

LT. COMMANDER MOLLIE SANDERS

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PART I – BACK-SEATER

CHAPTER I – AT SEA

Aboard the USS Nimitz, Pacific Ocean

The KABOOM of two fighter planes catapulting into the sky filled the air as the two planes accelerated from zero to 200 mph in 300 feet. All along the flight deck barely a head turned. Navy sailors wearing different colored jackets to indicate their specific jobs did those precise jobs as the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Nimitz sliced through the Pacific Ocean.

At one side of the deck and several stories high stood the tall structure known as “the island.” Here men and women as part of the pilot control center for the ship watched as their birds took flight or returned to roost.

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April 16

0800 hours

One deck below the flight deck, on the hangar deck, at the far end of that deck and facing out to sea, several pilots engaged in target practice as Navy Lieutenant Commander Mollie Sanders moved among them.

Oblivious to the looks given her by the men, she concentrated on her task. She knew that men considered her attractive, but she strove to distract from her looks by trying to be better and faster than any of the men – in any of their tasks.

After checking the grip of one pistol, Mollie let her gaze sweep the horizon of ocean and more ocean. She inhaled the air – what a welcome smell!

She had arrived onboard only last night in the dark. Immediately this morning she'd been asked to “help out” with target practice. No time to appreciate what she'd finally achieved – a transfer to ship duty.

Mollie stopped alongside a good-looking guy also in his early 30s. His flight jacket said Witlow and he held the pistol like a gunfighter in a western. Maybe his call sign was gun fighter.

“Two hands, cowboy,” Mollie said. “This isn't the OK Corral. And use the sights. The object is to hit your target, not scare him.”

The pilot turned blazing eyes on her. “And who the hell – “

Mollie pointed to the strip of white tape on her ball cap that said instructor. That stopped his protest.

She held out her hand for his pistol. He hesitated, then handed it over.

She assumed the perfect two-handed firing position – and in a blaze of fire emptied the magazine at the silhouette target. Next to her the pilot said nothing.

Mollie hauled back the target. All her shots converged in a three-inch group – in the target's groin!

The pilot eyed the target and remained silent.

“That’s the way to do it,” she said to him. She cleared the pistol and handed it back to him.

She walked to the next firing position, aware of his eyes sending death rays into her back.

Oh, well, she wouldn’t have to deal with him again. Today’s instructor role was a favor. Tomorrow she’d be in her favorite spot in the whole world – up above the earth, free of entanglements, speeding towards a far-off horizon.

Out of the corner of Mollie’s eye she spotted a hand clapping on Witlow’s shoulder. The hand belonged to Air Wing Commander (CAG) Alex Kruger. Mollie remained close enough to hear the CAG talk to Witlow.

“Two things you need to know, Surfer. One, she’s on the Navy pistol team. Two, she’s your new back-seater.”

Oh, no, Mollie thought. His call sign was Surfer and this was who she’d be flying with! She’d thought she’d never have to deal with him again.

“Permanently?” Surfer said to the CAG.

“You have a problem with that?” the CAG asked.

“No, sir!”

Mollie nodded. It would be interesting to see what this guy was made of when he was flying instead of shooting. Then, again, he might be surprised by what she was made of when she was flying instead of shooting.

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1130 hours

Kevin Witlow entered the officers mess with its long tables and a cafeteria line. He preferred this mess to the clean shirt wardroom, where the officers sat at round tables served by waiters but were required to wear regular uniforms. Here in the dirty shirt wardroom the officers could eat in their work uniforms.

Kevin glanced at the television hanging in one corner. The tv showed the flight deck with planes taking off and landing. Many of the pilots already seated ate with their eyes glued to the tv set.

As Kevin exited the cafeteria line, he spotted his new back-seater sitting by herself at a long table, her eyes also glued to the tv set.

Maybe he should properly introduce himself. He knew he reacted arrogantly this morning. But damn it, his only experience with women was his younger sister, and she taught kindergarten, for chrissake.

Why the hell did the CAG have to saddle him with a woman!

Kevin inhaled a calming breath and walked over, sitting down across from her. He held his hand out. She hesitated, for chrissake, then shook. Her hand told him nothing – neither too strong nor too limp. A regular shake.

“Surfer,” he said, giving his call sign.

“Gearhead,” she said.

“Mine’s cause I come from California. Fresno, actually. Never spent a day in my life surfing.”

“Too bad for you.”

Kevin rubbed his head, tried again. “Where’d you come from?”

The woman smiled. “The STORC.”

“The stork? Me, too, but I meant recently.”

The woman’s smile enlarged. “The STORC – Special Tactics and Operations Research Center.”

Now Kevin smiled. “I’m impressed.”

“I missed flying.”

Kevin laughed. “Sitting in the back seat punching buttons isn’t exactly flying –“

The woman’s eyes flashed. “Pilots are just flying truck drivers ... who could easily be replaced by a trained chimpanzee.” She paused. “Actually, I could program my BlackBerry ...”

Kevin opened his mouth to retort at the exact moment the CAG appeared next to them.

“Sanders, could I see you in my office at 1830?”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the woman replied.

The moment the CAG was out of hearing, Kevin leaned closer to the woman.

“A little tete-a-tete with the CAG? You work fast.”

The woman stood.

“Not every pilot aboard thinks with his dick. Mission first, surfer boy.”

Kevin watched her stride away from the table. As she did, he smiled with supreme macho confidence. One preening woman wasn’t about to throw him off his game.

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1830 hours

Mollie stood peering down at a chart that Kruger had rolled open on the tiny desk at which he sat. He held an open compass over an area on the chart.

“Missile launch will be in this area.”

“Right, sir.”

“You’ll have about four minutes to detect, track, and fire. If you haven’t done so in three minutes, I’ll self destruct the missile.”

“Roger that, CAG.”

“Have you briefed Surfer yet?”

Mollie hesitated for a fraction of a second. “Didn’t think he had the need to know just yet, sir. I’d like to treat this as routine as possible.”

The CAG looked up at her. “Gearhead ...”

He exhaled, then continued. “I believe in letting young officers have enough to hang themselves. Just remember this is the new, zero defects Navy, Sanders.” He looked her straight in the eyes. “One screwup and you’re through – no matter who says otherwise.”

Here we go again, Mollie thought. For the briefest of seconds her body seemed to collapse into itself, then she straightened up.

“Don’t intend to make any, sir.”

The CAG dismissed her with a hand wave.

Outside his office Mollie shook her head. She’d forget what the CAG had just said.

The mission would take all her concentration. That and dealing with the gun fighter who was going to be driving her ride.

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April 17

0730 hours

Kevin chomped down his breakfast in the dirty shirt wardroom with the other pilots. These were all men except for the two women who sat off in a far corner.

Kevin nodded as his pal Banger came up to Kevin. “Heard you have a new girlfriend, Surf. Giving her a r-i-i-i-de today?”

Usually Kevin didn’t mind Banger’s thick Southern accent or his sexual innuendos. But aware that the CAG would be watching Kevin on this pair-up, Kevin chose his words carefully.

“She already shot me down, Banger. You feel free to try.”

Banger laughed. “She can climb into my back seat any old time.”

The other pilots whooped and whistled. Kevin smiled as another pilot, Slugger, nudged Banger and said, “Better start your approach, B-Man.”

Kevin looked up to see the woman.

Banger turned to face her.

“Why, hello, Miss Scarlett. Would you care to accompany me to the cotillion this Saturday night?”

The woman gave Banger a look, then she said, “I surely am sorry, Ashley Wilkes. I’ve already agreed to go with the Tarleton brothers.”

Kevin had to give it to her, her Southern Belle voice was quite convincing.

She pointed to Kevin.

“Let’s go, Mister Tarleton. Our carriage awaits.”

Kevin stood and walked beside her towards the door. “You have a sense of humor.”

The woman flicked her eyes at him. “Is that what that was? Humor?”

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0800 hours

Kevin and the woman walked out into a beautiful morning and a quiet flight deck. The planes were lined up as if birds at rest.

As they walked toward his plane, she handed him a plastic sleeve.

“Mission profile change. Live fire.”

Hell it is! And with a new back-seater!

Kevin read the sheet, his anger mounting with every word.

“Are you fucking crazy? You don’t change the mission two seconds before we climb into the aircraft.”

The woman again flicked her eyes at him. “It had to be done.”

“The hell you say. I’m going to the CAG.”

The woman pointed to a line on the sheet. “CAG already approved it.”

Now Kevin’s eyes shot his anger at the woman. Shit!

He climbed up the ladder into the pilot’s cockpit – the front seat of his plane – with the stenciled name of Surfer under the canopy. The woman climbed up the other ladder into the navigator’s cockpit – the back seat.

Kevin checked his instruments. He was good to go.

He radioed the towers and got the signal to take off.

The adrenaline rush he got every single time swept over him as he accelerated. His plane catapulted off the deck with its own resounding KABOOM.

He'd give his new back-seater the ride of her life. She'd be begging for a change of assignment.

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0840 hours

In the back seat Mollie checked her weapons control and the electronic warfare instruments. She said into her speaking tube: "N-LAR operation. Commence test run."

Surfer answered her: "First we'll have to check out the system's response to simulated aerial combat."

The plane performed a spectacular series of aerobatics – rolls, loops, dives, climbs, wingovers, slamming on the brakes, flying inverted. Mollie knew he was trying to make her puke.

She hung on. Her face turning green! She wouldn't give in and ask him to stop!

From the speaking tube came Surfer's voice: "How's it going back there? Are we having fun yet?"

Mollie managed to get out: "Quite finished, Rocketman? Could we commence the test run now?"

"If that thing's still working" was the reply.

"N-LAR is designed with aerial combat in mind, Surfer. The test run, if you please."

Mollie checked her instruments as Surfer commenced to fly the pattern described.
“Missile launch in 20 ...15 ... 5... Missile launch detected! Engaging N-LAR.”

Mollie’s hands flew over the control panel. A screen showed a blip streaking toward them.

“N-LAR is tracking!” she said.

Her screen showed TARGET ACQUIRED.

Now Mollie spoke to the ship. “Dagger Control, I have target lock!”

She flipped up a plastic cover over a red switch.

From the com came Dagger Control: “Dagger 1, N-LAR free!”

Mollie flipped the switch. And for a moment there was a flash from a pod slung under a wing.

Then a burst of light hit the missile. Split the missile in half! Pieces flew in different directions!

“Target negated, Dagger Control!” she called, trying hard to keep the jubilation from her voice.

From the speaking tube came Surfer’s voice: “Target negated? You just shot down a missile with a laser beam and all you can say is target negated?! Fucking !”

“No need for unjustified exuberance, Surfer. That’s just one test. In a long series of tests.”

Surfer replied: “Yeah, like Apollo 11 was just one test in a long series of tests! Are you human? Hell, no! You’re a goddam robot!”

A spasm of pain crossed Mollie’s face. She said: “Set course for Graceland, Surfer.”

“Roger that, Commander Data.”

Again the spasm of pain crossed Mollie’s face as the fighter rolled into a turn for home.

Mollie wrote on a BlackBerry strapped to her knee.

Blapp! Blapp! Blapp! Her eyes jerked to the instruments. Her tracking screen showed a blip arrowing toward them.

Mollie spoke through the tube to Surfer: “Surfer, I have a missile launch, 14 miles, bearing one-zero-zero. Do you have that on your mission profile?”

Surfer’s answer came flaring back at her: “Is there a glitch in your system, Little Miss Perfect?”

Mollie toggled her radio.

“Dagger Control, this is Dagger 1. Did you fire another missile. Over.”

The answer came through the com: “Negative, Dagger 1. Our weapons are tight. Mission profile completed.”

Mollie’s fingers flew on her instrument panel.

“Surfer, missile now 12 miles out. This is not part of the test. I say again, this is not part of the test. The signature does not match the assigned frequency.”

On the com Surfer said: “Is it tracking us?”

“Break left and descent to 14,000. Course 270.”

The plane banked away and dove. But Mollie’s screen showed the missile changing course to meet their course!

“It’s tracking us, Surfer! Prepare to engage N-LAR. This is not a drill. We must engage.”

“This is a joke, right? You’re just getting back at me?”

Mollie shook her head at his words. “No joke. Come to 180, prepare for N-LAR firing.”

Her hands flicked over her switches.

“Dagger Control, this is Dagger 1. We have incoming missile 8 miles out. Engaging with N-LAR.”

“Dagger, 1, Graceland,” the CAG said over the com. “You have what?”

“Incoming missile. Hostile. Not part of the test. Engaging now.”

Her eyes flicked to her screen. “Surfer, head 090, climb to 16,000.”

“Dagger 1, do not engage N-LAR. I say again, do not engage N-LAR. Break off, break off. Get the hell out of there!”

The plane rolled around and pointed straight down. Headed for the aircraft carrier while trying to lose the missile.

Mollie’s scope showed the missile still tracking and getting closer!

The altimeter unwound at an incredible pace. Only a few hundred feet to the water ... it was coming up quickly.

The missile arrowed straight down too.

The fighter pulled out of its dive on full afterburner.

The missile kept on coming! It pulled out even lower over the ocean. Flying through the whitecaps. Then lifted its nose to close on the fighter.

The missile threat warnings shrieked in Mollie’s ears. Her scope showed the missile very close!

Surfer's voice came over the tube as he spoke to the CAG: "We may have to punch out, Graceland. I can't shake it. Brace yourself, Gearhead. Yevtenko, now!"

Mollie grabbed hold as Surfer pulled straight back on the stick, cutting the throttles to minimum.

The fighter pulled straight up and the missile shot by!

Stall warnings blared. The plane tried to fly upward with no power!

The sky spun around Mollie's head as Surfer rolled the aircraft 180 degrees and pushed the stick down and rammed the throttles forward.

The fighter fell down from its balanced-on-its-tail attitude. It was pointed in exactly the opposite direction, at full throttle!

The plane and the missile got farther and farther apart.

Mollie watched her scope. The missile disappeared.

"It splashed! It's gone! Damn!" she said.

She exhaled.

"That was damn good flying, hotshot."

She switched to her Southern Belle voice: "Maybe I'll let you bring me a mint julep when we get back to Tara, Mr. Tarleton."

From the tube came Surfer's voice, devoid of his macho pose. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"Fired from some atoll or ship somewhere below us," Mollie said as she watched her screen.

Moments later the plane screamed in to land on the carrier. Its tailhook caught the arresting wire.

The engines wound down as Surfer taxied to a parking space.

For a moment Mollie stared down at her BlackBerry. What was really going on?

The canopies on both cockpits popped open as the ground crew hooked ladders on the cockpits.

The CAG strode up to the plane as Mollie and Surfer climbed out of their cockpits.

“What the hell went on up there?”

Surfer shrugged, looked at Mollie.

“Didn’t have the right signature, sir,” Mollie said. “Definitely not one of ours.”

“You’re not fucking with me?”

“No, sir. Bona fide missile,” she said. “Showed up clearly on the detection panel – with the wrong signature.”

“Terrorists?” the CAG said.

“Something like that,” Mollie said.

“Oh, shit. Bloody hell will break out over this,” the CAG said.

“I have an idea, sir,” she said. “I’d like to test it out before saying anything.”

Surfer shook his head, leaving the CAG to nod his agreement to Mollie’s request.

Mollie watched Surfer walk off.

He can really pilot, she thought. But what was his story?

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1400 hours

Seated at a computer terminal in the intelligence center, Mollie searched the ship's databanks. Her hands flew across the keyboard and the screen filled with projected shipping lanes.

A young man in civilian clothes entered the room. He looked at Mollie's screen, then said to her, "Are you checked out on these?"

"Yup."

The man shook his head. "This system is state of the art. Nimitz is the first to have it. How could you ..."

"I designed it."

The man opened his mouth, then shut it. After another moment he said, "What are you looking for?"

Mollie smiled. She knew her answer would shake him up. "Pornography."

"What?!"

"I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."

The man looked so confused that Mollie relented. "I think the tangoes – terrorists – might be on a ship out there."

The man wheeled around and fled the room as Mollie's fingers continued to fly over the keyboard. Somewhere out there on the open sea was the answer she sought.