

NEVADA DESERT, UNITED STATES

3-29 pm Local Time

December 24, 1983

The Rockwell YF-22 UltraSabre handled like a dream. At \$5,000,000,000 apiece, it ought to, Celeste Robinson mused. This was only her second test flight, but already she could tell the aircraft was a winner. Fly-by-wire control systems, Harbinson LDS (Look Down/Shoot Down) targetting radar, ducted gas-plasma afterburners, MicroMesh Stealth body coating and those unnerving forward-swept wings all combined to make a plane that not only looked different, but WAS different to anything else flying. If the Air Force brass had any sense in their heads, they'd buy as many as Rockwell could make, and screw the price tag.

Robinson gazed down at the desert unscrolling beneath her at Mach 2.5. What a dead place this was...dry, arid plains as far as the eye could see, and the '22's "eyes" could see well over the visible horizon. It was a place that seemed cut off from the rest of the world; a miniature lunar landscape hidden away inside the ol' US of A. But, unlike the Moon, life went on down there, she reminded herself. Life hardened to the unforgiving desert conditions, life that stubbornly thrived amidst the dust and the scrub. Robinson hoped that there were no examples of that life in the area immediately ahead of her, because she was about to blow great chunks out of it. It was time to see if the YF-22 did what it's manufacturers claimed it would. The woman filed her thoughts on life into her mind's storage cabinet and turned to matters of death.

"Groom Lake Control, this is Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two. Approaching test range at Y 2.5 and Angels 10 (Y stood for Yeager...Mach numbers were coded as Yeagers in honour of the supersonic pioneer and an Angel was 1,000 feet of altitude), requesting permission to begin attack run. Over."

Robinson's crisp request was answered almost immediately. "Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two, this is Groom Lake Control. You are authorised to commence run. Good hunting, Celeste. Over."

"Roger, Groom Lake. Weapons are up..." She touched a stud on the control panel, and then looked upwards towards the weapons icon on her helmet display. A laser beam inside the helmet monitored her eye movements and promptly converted the very meaningful glance into the arming signal for the YF-22's MRM-554 Skyfire missiles. She was rewarded by a red icon that flashed MISSILE ARM ON.

"...and hot. Preparing to begin run. Over and out." Robinson banked the plane hard, cutting her airspeed to Mach 0.8 and descending as she did. She felt the Gs tug at her as the UltraSabre plunged earthwards towards the rapidly approaching test range. Already the LDS radar was offering her targets, as if eager to blood itself. But the point of this initial weapon tests was to evaluate the plane's short-range attack capabilities. Stand-off attacks would come later.

And anyway, Robinson relished getting up close and personal with the thing she was going to take out. It had been the same last year, when she'd flown 150-odd sorties over the Falkland Islands in a Royal Navy Harrier. If you were going to kill people, the least you could do was be visible to them as you did it, rather than cower two hundred miles away in a bunker with your finger on a button. God, was it really only eight months since she'd left Britain to join the USAF's Test Pilot Corps? No; it was nearer nine now.

Shut up, Celeste, she told herself. Remember? Five-billion-dollar plane? Ass on line if

this goes tits-up? Focus, girl, focus.

And then the first of her main targets came up on the LDS. Robinson flicked up the guard protecting the firing stud on the plane's joystick and stared hard at the target icon on her display. The time remaining to launch was vanishing fast on a green countdown timer before her eyes. Ten seconds...five...two...

IMPACT PROXIMITY ALARM suddenly blared in her helmet screen in violent red letters, accompanied by a truly irritating klaxon. The LDS's radar automatically switched to object-avoidance mode, presenting her with the radar blip of the incoming target. **Who the hell is flying around up here, now of all damn times?* she asked herself hotly. *There'll be hell to pay for this. If you prang my plane, you bastard...**

Her anger faded when she saw that the object wasn't your average common-or-garden accidental airspace intruder. It was too high and FAR too fast for that. She stared at the radar scope with wide eyes...the bogey was coming straight at her from the north and from above (84,000 feet!) at Yeager 7.

Yeager 7?!

"Groom Lake Control," she said, trying not to panic, "I have a confirmed unauthorised high-speed bogey, bearing 247 mark 6, at Angels 8-4, coming in at Y 7. Taking evasive action. Out!"

Robinson pulled the YF-22 into a steep dive as the object screamed past her. It was going so fast that only a silver blur could be made out in the split-second it was in her line of sight. It was levelling out and heading off towards the southwest, in the direction of Groom Lake. No-one was allowed over that area; for God's sake, the Air Force didn't even admit the base existed.

Any aerial intruders attempting an incursion of Groom Lake airspace were to be warned once and then shot down...and the UltraSabre was the only plane in the region right now, it was up to her. Robinson pulled her billion-dollar steed into another steep bank and looped back onto a pursuit course. As if by automatic, her thumb toggled the weapon selector, reassigning the SkyFire missiles to air-to-air.

The bogey was almost out of radar range by the time she got on a level vector with it, so she hit the reheat and pushed the plane up past Mach 2. The distance between pursued and pursuer dwindled swiftly; the target had slowed down to Yeager 4 and was decelerating swiftly. Robinson asked her flight computer to estimate the object's course. The answer came back in a second; it was headed straight for Area 51. *Godammit* she hissed to herself. *Don't make me kill you...*

The object's speed was currently Yeager 3; the YF-22 could make that for short-dash hops, but not long enough to catch up. So, the only thing to do was overrun the engines and go for a quick kill. Just as she hit the afterburners and launched forward at thrice the speed of sound, all the systems on her plane went dead.

The sudden darkness of the cockpit was the first flash of terror; then, the airless vacuum of G force pulled at Robinson as the UltraSabre fell out of control at supersonic speed. The cockpit whirled in 360 degrees, before the plane flipped on its back and began a full-scale deathplunge.

Robinson was crapping herself, to put it mildly, but she was damned if she was going to die. She'd heard of pilots who'd tried to shoot down flying saucers; some kind of EMP effect the UFOs put out killed weapons- lock devices and even engines of interceptor planes. It was to prevent the YF-22 from losing control after close nuclear airbursts, not from UFO attacks,

that the UltraSabre had been fitted with EMP-hardened failsafes. These circuitbreakers would trip whenever a computer-threatening electromagnetic pulse happened. All Robinson needed to do was flick the Reset button, and she'd be back in action. But a G-force of nearly 7 gravities made stretching forward to even *touch* the damn switch almost impossible. Fighting red tunnel vision and her own mounting panic, Robinson finally dragged her leaden body upright and hit the switch.

Suddenly, the YF-22 came out of its paralysis and levelled out. Automatic systems in the plane's flight computers made sure the very expensive aircraft could survive even the worst death-dive. The chance of the pilot surviving such a manoeuvre was slightly lower, however, and the UltraSabre now had a very nauseous and headache-y mistress.

Robinson fought down the illness and reacquired the UFO. She could hardly believe it; it was a **flying saucer**. A rounded, spinning pyramid with teardrop-shaped vanes projecting in a ring around its base. There was some kind of translucent plastic shield over the domed top, and the whole thing was made of...well, it looked like metallic pearl. She felt as if she could reach out into the gun camera screen and crush it like a fragile shell.

Where had it come from? What did its crew look like? And was it really trying to take out Groom Lake? It certainly looked that way. Robinson steeled herself for the deed.

"Groom Lake Control, this is Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two. I am reporting a UFO. Object is on course for your position, intentions unknown. Object is metallic flying disc, under intelligent control. It has attempted to neutralise this aircraft, and I am now in pursuit. Estimated time to firing range: 110 seconds." There was no response; the UFO was probably jamming her radio.

Seconds ticked by and the UFO crept closer in her gunsights. The residual adrenaline rush from before had made her jumpy and not a little pissed off. Wonder at what the thing represented had given way to cold anger. *Try to kill me, huh, ET?* she snarled at the spinning silver object. *Well, I'm not dead yet.*

One last burst of the afterburners finally brought the UFO within missile range. With weapons-lock screaming in her ear, and red target reticules burning in her bloodshot eyes, she let out a small gasp of emotion as she mashed the firing button down.

A SkyFire missile detached from the plane's wing, dropped in freefall for a moment, then surged forwards as the rocket motor fired up. Robinson watched the missile (also hardened against EMP) draw a trail of white smoke through the air, until the fiery point at its head touched the flying saucer. There was a brief white flash, then a boiling red cloud of gas and debris bloomed in the sky ahead of her. The UFO was literally dashed to pieces, and fell in several ragged chunks towards the desert floor.

Robinson looked on as the UltraSabre shot through the fading fireball and headed on towards Groom Lake. The saucer had almost made it; she'd be over the airfield in three minutes. Dropping out of supersonic, she called up Control. She was trembling with giddy excitement.

"Ahhh, Groom Lake Control, this is Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two. I have a Fallen Angel. Repeat, I confirm a Fallen Angel. Co-ordinates to follow."

There was a pause on the line, a heartbeat of dead air, before: "Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two, this is Groom Lake Control. You are cleared to land at Runway 3. You are hereby ordered not to disclose what you have just witnessed under any circumstances, until you can be officially debriefed. Do you understand, Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two?"

Robinson lowered the UltraSabre's undercarriage and lined herself up for the approach to the runway. "Groom Lake, I just saw a fucking flying saucer. I shot it down. Does that not

excite you even slightly?"

"We understand the gravity of the situation, Yankee Foxtrot Two-Two. Do *you* understand what you have just been told?"

"Yes," she spat. "I understand."

AREA 51 S-4 SPECIAL STUDIES COMPLEX GROOM DRY LAKE BED, NEVADA TWO HOURS LATER

Robinson had never been to S-4; the YF-22 trials were being handled at the Experimental Aircraft Unit Complex in the less secure Red Sector of the base. S-4 and a few other project units were housed in Purple Sector, a series of artificially hollowed-out caverns in Groom Lake's canyon walls. Purple and Red Sector personnel never mixed; the Purple people came in on their own private 737 at Las Vegas's McCarran Airport, got to the base in their own transport, left and went home in precisely the same way. There were rumours that the Purple study teams were doing crazy things in these caverns; tinkering with alien technology, resurrecting the dead, or conducting hideous genetic experiments on human guinea pigs. No-one in Red Sector was told much, other than that the Purple projects were of the highest security classification. That was, apparently, enough of an explanation for such immense secrecy among an already secret group.

And now Robinson was going to find out just what DID go on in Purple Sector. She'd been driven in a cliché'd black sedan up to the canyon walls, then a car-sized door had opened in it. The sedan had trundled through the hole in the amazing camouflage, and Robinson had found herself at the extreme end of a huge hangar. Stealth planes and much weirder-looking aircraft were arranged in serried ranks along the cavern floor, and her car was driving up the wide 'lane' between the machines. She'd seen technicians swarming all over them; some welding components, other supervising the fitting of engines and avionics. There were some weird-ass planes in here, but nothing Robinson hadn't recognised as human in origin. She had bent forward to talk to the driver.

"THIS is the big secret? You're just doing slightly more far-out aircraft research in here? I was expecting to see at least ONE flying saucer. You know, like the one I shot down this afternoon." The last sentence was said in a very pointed way; she wanted to know why no-one would comment on this unbelievable fact. The driver hadn't reacted, but the shaven ape in the passenger seat had. He'd turned round and gazed balefully at her.

"Captain Robinson, all your questions will be answered soon. Please try not to get agitated. You're in no trouble, I assure you."

"Then why all this..." but he'd turned looking at the damn windscreen. Robinson had sighed and sunk back into her seat. She had felt somewhat claustrophobic, imprisoned in this upholstered shell going to face God knew what.

She had looked out the window again; more planes, more people. It had all been very strange, in an anticlimactic way. Then, at last, they'd reached the end of the hangar and stopped before an office complex built into the wall. From there she'd been politely frogmarched into a dark and totally featureless briefing room, given some awful coffee and told to wait. And here she was.

She sat down in the only chair, looked at the bare Formica desk in front of her and waited for the Gestapo to arrive. They did, after two minutes, in the form of three more nicely-suited WASP males. She wondered if S-4 cloned them; an unstoppable race of polite, clean-shaven Wall Street yuppies, bent on the bureaucratic control of the world. The middle suit started talking and Robinson broke out of her sci-fi film daydreams.

"Captain Robinson," he said in a pleasant Ivy League tone. "I'm Special Agent Hendrick

of the DIA. This is Agent Kowalski." He indicated the rather heavy-set man beside him, who nodded slightly. They then both showed her fancy credentials and sat on seats they had brought in with them. "Firstly, Captain, I'd just like to thank you for your patience in this matter. I'm sure you realise the import of what has happened today."

"Yes. Are UFOs real or not? Are they from outer space...or not?!" she shot back. The man's face crumpled, giving it's rather unremarkably handsome features a modicum of distinctiveness.

"If you prefer it that way, Captain...yes. Yes, UFOs are real. And they *are* from outer space. At least, the one you shot down was. You knew that before now; most pilots do. But you'd never had it confirmed. Well, I am authorised to do so now." With this, Hendrick fell silent, blinking slowly like he was just learning how. Agent Kowalski shifted in his seat and coughed slightly.

Robinson sat and took things in for a moment, then leaned forward. "Am I going to die in some accident now? Or commit suicide by shooting myself in the back of the head with a shotgun?"

Hendrick smirked in weary resignation. "You have been watching too many paranoid movies. You are in no danger, Captain, please believe me. But," and here he became very steely and flat-toned, impressing the words on her like a sentence from God, "we who know the truth have an obligation to keep what we have learned secret. Do you know what would happen if we-"

"Admitted flying saucers are real?" she finished for him. "I'll tell you what would happen. Not a lot. People would be shocked, but not for long, and hardly anyone doesn't believe that aliens COULD exist. There won't be mass panic; it might even be GOOD for the world to know this. Have you ever considered that? Just admit it and...and stop all this bullshit?"

"If the situation was different, Captain, your high-sounding ideal would have some meaning," Agent Hendrick said angrily. He laced his bony fingers together and glared at her with pale blue eyes. "Sadly, the truth isn't Close Encounters Of The Third Kind, it's not cuddly space brothers coming to save Humanity. Listen to me, Captain, and then I think you'll begin to understand."

CELESTE ROBINSON'S APARTMENT LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

12-01 am Local Time

December 25, 1983

It was Christmas Day, and Robinson lay on her bed unable to sleep. It was not like when she'd been a child, fighting to stave off slumber in order to catch Santa Claus putting presents at the foot of her bed; no, this was insomnia of the worst kind. The insomnia of a woman with the world on her shoulders.

She got up and wandered to her bedroom window. Outside, everything was normal for the time of night; cars rumbled past, neon signs shouted their colourful messages, people wandered the streets in search of the next Vegas thrill.

None of them knew. None of them even suspected what was going on. Ignorance was bliss, alright. Until today, everything had seemed so simple, so clear-cut. Turn up at the base, test the YF-22 Monday to Friday, spend Friday night getting drunk at the base bar, fending off the moronic come-ons of her drunk male cohorts, shoot some pool, then bum a lift home. None of that seemed worth it now; it was all a hollow pretence. And yesterday she'd not have given it up for the world. For the *world*, dammit.

She'd taken an oath when she'd joined the RAF to keep secrets, but how could she keep what she now knew concealed? Where did you draw the line between protecting those you loved and allowing them to die through a need to prevent *others* from dying? She felt ill.

Stumbling in the half-dark of the bedroom, Robinson was halfway to the kitchen when the phone rang. She jumped and stared at the jangling instrument for a moment. If she picked that phone up, her life would never be the same again. *Let it ring, gosleep. This isn't your fight*, she told herself. *You were given a choice.*

But there was no choice. She kept seeing the films Hendrick had shown her at S-4 yesterday; blurry gun camera footage of UFOs pursuing airliners and shooting them down, stills of horrifically mutilated human bodies that had been found at saucer landing sites. Craters where hospitals and factories had once been. Human lives ripped apart by an enemy from another planet.

The phone kept ringing.

Robinson gritted her teeth, picked up the phone and left the reality she'd known for all her adult life behind. "Robinson."

"Captain," Hendrick's voice replied. "Your answer?"

"Yes."

"Very well." There was a short pause. "A car will be along in the morning to pick you up. I do hope you haven't got any social events scheduled for today?"

"Well, actually, I do-"

"Cancel them. The car will be outside your apartment at 8am sharp." There was a dead click, and Hendrick was gone. She replaced the receiver and sat down on the bed. That was that. She'd crossed the Rubicon, as her Dad might've said. She was now a soldier in the most secret war in human history.

The wall clock ticked away the seconds to 8am, and Celeste Robinson was awake to hear every one of them. When the dawn broke, she went for a stroll around her neighbourhood. The few people up and about were all rushing to their destinations, but one or two stopped briefly

to wish her a Merry Christmas. She just walked on, wondering if there'd *be* another Christmas come 1984. She finally returned to her apartment just before 8, and waited on her doorstep for the car. It arrived at exactly the correct time, and Hendrick stepped out. He looked annoyingly fresh and dapper, and Robinson decided to start disliking him as soon as she possibly could. Right now, she was too tired.

"Good morning, Captain."

"My name is Celeste," she muttered with weary anger.

"As you like. Let's go."

She walked to the vehicle and peered inside. Kowalski was at the wheel, and another man was sitting in the left rear seat. The newcomer had blonde hair and was about 40 years old; Robinson could've sworn he'd seen him before somewhere. Shaking the feeling off, she got in and sat down, and they were off a few seconds later.

"Where are we going? S-4 again?" she asked. The blonde man looked at her.

"No, Ms Robinson. We're going somewhere quite different. We're going to Dreamland." He sounded Canadian; where HAD she seen him before? Oh no, it couldn't be. That'd be too freaky for words. But it bloody *was*.

"Colonel Straker?" He whirled to face her at the name.

"It's Commander now, actually." Straker's blue eyes narrowed imperceptibly, and she felt his gaze scanning her like the YF-22's radar. "Have we met?"

"Yes..." Robinson dug in her memory. "At an Air Force seminar last year. You gave a talk on how your film studio was helping to publicise the USAF and Navy Air Force with that Top Gun movie. You retired in the 70s, Commander. What are you doing back?"

Straker smiled sadly. "I never left, Captain."

The car drove on into the uncertain future.

Back to