

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Gathering Storm

The year is 2006. Satellite photos show China mobilizing to invade Taiwan. China has extended her sphere of influence over Asia by aggressive acts against her neighbors, and is deliberately interfering with international traffic to control trade routes in the South China Sea. China knows that if she waits beyond 2006, national elections in Taiwan will be a vote for independence, not unification with the mainland.

A thick overcast of dark rain clouds obscured the South China Sea as the sun dropped below the horizon. Soft red lights from the instrument panel illuminated the cockpit of the world's most formidable Navy fighter, providing a strange sense of security for the two pilots.

Lt. Kelly Owen squirmed in her seat.

"We just hit the thirty-mile mark, Curly, I'll give air control a call." It had been a long haul from Atsugi. Only twenty minutes to the carrier.

"Roger," Curly replied, rousing himself from the long, exhausting flight.

"Iron Man, Navy One-Zero-One, thirty east at twenty-five thousand on an IFR flight plan from Atsugi, Japan for landing," Kelly reported. "Over."

"Cleared number two for landing on a mode-two approach, call ten miles on final." Iron Man replied. They had her on radar and reported the weather, solid overcast extending from twenty thousand to three hundred feet with heavy rain, visibility variable from one to two miles, and heavy turbulence. It was a sea state of three.

"Great, all I need is a night landing in foul weather, on a pitching, rolling deck with my sore ass," thought Kelly as she scanned the control panel.

She dialed in the bearing, taking a fifteen-degree cut to set up her approach astern and from the right of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. She settled back and massaged her hips and thighs to get circulation back into her cramped legs before starting her penetration through the overcast.

"In twenty minutes we'll have to defend ourselves before the inquisition," she said over the intercom to Curly Weaver, the weapon system officer in the back seat. The Growler, the plane they were flying, was the latest addition to the fleet, a suppression aircraft that led the strike team to the target.

"Maybe they won't be too rough on us," Curly said. "Just glad to see us back with the goods."

Kelly didn't reply. Curly was an inveterate optimist. She had wrestled for hours with the conflict she had caused, bypassing her squadron Commanding Officer and Carrier Air Group Commander. She was sure the CO and CAG would both be there to greet her when she landed.

Right now, she had to focus on getting her jet down safely on the deck in rotten weather. She gritted her teeth, pulled the throttles back, popped the speed brakes and started a rapid descent into the soup below. The combination of slowing and descending on instruments, and hitting turbulence all at the same time, made it difficult to trim the plane. Gradually, she slowed from 350 knots to 130 knots and steadied the rate of descent

to three thousand feet per minute.

Kelly set the radio altimeter at fifteen hundred feet. An audible beep signaled her to close the speed brakes, add power and trim the plane to hold a thousand feet. At twelve miles, she was still in the soup on instruments. Somewhere below was a blacked-out USS *Lincoln* Battle Group traveling in a war zone. Landing would require some damn good night instrument flying.

At ten miles the approach controller called, "One-Zero-One, dirty up."

She lowered the wheels and flaps, added throttle to hold altitude and airspeed and dropped the tail hook.

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The storm was gathering intensity and making ordinary operations increasingly more difficult. From the rain-swept control tower on the upper bridge, Greg Owen looked out into the eerie red battle lights that outlined the darkened four-and-a-half-acre deck of the aircraft carrier. He had flown in from Taiwan late that afternoon in the same wretched weather. It had been more than thirty years since he set foot on a carrier. This Nimitz-class ship was almost four times bigger than the Essex-class he'd flown off of during the Korean War, yet it held only eighty aircraft, compared to a hundred on the smaller straight-deck. The aircraft were now bigger, and a thousand times more lethal.

Along with his friend, the Air Boss, Greg watched uneasily as each Hornet broke through the low ceiling.

"Kelly Owen in One-Zero-One on final," boomed over the ship's sound system.

The Air Boss raised his bushy blond eyebrows and looked at Greg in amazement.

"That your granddaughter?"

Sharing his friend's surprise, Greg nodded.

"She was on a special project at Patuxant River. Wondered when she'd get here."

Patuxant River, or Pax, was the home of Naval Air testing. Greg had not seen Kelly in months, although they exchanged email frequently. He was anxious to see her.

As the Growler's landing gear locked in the down position, Kelly's landing lights came on. From Greg's location on the upper bridge, she was just a speck of light at three miles. He knew she would just be able to make out the "meatball".

In Greg's day, there was no automatic landing system and almost no night operations. Landing at night had been an extremely risky venture undertaken by a handful of highly experienced pilots with the landing light on the plane, a lighted deck and voice instructions from the Landing Signal Officer-LSO- advising position, line-up, wheels and tail hook down. On today's carriers, the LSO maintained verbal communication with the pilot, but the meatball, an amber light that provided a visual landing aid, guided the pilot in the final approach.

Landing a fixed wing 50,000-pound aircraft on a pitching, rolling, deck on the open sea was the most dangerous and precise task any pilot ever had to do - it was like flying in at a relative 100 knots and hitting a moving postage stamp. No matter how many times you got it right, the first failure would be your last. Greg watched Kelly's approach with every muscle in his body tensed.

She crossed the wake, lined up the canted deck, hit the tip-over point and started her descent.

“One-Zero-One,” the Air Controller called out over the sound system, “three-quarters mile. Go visual and fly the ball.”

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At this critical point in her approach, Kelly had to transition instantly from the instrument panel to visual flight. She looked up from the security of her cockpit instruments out into the murky blackness, hoping the red deck lights and amber meatball would be there where they were supposed to be. Rain pounded onto the canopy and made visibility difficult. The lights appeared. It took a second for her to adapt and check her plane’s attitude relative to the meatball and deck outline. She had eight seconds to make any corrections before she slammed into the deck at 155 mph in a controlled crash.

“Keep your power on. Don’t get slow on me,” came the reassuring voice of the Landing Signal Officer.

At the last second the deck rose rapidly to meet her. She rammed the throttles forward, cutting in the afterburners in case she missed the wire. The sound was deafening.

Two seconds and 340 feet later she jerked to a full stop and slumped forward in her shoulder harness. She breathed a sigh of relief. “*Thank God I made it,*” she said to herself. Kelly brought the throttles back and cut-off the afterburners. The noise subsided.

“Welcome home, Warrior Woman,” roared the Captain over the sound system.

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“Warrior Woman - is that Kelly’s call sign?” the Air Boss asked.

Greg’s stomach was contorted in knots, but he managed a smile. “She got it in flight training. A flight instructor knew Kelly was a Celtic name for warrior woman.”

Silhouetted against the red battle lights, Kelly climbed out of the cockpit onto the steel ladder the plane captain had rolled up to the aircraft. A tall, lithe blond with strikingly handsome features, she stepped carefully down to the deck and waited for her Weapon System Officer.

“That’s Curly Weaver,” the Air Boss said. “They work well together. Go down and meet them.”

Greg hurried from the bridge and from the Deck Handler’s hatch watched Kelly and Curly pick their way aft through the dark hammering rain, wafts of jet exhaust and noise. Eerie figures of plane handlers armed with lighted wands hustled around moving planes and weapons. When the pilots reached the island entrance, Kelly looked up, obviously surprised to see her grandfather standing in front of her.

“Hi, ‘Papa’! Take a wrong turn somewhere?” Kelly grinned at him.

“Came in this afternoon.” Greg could not resist giving his granddaughter a bear hug as she stepped in dripping out of the rain. He was proud to be able to rekindle the bond there was between them.

“Phew! Man, we’re bushed.” Kelly introduced Curly Weaver. “We flew in from Japan. Left the U.S. early yesterday.”

“Why didn’t you deploy with the air wing?” Greg asked.

“We took two planes to Pax to get new radars installed. Come on down to the

Ready Room and I'll explain. I need to let my skipper know we're back with both planes. He and CAG are probably sweating us out." She lowered her voice. "Papa, I went out on a limb to install two experimental radars. The stuff isn't even in production yet."

Greg struggled to grasp the situation. Huddling close as they made their way down the ladder to the catwalk and through the hatch into the passageway leading to the Ready Rooms, he listened intently as Kelly unfolded her story.

"The radars Pax installed are far more advanced than anything we have in our aircraft. They give us an advantage in any air or sea battle with the Chinese --"

"What's your problem?" Greg asked.

"I went over the heads of my CO and CAG. I called in my markers with Ben."

Vice Admiral Benjamin Smith was Kelly's former CO and a good friend of Greg's. Greg grimaced. Here was his own bloodline doing the same dumb-ass things that everybody accused him of doing; those bullheaded moves that had repeatedly gotten him into trouble with the Pentagon. Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!

"You know what happened to me?" he said.

"Sure, they fired you! How come you're back in harms way? Tired of golf and the good life?"

"You're still a smart ass," Greg said without cracking a smile.

Kelly turned and looked closely at her grandfather. "I like your cap. Where'd you get it?"

"Association of Naval Aviators."

"The long bill distinguishes you."

woman who was the light of his life.

"Don't butter me up," Greg said, frowning. But he smiled to himself at this young They approached the metal door to the Ready Room of "The Fighting Eagles", one of the eight squadrons aboard the ship.

"I'll probably catch hell in here," Kelly said. "Hope I don't embarrass you."

Curly opened the door for them. The three made their way through departing pilots who had just finished briefing. The monitor at the front of the room blinked PILOTS MAN YOUR PLANES.

A flight that had landed ahead of Kelly was being debriefed. The pilots were reporting their success in launching dozens of tiny satellites into orbit over southern China.

Greg's ears perked up. He strained to hear more. Getting the satellites into orbit was the first step in the successful operation of his missile shield, which was his reason for being here. The Super Hornets—aircraft commonly called Rhinos—had. launched the satellites from rocket pods mounted on the Rhino's wings. As they orbited over China, the satellites collected target data necessary to track and shoot down the hundreds of ballistic missiles China aimed at Taiwan.

Kelly's CO, Mike "Red" McManus, frowned when he saw the group come in and interrupted his conversation with the squadron duty officer. Tall, red-haired, freckled faced, and reportedly harsh as horseradish, Red McManus was Commanding Officer of The Fighting Eagles.

Kelly introduced Greg. Red exchanged the latest information on the status of Greg's satellites. Then he looked pointedly at Kelly. Greg went to the back of the room and sat down with a magazine.

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Kelly waited for Red to speak. He had been adamantly opposed to her proposal to install the advanced radars. It was too risky, he'd said, when they were preparing to deploy for a war with China. Despite Kelly's Top Gun reputation and being a protégé of Admiral Smith, Red McManus had turned her proposal down flat. She argued that it was critical to have the best technology the Navy could offer to defend against China's known air and sea threats. She wondered now if Red was aware that Vice Admiral Ben Smith had worked with Greg on the Navy's missile shield and was a family friend. If so Red and CAG must be envious - this would not help her situation.

The Flying Eagles flew the Rhinos, and Kelly flew the latest version, called the Growler, used to suppress enemy air and sea radars.

In July of 2006, things had heated up both between the U.S. and China and between Kelly and her superiors. It became clear: China was mobilizing to invade Taiwan. The Department of Defense deployed the USS *Lincoln* with Aegis ships carrying the missile shield.

Kelly had approached her CO and CAG about upgrading two of the Growler suppression aircraft with the new radars being flight tested at Pax. They refused to consider it.

Kelly had been perplexed. She concluded from flight tests that the more agile radar was essential to defend the Fleet against swarms of China's fast torpedo boats and modern Flanker fighters. That's when she'd called Ben. He was receptive to her proposal, but warned he'd have to go to Commander in Chief Pacific to get authorization to install experimental radars. It was an awkward situation. Kelly was certain it was the right thing to do, but it put her career on the line. She decided it was worth the risk.

When priority orders arrived to dispatch Kelly with two planes to Pax before deployment of the squadron, CAG was furious. After she left, Kelly had heard scuttlebutt that he had to be scraped off the overhead. Now with Red already chewing on her ass, she looked up to see CAG, Dutch Irish, in the back of the Ready Room.

Dutch was a big man with a square jaw and an ever-present cigar. He leapt to his feet. Kelly caught a glimpse of him bolting toward her just as the other flight leader, Mac McCarty, came up behind her. Dutch didn't look like he was here to praise her resourcefulness, but instead more likely to bury her. He shoved in next to Red, directly in front of Kelly.

"Well, Lt. Owen, I guess you won," Dutch said sarcastically.

Kelly chose her words slowly and carefully. "I don't see it as winning. I see it as ensuring our survival. What we brought back is the capability to track hundreds of air and sea targets."

"Prowlers do that!" Dutch retorted.

"Sorry, CAG, the Prowlers' old radars don't have the capability to track large swarms of targets. Did you get the test reports I sent?"

He plucked the cigar from his mouth. "I don't have time to read all of your Goddamned test reports--"

Red interrupted. "What about the maintenance and spares for these new radars? Who's going to maintain them?"

“Two Raytheon factory reps should have come in on the shuttle today,” Kelly replied. “With tool kits and parts. Pax also sent their top radar expert to look after us, an old Mustang who’s honchoed the project from the beginning. He asked to come.”

“You better be right. It’ll be your ass if we have experimental equipment we can’t support.”

“We didn’t have any trouble with the radar,” Mac interjected.

Inwardly, Kelly winced. *That’s not true! We had a whole series of electrical faults.* She struggled to maintain her outward composure.

“We flew tests against all kinds of air and sea targets,” Mac added, “trying to saturate the system. Created targets using Aegis ships, Hawkeyes, Shadows, and submarines. Couldn’t fool those radars.”

Kelly looked at Mac with a blank stare. Should she jump in and contradict him? No, she was in enough hot water!

“Did you test compatibility with the Seahawks?” Dutch asked.

The Seahawks were the strike helicopters on the carrier and the Aegis ships.

“Yes, Sir,” Mac answered. “We exercised the gear against every known threat. Loaded the database the Navy created, thanks to all the spy plane surveillance flights along China’s coastline.”

“You tested our jamming gear against that database?” Dutch asked, cigar shoved to one side of his mouth.

“Yes, Sir! The ships, planes and subs simulated all the Chinese tactical frequencies. We were able to jam ‘em all.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Red said, but the flush had faded from his freckled face and his tone had cooled. “Kelly, you and Mac are slated for the zero eight hundred launch tomorrow. Briefing is at zero seven hundred hours. You’ll be leading the strike. Get some sleep.”

Kelly finished the briefing and came over to Greg. She was sorry that her grandfather had to see her get chewed out.

“Papa, let’s go down to the flight crew’s mess and find something to eat.”

Greg set his tray of food down across from Kelly. “The skipper and CAG sounded angry that you went around them.”

“That’s unfortunate. Ben has major input on both the skipper’s and CAG’s fitness reports. They won’t win brownie points by chewing on me.” Kelly’s mentor, Admiral Smith, was CO of Naval Strike Air Warfare Center—NSAWC—and the Navy’s top air warrior. Ben’s “University of Air Warfare” was the training place for the fleets’ CAGs and their air wings. Along with other schools, it was where Top Guns were trained. Kelly had graduated from Top Gun earlier in her career. She had only been assigned to The Fighting Eagles for three months.

“They seemed glad to have you and Mac back with radar-operational planes and tactically checked out to use the jamming gear,” Greg said.

Kelly shook her head. “CAG only accepted the project after Ben convinced him it gave us air and sea superiority. I wasn’t thrilled to use Ben, but I still think I had to do it for the good of the wing.”

“You put Ben out on a limb,” Greg replied.

“The problem,” Kelly said, “is going operational with new avionics that haven’t

passed qualification tests.”

“The risk seems justified in this case. Imagine how I feel about a missile shield that’s never been used in battle.”

“How do you feel?”

“Scared as hell!” Greg put the Egg McMuffin he was eating down and took a drink of water, then cleared his throat. “Just thinking about it keeps me awake at night. Will it perform against an upgraded Chinese missile force? The Chinese have been relentless in their efforts to leapfrog our technology. You don’t remember, you’re too young, but in the Korean War, we grossly underestimated them. They’ve reorganized their military forces into a smaller, integrated professional force. Modern command and control structure with modern communications --”

“You’re worried about the outcome?” Kelly asked.

“Of course! The Pentagon ignored my warnings for ten years, underestimated the Chinese threat and overestimated the Russians.”

“Maybe you’ll be vindicated now, Papa.” Kelly had never seen her grandfather look so haggard. Suddenly she wondered about his health. Tough and tanned from his outdoor life, he usually looked twenty years younger than his seventy years. At his age, so much stress couldn’t be good. She knew that Greg retained a lot of resentment and bitterness towards the Pentagon. He was Director of the Navy’s Theatre Ballistic Missile Defense System, which was being deployed with this fleet for the first time. He had devoted his life to the Navy and to building a sea-based missile shield that he believed could create a new world order. As a Director, he had been sidelined because he wasn’t politically sensitive enough to the Pentagon brass’s inter-service rivalries that competed viciously for missile funds.

Greg raised his sandwich to take a bite, and put it abruptly down. “It took an act of God to get that Essex-class carrier converted to a missile ship. They kept telling themselves and Congress that we only had to defend against five or ten missiles.”

“Papa, they just underestimated the Chinese.”

“They were stunned to find it was six hundred missiles they had to defend against. Our Aegis ships can’t carry twelve hundred interceptors.”

“So that’s the purpose of the small deck Essex carrier? I thought it was for helicopters.”

Greg laughed and finished his sandwich. “It almost cost me my job getting funding for the missile ship and convincing the jug-heads that the satellites could be launched into orbit from a Rhino. When we arrived today I was like an expectant mother. First one off the plane. Raced to Combat to check the status—” Combat was shorthand for the Combat Direction Center (CDC).

“And—?”

“The two waves of satellites launched by the Rhinos are happily chirping to the Aegis ships. The third wave was deployed by the flight that came in front of you. Red McManus told me the flight was the first to have a rocket fail to deploy.”

“I’ve seen the rocket pods on our Rhinos that launch those satellites,” Kelly said. “I didn’t know what they were for—it’s such a hush project.”

“Each satellite is the size of a pack of cigarettes. They contain sensors that detect and image a ballistic missile in the boost phase. The microminiature detectors image all the way from infrared to ultraviolet.” As Greg related the details, he drew animated

pictures with his hands, demonstrating size and position. The worry lines vanished from his weathered face. “Three tiny satellites are tethered together on long cords. If one malfunctions, the others take over. Each satellite trajectory is downloaded from Combat into the rocket pod. Each pod deploys nine satellites.”

“Sounds like *Star Wars*,” Kelly said, happy to share her grandfather’s excitement. She loved this grizzled, former Navy fighter pilot.

“It is *Star Wars*.” He grinned like a little boy. “But getting continuous tracking coverage for the interceptors depends on getting the correct orbital coverage.”

“What’s the lifetime of the tiny satellite?”

“Battery life is ninety days.”

“And this is the first time they’ve been used?”

“NASA uses them on weather and navigation missions—”

“I’m exhausted, Papa,” Kelly pleaded. He could go on for hours, and she enjoyed listening, but not tonight. “I’m going to pack it in and get some sleep. We’ll get together tomorrow after my mission.” Kelly was afraid he would start to rehash all of his old bitterness. Tonight, she had her own problems to deal with.

“Okay, Warrior Woman. Good luck on your flight.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Tiger Stirs

Major General Wan Zhensheng's staff car slowed as it approached the gatehouse of Fujian Naval Base. The security guard—wearing a dark blue uniform, a spotless white helmet, belt, gloves and leggings—napped to attention and executed a smart salute. He motioned the staff car to proceed. The guard had been alerted to the imminent arrival of the Director of Chinese Intelligence—The General Staff's Second Department—for the People's Liberation Army.

As the car proceeded down the divided roadway, Major General Wan surveyed the freshly painted buildings, well-trimmed trees and green lawns. The car turned into a wide street lined with red brick buildings at the end of which was one statelier than the others—The Headquarters of Vice Admiral Yang Xuetong, Head of the East Sea Fleet.

The Chinese military was confident that they had the imperialist American Navy checkmated. The carrier USS *Lincoln* had returned from a tour of duty in the Middle East and entered the shipyard at Newport News for refitting. That meant all the U.S. carriers were either in refitting, work-up or deployed on operational missions involving terrorists.

The Americans also had nothing but trouble deploying their missile shield. If China was to unify Taiwan with the Mainland it must be done forcibly, and now was the time. Without an operational missile shield, the Americans not only couldn't defend Taiwan, they couldn't defend themselves. Time was running out. The war plan for China's invasion of Taiwan was executed—six hundred ballistic missiles pointed at Taiwan and the amphibious forces poised to attack.

Then, out of nowhere, an American Battle Group appeared. Beijing was in shock.

After heated consultations and before initiating the invasion of Taiwan, the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission (CMC) dispatched Major General Wan to meet with Vice Admiral Yang and instructed him to devise a suitable response to the American incursion into China's sovereign waters. The Party wanted answers and they wanted them fast. How could the Yankees afford to risk one of their Battle Groups in China's dangerous littoral waters without a workable missile shield?

Vice Admiral Yang kept Major General Wan waiting in his anteroom for twenty minutes. Wan paced the floor. "Hai, I hate dealing with this little bastard," he growled inwardly as his anger mounted.

Through the window panel pane Wan watched Yang approach his office door and bid a young officer goodbye. Wan rose as Yang walked over to him, stopped stiffly and bowed slightly in a superior manner. Yang was a handsome man of fifty-five and his immaculate uniform was perfectly tailored to his small frame. He scrutinized Wan through a pair of glinting, oval, rimless eyeglasses.

"Welcome Comrade Director. Come into my office." *Why does his ego always demand some show of power?* Wan wondered. *He just can't overcome his jealousy of my Party position.* "I will come straight to the point," Wan said forcefully upon entering Yang's office. "My CMC intelligence organization is being compelled by the Party to

explain how the Yankee fleet arrived without warning.”

“Comrade Director, I cannot help you. That is your department.”

Wan fumed. “We gave you the intelligence resources to track progress of the American missile shield. Why are they here? Do they or do they not have a missile shield?”

Four years earlier Yang had officially reported that the American Space-Based Infrared Satellite (SBIRS) program was delayed until 2010. The information had been published openly in American newspapers beginning in 2002, when they incurred technical difficulties with their satellites.

Yang cast a steely look at Wan. “How could they have a missile shield without satellites to provide tracking data for their interceptors? Isn’t it you who issued the flawed report about the status of their carriers?”

“Nothing was flawed about the disposition of their carriers. They secretly pulled the carrier out of rework and assembled the Battle Group without our knowledge.”

“Nothing I’m aware of has changed,” Yang said coolly.

At the raucous Party meeting Wan had just attended, the majority in the Party wanted to mount an immediate attack on the Americans. The rest suspected some sort of treachery.

“Could this be a deliberate deception by the Americans,” Wan suggested, “provoking us into war?”

Yang slowly pushed his glasses up on his nose, a habit signaling his level of irritation. “No! The satellite part of their missile defense is delayed because it ran into technical and political problems.”

Wan knew the program had been delayed because of negotiations with the Russians over the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. In 1992, funding was delayed. It was common knowledge that the U.S. early warning system, NORAD, had run into technical difficulties during the Gulf War. NORAD’s six satellites were severely stressed trying to detect Iraqi Scud missiles. Developed during the Cold War, NORAD was old and needed better sensors. SBIRS was the program designated to replace NORAD’s six satellites; and, in addition, it would add a constellation of twenty-four low earth-orbiting satellites to provide targeting data to the American interceptors.

“Those SBIRS-Low satellites are absolutely essential to track our missiles and launch their interceptors,” Yang said. “Besides their ships don’t have the capacity to carry enough interceptors to stop our ballistic missiles.”

Wan ignored the brash response. “Have you finished the battle plan for tomorrow and issued orders to the fleet?”

Yang’s finger rose to his eyeglasses, already high on the bridge of his nose. “Yes. I’ll give you a copy of the plan to take back.”

Wan left the office with the battle plan. As usual, Yang had reflected the attitude of a hard-line Party member who always saw the darkest intentions of Americans, regardless of circumstances. Where Americans were concerned, Wan found himself strangely at odds with Yang. Their distrust for each other had intensified in 2001 over the American spy plane incident. Yang refused to admit to his pilot’s aggressive behavior, ramming the plane in international waters and causing it to land on Hunan Island. Even when Wan presented the Vice Admiral with radar records that clearly showed the Chinese pilot’s aggressive behavior, Yang refused to accept responsibility.

Nevertheless, until a younger, more qualified leader came along, Wan would have to deal with Yang.

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Yang could hardly contain his resentment. No Naval officer held any positions in the four general departments - equivalent to the American Joint Chiefs of Staff - the CMC - equivalent to the national command authority, where key decisions were made. Hardliners like him had avoided being purged by the Communist Youth League during the chaotic Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s when radical Maoists took over schools and military academies and consigned the reformists to the hinterland. Yang was spared the purges and finished his military training but without the benefit of a military academy. Unlike Wan, he had not had the opportunity to attend the reformed military academies and the reformed Central Party School in Beijing, where modern theories of liberal democracy were taught alongside Marxist dogma. He had risen through the enlisted ranks.

It was only in the post-Mao era that the role of the Navy had changed from minor coastal defense to its strategy of “offshore defense”. Building a credible Navy from a second-rate coast guard took time and money.

Yang had been the logical candidate to lead the rapid build-up of the Navy. He was a loyal party member, and when the Party decided the long delayed unification of Taiwan with Mainland China could wait no longer, he was catapulted into prominence.

For an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, China had to control the sea. To accomplish that required air superiority and submarines to blockade the Straits. That would make it too risky for a Battle Group to operate in China’s littoral waters. The solution was: INFEST THE LITTORALS WITH CHEAP DIESEL SUBMARINES ARMED WITH WAKE- OR PATTERN-FOLLOWING TORPEDOES. Yang was determined to crush the Americans and felt confident the plan would succeed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Creating The Warrior

Kelly entered her stateroom, took off her flight suit and dropped it on the chair. She needed to unpack, but first she wanted to take a shower. The hot water relieved the tension in her tired body, but her mind was still racing. What a pleasant surprise to see her grandfather. Maybe he could help sort out her life. The conflict and effort over the last few weeks had taken a heavy toll.

Unpacking her cosmetics, Kelly glanced in the small mirror over the sink. She saw a gloomy young woman.

What's the matter with me? She reflected I'm twenty-nine years old—strike leader in an elite Navy fighting unit—unheard of for a woman a few years ago. Graduated near the top of my class at the Naval Academy. I sailed through flight training - selected for advanced training in jets—assigned to a Hornet Fleet Replenishment Squadron after winging—then a regular fleet squadron. Served a tour in Afghanistan—returned to the States—selected for Top Gun. Now I'm a flight leader in a new squadron and I really like being a fighter pilot.

Combat gave her a high. But she was in the promotion zone for Lieutenant Commander. If she made XO and CO, that meant managing people.

Kelly carefully placed her cosmetics in the medicine cabinet, then hung her uniform in the closet, along with a couple of civilian outfits. The rest of her things would have to be stowed in the drawers under her bunk.

Success had raised questions in Kelly's mind about her capabilities and limitations. Being a Top Gun and talented strike leader was not an automatic path to command. To be screened for command she had to qualify for leadership. The absolute essential was the ability to create cohesion—getting the group to stick together and depend on one another. That required loyalty from everyone up and down the chain of command. Kelly didn't know if she could achieve that.

Now her grandfather was here - and he knew the Navy. If she could discuss her concerns with him, maybe he could help with the answers.

But her career problems were not her only concerns. What Greg didn't know was that she was engaged to Jerry Ringer, Deputy Director of the National Security Agency-NSA. What would her Grandfather think of that?

Kelly gazed at Jerry's picture, and then held it close, trying to feel his presence. Maybe she should send him an email. Long periods of separation made their relationship difficult.

She was confident Jerry was in love with her, but she wished he didn't object to her career and lifestyle. At first his attitude hadn't seemed important—they were just friends. As they became more involved, his objections increased. When he visited her at Pax, while she was trying to install and test the radars, their relationship had reached a crisis point. She was too tired from seventeen-hour days and too focused on the round-the-clock effort to be good company. They'd had an argument, and Jerry abruptly left.

Now, anytime she wasn't focused on briefing, flying or debriefing, the burning issue that occupied Kelly's mind was the conflict between her love life and her career. Like tumbleweed, she drifted wherever the wind blew. When the chips were down, she

could make sound, quick decisions—like getting the radars installed, flying an advanced suppression aircraft, tracking bogies and firing missiles. However, like her grandfather, she wasn't investing enough time greasing the skids with her contemporaries. She ran roughshod over people sometimes to achieve her goals. She was fortunate to have mentors like her grandfather and Ben—but mentors weren't enough. And no matter how absorbing her career, it wasn't adequate. She needed to patch up her relationship with Jerry or write it off as too much trouble—and she wasn't ready to do that.

She sat down at her computer and whipped out a short email. After hitting “send,” Kelly felt better. Now exhaustion settled in hard. She had to get to bed—just as soon as she brushed her teeth.

“Okay, Warrior Woman,” she said to the mirror, “you busted your butt getting those radars installed. Everybody's pissed off at you, including your fiancée. Now prove it was worth the effort. *Hang tough!*”

The men at Top Gun hadn't thought she could compete with them, but she'd proved herself. There were always skeptics. She'd won Ben's confidence at NASWC. She could do it again.

Kelly pulled back the covers and crawled into her bunk. Bunks always seemed so hard and small at the beginning of a tour.

Despite her exhaustion, another problem gnawed at her. Mac had misled the CO and CAG when he told them everything had gone well in the flight tests. She should have stepped in and immediately corrected Mac's statement. They had experienced random power interrupts that shut the radars down. They were able to recycle the power to the radars, but circuit breakers still popped. When they landed, they couldn't reproduce the interrupts. Whatever caused the power surges only happened in the air. If it happened during combat, it could be fatal. The team had discussed the problem and decided to keep it quiet until they got it fixed.

Still, Kelly worried about those interrupts.

\* \* \*

Greg stepped onto the steel ladder on the way to his stateroom. As the ship rolled, he lost his balance and bumped against the bulkhead, barely catching the rail. The weather was still lousy, and he didn't have his sea legs.

Kelly's encounter with her CO and CAG also nagged at Greg. Using the same bullheaded tactics he had used to sack his own career, his granddaughter was leaving behind a trail of bruised egos and jeopardizing her chances for advancement.

Squeezing to the side, he let a sailor pass and wondered how he could help Kelly. She would have her work cut out for her with tomorrow's flight. He hoped she could handle it.

Everything had happened so fast. The U.S. had been drawing closer and closer to conflict with China over domination of the South China Sea and its ambitions to control major trade routes in Asia. However, the parade of yearly threats to invade Taiwan elicited little interest at the Pentagon, until satellite photos showed China massing forces on the coastline. Suddenly the brass had paid attention.

Two years earlier, the Department of Defense (DoD) had asked Greg to return to the Pentagon to manage a secret program to provide a short-term solution to satellites

used with the missile shield. Greg, a retired Naval Reserve Officer who had flown as a strike pilot in Korea and commanded a Reserve squadron before his reserve retirement, had followed dual career paths as a Naval Reserve Officer and a DoD civilian scientist. Now, a seventy-year old relic, he was in a war zone, hurriedly whisked aboard ship to provide his expertise and experience on the missile shield. When he took time to think about it, the situation left him scratching his head.

Instead of turning into the passageway leading to his stateroom, he continued up the ladder to Primary Flight the center of control operations—called Pri-Fly. This was the ship's control tower, housed in the topmost of three bridges of the carrier's Island, located on the starboard side of the *Lincoln's* flight deck. Pri-Fly controlled takeoffs, landings and aircraft within twenty-five miles of the ship and all movements of planes on the flight and hanger decks. When he reached Pri-Fly, Greg walked past the outward-sloping windows that provided a full view of the flight deck and surrounding ocean. He wondered if the Air Boss was still up. They had worked together in the Pentagon and become good friends. Maybe he could bring Greg up to speed on Kelly's performance since joining the air group.

Continuing on to the Air Boss's stateroom aft of Pri-Fly, Greg saw a faint light under the door and knocked.

Wearing a scowl, Jack Stewart, a tall stocky blonde with a distinctive jaw that gave him an air of Scottish authority, opened the door. The Air Boss's expression softened when he saw Greg. Born a Canadian, Jack was admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy after being sponsored by his uncle, a retired American WWII battleship commander.

"Grab a drink from the Pri-Fly frig," Jack said, "and come sit."

Entering Jack's carpeted room, Greg looked aft and saw a typical Navy steel wall unit housing a desk and two chests of drawers covered with family pictures. A computer and flat panel monitor sat on the desk. Across the room, attached to the starboard bulkhead, a shelf ran the length of the room and connected to the bunk. On the shelf was a TV and phone. A door led into a private head with sink, toilet, shower—and a phone. Timing was everything.

A squawk box was attached to the overhead, with the volume turned as low as possible. Announcements, like "sweepers, man your brooms" and "the smoking lamp is now lit," could be damned annoying when a sailor was on the cusp of sleep.

After they exchanged a few war stories, bringing each other up to date, Greg broached the topic of Kelly's performance. Jack's affable attitude changed abruptly.

"Kelly leading a strike tomorrow?" he asked.

Greg studied him. "Off at zero eight hundred."

"I don't like the idea of women flying combat missions."

The remark caught Greg off guard. "Come on, Jack, you should've gotten over the gender hang-up years ago."

"I know, but I don't believe in women flying strike missions."

*Surprising how many middle-aged males still felt that way.* He'd better accept women if he had any ambitions for Flag.

"The Soviets had three regiments of female fighter pilots in WWII," Greg remarked. "Some of their best pilots and most famous aces came out of those regiments—they punished the Germans big time."

“I know, but—”

“British and American women did some of the toughest flying, too.”

“They didn’t fly combat.”

“Only because we weren’t desperate enough.”

“In any case, Kelly sure takes the bull by the horns.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Pilots in her squadron, others on the ship.”

“She’s only been in the air group for three months.”

Jack stared at him for a moment, and then took a long swig from his glass.

Jack’s attitude about women pilots bothered Greg. Kelly seemed quite capable of causing enough problems for herself without the Air Boss having an antiquated notion of women’s abilities.

“Rubs some the wrong way,” Jack said finally. “That Owen stubbornness again.”

Greg shrugged. “She’s a minority - probably defending her turf. Kelly’s better trained and has more combat experience than either you or me.”

Jack nodded. “Great personality, quick wit, but to be leadership material she’ll have to become more of a facilitator.”

“You’re not biased are you, Jack?”

“Me? Does she want to make the Navy a career? No interest in raising a family?”

“I don’t know.” Greg did know that Kelly liked the constant challenge, adventure, close fraternity among the pilots and crew. It was a special feeling belonging to an elite group. And life never got dull.

“She’s a lot like you,” Jack said. “Competitive. Determined to prove herself.”

“Yeah. In a dogfight, second best doesn’t cut it. She may unwittingly trample on some toes.”

“Like getting Ben to run interference to get those experimental radars,” Jack said.

Greg frowned. *Word sure gets around.* That little maneuver had gotten her what she wanted, but it wouldn’t promote her career.

The men sat in silence.

“Did she always want to fly?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know. She never asked to fly with me.”

“You didn’t try to inspire her?”

“Didn’t need to. She was always adventurous.” Greg paused and scratched his head. “We skied hard together. I remember once, we were skiing in Utah. I accidentally took a wrong turn that led me onto the hardest mogul trail on the mountain, a double black diamond called ‘Tiger Tail’. Lots of limbs broken, and more than a few skiers never made it to the bottom. Somehow, I made it down through the icy moguls, but it was life threatening. I looked up for Kelly. She was always testing the maneuver envelope. Here she comes, fifteen years old, as cool as you please, hammering in and out of the ruts. The moguls were so deep she’d disappear then reappear checking her speed. Perfect edge control on a sixty-degree vertical.”

“Hot shot,” Jack said. “That sort of daredevil attitude in a pilot endangers more than her own life.”

Greg stared at him. *What the hell inspired that remark? He doesn’t like her.* “Did you know she bagged two Taliban headquarters and a SAM site? Ended up in Top Gun School at NSAWC?”

“That’s a burr in the saddle of some of the air group pilots who didn’t make it.”  
*And you obviously hold that against her*, Greg said to himself all the while trying to keep a steady face and struggling to remain pleasant.