

BLUE SKIES

by
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2009

CHAPTER ONE

White House Situation Room, Washington, DC

“Sir, I don’t mean to argue with you.”

“Then don’t,” newly inaugurated President Peter Khalid said in as calm a voice as possible without being overly threatening. “I know I’m new to the job, but let’s get something clear right now. The election is over and I don’t give a damn how many of you endorsed the other guy—he lost. You ended up with the one who isn’t the war hero, so learn to live with it or get the hell out.”

“Sir—” Admiral Rodney James tried again.

“I’m not finished.” The president stood from his seat at the head of the table in the situation room. “I’m the candidate who promised change, and that’s what the American people are going to get. They’re going to get it even if I have to fire everyone in this room to get a more receptive audience. Do we understand each other, gentlemen?”

A chorus of “yes, sirs” came from the military leaders around the table except for Admiral Rodney James in his stiff blue dress uniform. The four stars gleamed against the dark fabric as if he spent a good bit of time lovingly buffing the symbols of his success, and they showed Rodney’s commitment to service. Everything about him practically screamed tradition, honor, and most importantly, the status quo.

Peter saw how his shoulders stayed rigidly straight as if someone was pressing their knee to the middle of his back. The defiance in his eyes held the message “don’t rock the boat, especially on my watch, asshole.”

“Admiral, do we understand each other?” Peter repeated.

“With all due respect, Mr. President, if you aren’t interested in my opinion, then why am I here?” Rodney put his hands on the oak table and leaned forward in a way that showed he was a man used to giving orders and not getting any flack about it. “What we have is a serious situation here, and it calls for men to make a serious response. It’s no time for publicity stunts or an implementation of radical changes. What you need to do is let us handle this, so the message is clear. You may be new to your job, but everyone in this room is highly trained and totally capable of handling it. All we need from you, sir, is a green light.”

“You’re dismissed, Admiral James.” Peter rested his weight on his fingertips as he leaned forward. “Vice Admiral Garner,” he said to the naval officer standing behind Rodney close to the wall. “When can you carry out my orders? Or do I go down to the next eager beaver looking to be promoted? And I mean that even if I go down to the person cleaning the toilets on the smallest dinghy in the Navy.”

Vice Admiral Sawyer Garner opened his briefcase and removed a file. “A bit young, but an excellent candidate for what you have in mind, Mr. President. Captain Sullivan comes from a Navy family, and I don’t see a problem getting the job done once we decide on a course of action. The *Jefferson* will be in capable hands.”

“That takes care of the Navy,” Peter said looking down the line to the next branch of the military.

An hour later Peter had gotten what some would refer to as a token change, considering the size of the armed forces, but change to level the playing field for those who wanted to serve had to start somewhere. Placing talented, capable people who’d previously never been considered in positions of authority would either blow open the doors of the military old boy’s club, or blow up in his face, but either way Peter was committed to providing the chance.

“Thank you all for your cooperation.” Peter signaled his staff to dim the lights. “Now let’s get to why we’re here.”

“The situation *is* serious, sir, but it can be easily defused if you’re willing to send a message,” Garner said from his new seat at the table.

“I believe I’ve demonstrated I don’t have a problem with that, so let’s hear everyone’s suggestions.” The screens in the room suddenly displayed an array of maps and satellite images.

These were the moments the military personnel trained for and that defined presidential legacies. Peter took a deep breath and felt his hair

turning gray. There was already a conflict in the Middle East involving U.S. troops, and what they were contemplating had the potential to start a fire that would make the Iraq situation seem like a mere grain of sand in a vast desert in comparison.



Top Gun Facility, Fallon, Nevada

Blue skies. The expanse of them made Commander Berkley Levine smile and think momentarily of the games of hide and go seek she played as a child. This was the same concept, but with a day like this it was more of a game of sitting duck if you didn't know what you were doing.

It was the slightly panicked voice in her ear that put the memories aside.

“Are you all right, ma'am?” The young navigator sounded concerned. “I don't know if you've noticed, but we're starting to drift a bit off course.”

“Tell me what you see, Lieutenant.”

“Ma'am?”

“Look around and tell me what you see.” She aimed them farther north and was confronted by even more blue skies.

“Nothing, ma'am.” If his breathing was any indication, her relaxed chuckle ringing in his helmet had driven his nerves up a couple of notches instead of reassuring him. “Blue skies, Lieutenant. It's the one thing God made for all of us to enjoy no matter what name you call Him by.”

“All that wonder confronting you, and your answer is nothing?”

“I'm sorry, Commander.” The answer was tentative.

“Do you see anything else?”

“No clouds?” He sounded as if this was a test that none of the crew in the simulator told him about before sending him out with Berkley.

“That'd be a great answer if I'd asked you what you don't see.”

“Sorry, ma'am.”

“Sorry won't bring your pilot back when you don't also see the bogey coming up on us at five o'clock either, Harvey.” Berkley heard Lieutenant Harvey Whittle gasp as she went into a set of rolls to get

away from their pursuer. When she leveled off their bogey was now in front of them.

One quick press of the trigger on the throttle and the computer eliminated the slick young hotshot trying to sneak up on them. She then banked again hard to the left and avoided the trap the young fliers had set. Their objective had been to sacrifice one in order to get their main target, which was her. It was a game, after all, and they could land that afternoon bragging how one of them had done the impossible—brought down the one flyer who had yet to be caught in the crosshairs during these training sessions.

“Still with me, Harvey?”

“I’m trying my best, ma’am, but I’m getting a little dizzy. That’s usually not a problem, but none of the other pilots I’ve gone up with have put so many moves into their flying.”

“Uh-huh.” She pitched them forward into a dive that made it seem like they were on a roller coaster more than a jet. “You haven’t christened the seat back there, have you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Good. Keep an eye on that guy on our ass, will you please? Trust me, Harvey, it’ll keep your mind off your breakfast.” The mountains of northern Nevada got very close as she flew lower to the ground than their commander liked, but she knew she wasn’t about to hit one of the protruding rocks.

“Cletus, get your ass above fifteen hundred feet,” the tower broke in.

“Aye, aye, sir.” It felt like she slammed the brakes on and Berkley could almost hear the plane that had been on their tail scrape the glass when they overshot them. “Ask and you shall receive.” She then climbed in a hard bank to the right trying to draw her opponent out in an attempt to get him to start thinking like a seasoned combat pilot. With the move she had just put on him, it would have been the easiest thing in the world to just finish him off.

“What are you waiting for, ma’am?” Harvey now sounded more engaged in the process.

“You sound impatient.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to tell you what to do.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it, did I?” She laughed again. “Good to

hear you've gotten over a major bout of timidity and started to open your mouth."

"He's circling back around, ma'am."

"Good job. Now keep your eye on the bouncing ball." Before he could ask what she meant they went into another dive, flying through a canyon that Berkley was sure the hotshot behind her wasn't going to follow her into.

Pilots like Lieutenant David "Blazer" Morris were good, but most of the time they were predictable. It was Berkley's job to knock some of that cockiness away and teach them to be better than good. It was her job to make them Top Guns.

"Still with me, Harvey?"

"Yes, ma'am, and I still have Blazer in sight. He's behind us but hasn't entered the canyon." A wall of rock was coming up, and she had no choice but to gain some altitude. When she did the young pilot behind her would have a clear shot. "He's locking in, ma'am."

"Of course he is. Are you a gambler, Whittle?"

"I like playing poker. Why?"

She laughed again and accelerated a little. "Well, we have to gamble that we can fly out of here before we hit those rocks, not hit Blazer, and not get shot down." While Berkley could hear the computer's warning of the lock Blazer had on them, she was more interested in something else in the front of them. Seemingly only inches from their demise, Berkley saw what she was after and pulled back on the stick, bringing them shooting out of the canyon like a bottle rocket on the Fourth of July.

A soft "fuck" came through her headset from Harvey when they heard Blazer and his navigator celebrating their kill, having gotten off a shot before Berkley could take any more defensive maneuvers. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I feel like I've let you down."

"I appreciate that, but don't be so quick to count us out."

"Cletus." The radio cracked to life again.

"Yes, sir." She started back to the base taking the long way around for a few more minutes of flying time to work on her craft. Way out of sight of the brass she did a series of rolls that she was sure made Whittle wish he'd skipped the Spanish omelet that morning. Flying was her religion, and just as those who prayed to demonstrate their devotion to

God, she showed her devotion to flying by trying to become as perfect as she could, no matter the situation.

“Let’s call it a day. So bring Whittle back before the boy has a nervous breakdown.”

“Yes, sir.”

The F-18 came to a stop and the ground crew was waiting with the ladder to help them out of the cockpit. A hundred yards from them, Blazer was being congratulated by his peers for being the first to score a kill against the legendary pilot they’d chased all day.

The backslapping continued as Berkley’s feet hit the tarmac and she shook out her short dark brown hair. Even if she had been perturbed by the display, she wouldn’t let them see it in her eyes, and she covered them with Maui Jim sunglasses.

“In the conference room, ladies, unless the party has already begun and you can’t spare the time,” Berkley said as she walked by.

All the students snapped to attention and gave her a rousing, “No, ma’am.”

CHAPTER TWO

Blazer, what did you learn today?” Captain William Percy “Rattler” Jepson stood at the front of the room in a uniform so starched it seemed it would crack when he moved. Will had been the commander of the Top Gun school for fifteen years and rarely took to the skies anymore. He did have an eye for talent when it came to combat pilots and culled the best of what the armed services had to offer to help him teach the next generation to be exceptional.

“If you keep at it, sir, any bogey can be brought down.” Blazer cut his eyes toward Berkley. “No matter how good they *think* they are.”

“Boy, stop talking before I ground you until the next millennium.” The monitor at the front of the room came to life and the computer records of what had happened that day were cued up. “You thought you’d sacrifice your wingman for the glory of the kill. If I were Cobra, I’d request never to be sent up with you again.” The first pilot taken out that day at the end of Berkley’s computer guns nodded slightly. “The score you were after learned a long time ago that teamwork is what gets the job done. Impressive flying trying to keep up with her, though.”

His words belied his statement as the footage from the camera in Berkley’s plane was cued up. More than one of the pilots in the room cringed when the onboard monitor showed just how close the canyon she had flown through actually was. No one’s eyes were wider than Harvey’s. He was pressing his hands so hard into his desk his fingers were purple.

“Answer me one more question, Lieutenant Morris. Can a ghost shoot someone down?”

“Sir, I’m sorry. I don’t understand the question.”

“Am I speaking in tongue, boy? Can a fucking ghost shoot someone down?”

“No, sir, not that I know of.” Blazer’s face flushed scarlet and his hands clenched to fists. Will stared at him, and Berkley could tell the young pilot wasn’t used to being made fun of and that the laughter around him was starting to piss him off.

“Then you can apologize to your fellow fliers for bragging about bringing Cletus down.”

“I shot her fair and square. That you can’t take away from me.”

The computer cut to some different footage showing both Berkley’s and Will’s computers in a split screen. Just before she came screaming out of the canyon, Will’s smaller and faster plane had zeroed in on Blazer and knocked him out of the game. “If you’re dead before you get the shot off, it don’t count, boy. Cletus used the same tactics you used on her to give her wingman the shot. Because in the end she knows dead is dead no matter who pulls the trigger.”

“So you see, Whittle, why I don’t want you to ever take your eye off the target,” Berkley whispered to her navigator sitting next to her. “Had you been looking back, if we’d been in his situation, you’d have spotted Rattler before he was able to get that shot off. You’ll always be the eyes in the back of the head of any pilot you fly with, so don’t let them down.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Whittle straightened up in his chair. “Would you mind if I had lunch with you, Commander?”

“Sure, the chipped beef around here is better tried with backup.”

They stepped out into the heat of Nevada and headed to the mess hall. The khaki uniforms helped with the dry, hot air, but still it could be felt through the cotton material. They finished going through the line and picked a table next to the wall of glass that gave them a good view of the mountains in the distance.

“Can I ask you something, ma’am?”

“You can give it a shot, but I’m not promising I’ll answer.”

He pushed the mashed potatoes around on his plate and didn’t look up after that. “Why’d you pick me to go up with you today? I’m not exactly in your league.”

“My dad flew for the Navy with a young guy named Whittle, and I believe his first name was Harvey. He told me it was like having someone glued to your ass the whole time they were in the air, and it

made him feel like he had a guardian angel on his butt.” Her knuckles wrapping on the table made him finally raise his head. “Is he a friend of yours?”

“He’s my dad, ma’am. He saw some action and he got hooked on the adrenaline rush, so it took him a while to settle down and have a family. The way he speaks about the military made me feel he would be disappointed in me if I didn’t give it a shot. Unfortunately for him, I inherited my mother’s coordination, so it kept me out of the cockpit.”

“I’ll tell you a secret.” She leaned forward and staged whispered her next line. “The person in the hopper seat is just as important as the pilot. Don’t let people like Blazer or Cobra tell you otherwise. If their backseats had been giving good advice today, we’d still be out there trying to outmaneuver each other.”

“Thanks for that, ma’am.”

“We need to do two things before you head back to the barracks today, Whittle.”

He grinned and sat up straighter in his chair. “Whatever you like, ma’am.”

“First.” She held up her finger and pointed it at him. “You can call me Cletus or Berkley. If you’re going to be my backseat, I can’t have you wasting time trying to get out Commander or ma’am.” Another finger went up and she smiled to soften the reprimands. “We need a new name for you.”

“You can call me Whittle, ma’am. I really don’t mind.” She shook her head, and he backtracked. “Sorry, Berkley.”

“I’ll give you until the morning to pick a flyer name. If not I’ll do it for you.”

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure, I’m in a generous mood today.”

“With the way you fly, why didn’t you pick some name like Viper or Killer? Cletus isn’t exactly very menacing sounding.” She leaned in and told him the story behind the name, enjoying the way his head fell back when he gave her a big belly laugh.

“Thanks for telling me, and I promise I’ll work on the name tonight.”

“See you in the morning, and don’t forget to pay attention during the rest of today’s classes. Blazer got his ass handed to him in that conference room today, so he’ll be really gunning for us tomorrow.”



“How’d it feel up there today, boss?” Berkley put her feet on the desk in Will’s office and looked at the pictures covering his wall. More than a few had her father’s smiling face as he stood next to Will in front of a slew of different planes.

“Like it did when I could keep a hard-on for more than two seconds.”

“Ever hear the expression too much information, sir?” She laughed at his straightforward nature. If she had to guess, Will never really noticed that she was a woman, and had never treated her any differently than any other pilot who had come through the program.

“Fuck off, Cletus, and tell me what you thought of the new group, since I figured this first exercise would’ve stretched past an hour. Imagine my surprise that my ass hadn’t warmed the seat yet when we were done.”

“A lot of egos to contend with, but when isn’t it like that? Tomorrow we’ll go through some maneuvers before we head back to the chase. Should make them start to think like part of the wheel instead of one of the cogs.”

“I was looking at Whittle while you were up there today. The boy was a shade of sickly green for most of the flight. Want to admit you were wrong on that application and change out tomorrow?” He picked up a file on his desk and opened it. “There’s a kid from Lincoln that’s supposed to be pretty good.”

“You leave Whittle alone. He’ll be fine. He’s a bit nerdy, but he’ll turn out to be a great backseat. You’ll see.”

“Get your ass out of here, then, and I’ll see you in the morning. If you’re not busy, Rose wants you at our house tomorrow for dinner. She’s trying a new recipe for enchiladas.”

“Mexican food?” Berkley put her hand on her stomach and felt the need to stock up on antacids. Will’s wife Rose wasn’t known for her skill in the kitchen.

“Mexican food, and I’m not going in alone, so don’t think about making any excuses of why you can’t come.”

“The last time she tried that we were out for a couple of days.

I love Rose to death, but would it kill you to give the woman some cooking lessons for her birthday?”

“And admit to her that she can’t cook? I’m not that brave, wiseass. Get out of here before I find some way to sneak my food onto your plate. We’ll meet in the morning to map out the exercises for tomorrow.”

“If they go anything like today, you might consider a few days in the classroom as a way to get their attention. Nothing brings some of these little ones into line faster than taking their toys away.”

“That’s true, since you pout better than any two-year-old, and before you think of a smart-ass reply to that, remember that you could be sitting in there with them.”

She stood and gave him a casual salute before heading out to the old Jeep she drove. It was a purchase she’d made at an army surplus auction and had spent a few summers restoring it. From what the previous owner had said, the 1943 vehicle had seen action in France during the war.

Rebuilding the engine and getting her hands dirty had allowed her to get her mind to focus on the task instead of on the demons that haunted her thoughts when she sat idle. After getting her wings and serving six years in every dangerous situation Uncle Sam needed taken care of, Berkley had given up the live ammo for the computer-simulated rounds of Fallon.

The position at Top Gun was coveted but perfect for Berkley, who in her career had never turned down any assignment and never failed to put herself in any position to get her team home safe. In Fallon the constant pressure situations they practiced had elevated her talent to a point that no one had brought her down yet.

At this point in her life the moments in the cockpit were enough to make her forget what she didn’t have when her feet were on the ground, and it’s where Berkley planned to finish her naval career since she knew the life of a naval pilot was over almost as fast as the planes they flew. The day your eyesight weakened and your reflexes slowed was the day you had to leave the cockpit to the younger, more able pilots.

But a naval career had been something she’d worked hard on for a very long time, and while she still had a passion for it, the same wasn’t true for most everything else. Like Harvey, the choice of enlisting hadn’t been difficult for her since her father’s life in the service was something

he had used as bedtime stories. She'd wanted the same excitement he'd told her about when he was known as Fearless. That was his nickname in the cockpit, and what he'd tried to instill in her.

Her parents had been *gifted* with four daughters, as her father liked to say. That they didn't have a boy was never an issue of disappointment for him from the moment Berkley arrived with a head full of brown, poker-straight hair, screaming like the room was on fire. The story was that when the nurse on duty had come out and handed Commander Levine the newly born Berkley, it was the first time the macho guy had shed tears in public. She was followed by sisters Ann and Willow, all of them eleven months apart, and when Berkley was five her parents had come home with Suzette.

Commander Corbin Levine had been a devoted father to all his girls, but everyone knew how attached he was to the one brunette in his brood. His gangly kid, who'd topped out at six two, had become a star athlete, model student, and talented pilot. His friends teased him unmercifully for the size of his smile when Berkley graduated top in her class from the Naval Academy, assuring she would follow in his footsteps into the cockpit of the meanest machines on the planet. She wasn't the Navy's first female combat pilot, but she was one of the best they'd ever trained.

Berkley's sisters, Anna, Willow, and Suzette, went on to work for their mother's family in New Orleans when her father was stationed at the Belle Chase Air Station to finish his career. All of her siblings were married with children, and the next generation was still populated with red hair and green eyes, leaving Corbin and Berkley as the only two with pale blue eyes that contrasted nicely with their dark chestnut hair.

The large family had given Berkley a sense of place that had been important because her father's assignments had moved them enough that she had trouble remembering all the locations. Her father had taught her honor, service, and commitment to country—all the things that defined him and his duty, but had also encouraged her to choose what was important in her life.

Her mother had given her the thirst to expand her horizons beyond what she found in the cockpit, and also the example that even though she'd picked the life of the wanderer, as her father had done, there was the possibility for a great love affair. Both of her parents bragged about them in different ways, and when her mom talked about her, the best

description was that Berkley had an outlook on life that both thrilled and terrified her because she feared so little. But it was what had attracted her mom to her father when they met, so when it was Berkley's turn to love, whoever it was would be damned lucky. It was that lesson in risking her heart that had brought her to Fallon.



After stopping at the grocery store for a steak and ingredients to make a salad, Berkley drove home to the ranch house she was leasing right outside of town. When the Jeep came to a stop, her golden retriever jumped off the porch and ran to the vehicle, putting his two front paws on the side.

“Hey, Junior,” Berkley grabbed her bag and kept it out of his reach. The dog had been a gift from her father and was the great-grandson of the best hunting dog her father had ever owned.

With the front gate closed, Berkley went to change so she could fire up the pit. While the coals got hot she spent some time throwing Junior his ball. When she put his toy in her pocket Junior went inside and pulled open the fridge by the towel Berkley kept on the handle and carefully clutched a beer in his teeth and brought it out. He knew this kind of fetching game would get him a treat later. He gave the beer to her and sat away from the fire to watch Berkley cook. Their menu was limited because of Berkley's cooking talents, but anything tasted better cooked over an open flame—at least that's what her mother had told her when she'd come out and helped her set up the house.

Her mom had spent a month with Berkley on the pretext of helping her unpack and to teach her a few things now that the Navy wouldn't be providing every meal. Berkley had enjoyed having her around as much as her mom had needed to feel like the self-sufficient sailor she'd raised still needed her. When her mother left, the closets in the house were in order, the boxes unpacked, a new grill sat in the backyard, and in the kitchen she'd left a list of things Berkley could throw on the grill and instructions for how to season them.

She ate her meal in silence, splitting her steak with Junior and watching the sunset from the back deck. After she washed the dishes and refilled Junior's water dish, Berkley sat in the backyard with another beer and looked up at the stars. Her life wasn't full, but it was enough

for now. In the quiet moments like this she not only missed her family, but missed having someone to share her time with. That would have to wait until the sting of her first serious relationship was forgotten, and then there was that little hiccup that the Navy frowned on her telling them all about what she desired in a partner. Up to that point they hadn't asked and she hadn't told.

"You know, Junior," she said as she scratched the dog behind his ear, "I can sense when I've got someone trying to fuck me over up there," she pointed at the sky with the bottle in her hand, "but when that great instinct really mattered, I pretty much put myself in the crosshairs and didn't know it until the bomb hit."

The phone rang. "Levine," she answered, surprised at the late hour.

"Make sure you polish your shoes before coming in tomorrow," Will barked at her. "I just got word we're getting a visit tomorrow from a Captain Sullivan. He's heading up the newest carrier the Navy put in the water and he's shopping for crew. The suits feel like there's a situation brewing in the east and the USS *Jefferson* is going to be sailing right into the middle of it." The suits he'd referred to were the idiots in the Pentagon who liked to play war but had never donned the uniform. For men like her father and Will who'd seen more action than they cared to in a lifetime, the suits were the bane of their existence.

"I'll make sure I look all nice and shiny, then." She hung up the phone and leaned against the wall, releasing a long breath. "It couldn't be, but with my luck it is. Shit."