, outperformed, outlasted whom—and SEALs were a breed apart. The short, awkward-looking officer might technically outrank the big guy, but the big guy outclassed him in every other way. The contrast was almost comical.

Marsupial, meet mountain lion.

Stickman leaned out the door and shouted over the din of the rotors. "We're here for Chief Finn."

The marsupial took the backpack from the mountain lion, stepped forward without a word, and boarded the helo.



# 4

Finn silently assessed the four other people in the bird, starting with the pilot. He could sense him regarding his passenger there in the back with disdain. An angry man. Finn never trusted angry men. This one was cursed with a chiseled face, classic Greek nose, olive complexion. A movie-star face. Nobody should be born that handsome. Good looks like that made it tougher to keep yourself in perspective.

Finn understood the type: his talents, his limitations. The pilot would never advance much further than where he was right now. He might be career navy but his trajectory was a dead-end street. Not that his ego was too big. It was too small. Too fragile.

Finn dropped the pilot from the sonar of his mind and moved on to the co-pilot.

Something about Finn had startled her when he first climbed on. She'd tried to hide it, but she wasn't skilled at concealment. She was on the stick now and focused on her task. She said something to Movie Star and Finn caught the echoes of a Texas accent, light on the twang. West Texas, his guess. Strong, possibly headstrong. Someone on a mission. No dead-end street here.

Tall, good features. Must have taken a ton of shit on her way to flying a navy bird. The naval aviation officer track was brutal. Just gaining admittance was an intense selection process, let alone getting all the way through it. Not easy to make it this far. Even harder to do so and not turn mean. Finn read the co-pilot as tough on the surface but still green. He sensed a sadness just underneath, too, like she was grieving someone or something recent.

The crew chief in the seat next to him interrupted his thoughts. “Welcome aboard, Chief.” Finn looked at him but said nothing.

The junior guy, the crew’s avionics operator and designated SAR swimmer, grinned at him. Black dude, introduced to Finn as “Stickman.” Still had that new-guy sparkle. This was a kid who had not yet seen death up close.

Finn nodded.

They all had their jobs to do. He saw no reason to interfere or interrupt.

He didn’t speak a word the rest of the flight.

The helo threaded its way through the invisible corridors, slipping in on the carrier’s port side as fighter jets exploded off the deck’s bow and came screaming in aft to catch the big arrestor wires. Finn watched through the Knighthawk’s side window, absorbed in the skill of it all.

According to Kennedy, a carrier flight deck was one gigantic bolt-action sniper rifle, three and a half football fields long, only instead of firing steel-tipped 10-gram rounds it shot 25-ton fighter jets, firing and reloading at the rate of one every twenty-five seconds. Finn thought about the jet pilots strapped into their multimillion-dollar machines, being shot off the deck into the dark like bullets.

The idea of being encased in a supersonic steel tube like that made his balls clench.

The tall co-pilot put their bird down on the deck like a mother’s kiss on a baby’s cranium. She was good. He noticed her glancing in the pilot’s direction, trying not to look like she was doing it. Checking for signs of his approval. Professionally, though, not emotionally. Finn suspected she didn’t give a shit about his approval emotionally. Good thing, because she was never going to get it, not from him. No one was.

The young SAR swimmer slid open the cabin door. Finn followed him out and down onto the flight deck’s hot surface. The crew chief, Harris, walked him over to the edge, where they clambered down a short metal ladder onto the catwalk. Harris stepped through a hatch into the ship’s interior.

Finn hesitated.

So here he was. Boarding an aircraft carrier, being carted back to the States.

Leaving his team behind.

Harris turned and saw him looking back to the south, toward Bahrain. “Chief Finn?” When the SEAL didn’t respond he said, “Everything okay, Chief?”

Finn looked over at the other man. Nodded and followed him in.

Nothing was okay.