

June Scobee Rodgers Presents:

STAR CHALLENGERS #2

# Space Station Crisis

Rebecca Moesta & Kevin J. Anderson



**STAR**  
**CHALLENGERS**

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### **STAR CHALLENGERS: SPACE STATION CRISIS**

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## **DEDICATION**

To the Challenger Center flight directors, teachers,  
and astronauts everywhere who help launch young people  
toward discovery and achievement.

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## SPACE STATION CRISIS

# ONE

The sky was calling JJ.

She needed to get her feet off the ground and be surrounded by nothing but air—while going very, very fast. With razor focus, she worked her way through the preflight checklist while standing next to the compact Piper Arrow. All the while, her uncle Buzz watched her like a hawk.

“Take your time,” he cautioned. “The sky’s not going anywhere.” He’d been her flight instructor long enough that JJ knew if she didn’t do a good job following the checklist, she wouldn’t be going anywhere either.

When she finished the checklist, forcing herself to pay attention to every detail, he smiled and said, “Good job, flygirl. Got your pubs bag?” She nodded and held up the small heavy bag that held her approach plates, charts, and logbook. “Then let’s see how you do getting this baby off the ground.”

JJ—short for “Jenny June”—Wren climbed into the Arrow’s cockpit, feeling a little bit nervous and a whole lot excited. Today would be her first time piloting a plane in weather under IFR—instrument flight rules. She’d have to trust her instruments when she couldn’t see where she was flying. Uncle Buzz had chosen an overcast day specifically so that she could practice using her instruments. It was an entirely different experience.

Up until now, she had been learning on her uncle’s crop duster, which had an open cockpit. But she could

only fly the crop duster under visual flight rules, keeping her eyes open and watching where she was going. This would be a big step for her. Though she had flown in the single-engine Piper a few times, this was her first time as the actual pilot. The responsibility and the freedom were thrilling.

Uncle Buzz folded his tall frame into the copilot's seat to her right. JJ casually tossed the pubs bag onto the back seat, buckled herself in, and put on her headset. When Uncle Buzz gave her the thumbs-up sign, she signaled the tower. "Tower, this is Arrow November nine zero five zero kilo, ready for takeoff, runway one-seven right, IFR round-robin." She tried to sound serious, professional, and older than her actual fourteen years. Uncle Buzz had taught her the code, how to talk like a real pilot.

Air Traffic Control, or ATC, responded, "Arrow November nine zero five zero kilo, you are cleared for take-off. Fly heading one-eight-zero, climb to twenty-five hundred, and contact departure." That vector would take them around the approaching storm. JJ wasn't worried (if anything, Uncle Buzz thought she didn't worry enough). Biting her lower lip in concentration, she lined up the small plane on the runway, confirming with the compass that it matched the runway heading, then gradually pushed up the throttle.

"Okay, now that we're moving," her uncle said, "how's your engine?"

JJ checked the gauges. "Pressure green, temperature green." She loved feeling the thrum of the plane as she accelerated down the runway. "Airspeed alive," she said when the indicator started showing her speed.

Uncle Buzz gave her another thumbs-up. When they were going fast enough, JJ slowly pulled back on the yoke—the control that looked a little like a steering wheel. With just a slight wobble, the Arrow’s wheels lifted off the ground. JJ’s heart seemed to lift off at the same time as the lightweight plane. As the little craft climbed toward the clouds on the heading that ATC had given her, JJ reminded herself of all of the times she had practiced this in a simulator.

Now it was real.

“Bring your nose down just a little, for your best angle of climb,” Uncle Buzz said.

JJ did, and she had just started feeling relaxed—even giddy—when a gust hit the plane, but she adjusted easily and flew through the mild turbulence. She could handle this. The Arrow hit more rough air when they reached the clouds, but again JJ held the aircraft steady on its heading. She liked this! JJ imagined she was having a little competition with the weather, and she was determined to win.

Piloting this plane reminded her of the Challenger Center simulations—which had turned out to be quite real. She couldn’t just learn things halfway. She *was* going to be a pilot, and a good one. The mysterious Commander Zota had convinced JJ and her friends that lives would depend on them in the future.

She was reveling in the flight when a downdraft slammed them like a giant invisible flyswatter. For a few seconds, it felt as if the plane dropped out from beneath her like one of those long-plunge freefall rides at an amusement park, and her stomach tried to float

up into her throat. But she didn't panic; she knew what to do. JJ sucked in a deep breath to steady herself and concentrated on flying even as turbulence shook the aircraft.

Another strong gust smacked them, then—*wham!*—something hard struck JJ on the back of the head, and everything went gray and fuzzy...

The next thing she knew, an acrid chemical smell was filling her nostrils, and everything came into clear focus with a jolt. From the copilot's seat, Uncle Buzz waved something that looked like a roll of gauze under her nose—the source of the horrible smell. Her eyes and nose stung, but she was fully awake.

"What...?" JJ began.

"Good, that snapped you out of it. Took me a couple minutes to get us into clear airspace, but we're fine now." Uncle Buzz threw the small tube of gauze into the back seat. "Smelling salts—very useful in an emergency like that. Most pilots don't carry them, but I'm old fashioned about my first aid kit. You were looking a bit woozy there. It tends to happen when you get banged on the head."

JJ put a hand to the back of her skull, which was throbbing. "Wha—how?" she asked, then remembered to put both hands back on the yoke. She tightened her grip. "Who hit me?"

"There was an embedded thunderstorm in the clouds. After ATC gave us our heading, the storm must've moved faster than expected. We caught the edge of it, and the winds knocked us around a bit. And when we hit that downdraft, the pubs bag came up out of the back seat

and whacked you on the noggin. Next time, remember to stow it and strap it down.”

JJ felt herself flush with embarrassment at the stupid mistake. “Sorry, I won’t forget next time, and I certainly won’t forget that smell!” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “It sure cleared my head fast.”

“Ammonia salts,” Uncle Buzz explained. “You weren’t unconscious, but it wouldn’t hurt to let a doctor look at that head once we land. How are you doing?”

“Other than feeling like an idiot, you mean? Fine.” JJ was determined to get things right, and she would not make that particular mistake again. “I’d like to do the landing, if that’s all right,” she said. “Someone has to take us back down—and it might as well be me.”

Uncle Buzz gave her a thumbs-up again. “But you let me know if you feel dizzy.”

Clouds and the speckles of mist on the cockpit windshield made it impossible to see, but she followed her instruments. IFR. *That* was her challenge for today. She contacted the tower again, and Air Traffic Control provided a return heading. Using the numbers and the compass, she turned the plane back toward the small runway.

She watched the altimeter as she descended, pretending not to notice that Uncle Buzz kept a sharp eye on the instruments as well. Fortunately, he didn’t need to correct her. Though her head still throbbed, JJ knew she was following procedures to the letter. The instruments told her she was on the correct flight path.

Suddenly, like a curtain being yanked away from a window, the haze of moisture disappeared as the Pip-

er Arrow dropped below the gray clouds. The rolling landscape spread out before her, and in the distance she saw the airport with its small control tower. Far to her left, she spotted another small plane just climbing to the clouds. Otherwise the sky was empty. What a relief to see where she was going again!

Over the radio she heard, “Arrow November nine zero five zero kilo, report runway in sight.”

“Arrow November nine zero five zero kilo—runway in sight,” she said.

“Arrow November nine zero five zero kilo, cleared to land, runway one-seven right.”

She tensed briefly, forced herself to relax, then glanced at the instruments. She could tell Uncle Buzz was proud of her. Her father, a firefighter killed in the line of duty two years ago, would have been proud, too. The runway drew her toward it like a magnet, and she aligned the Arrow perfectly.

The plane felt natural gliding down toward the pavement. The wheels touched down with just a bump, and then they were roaring along the ground, decelerating like a drag racer. She felt an adrenaline rush as she slowed the Piper to a safe ground speed and brought them to their designated spot.

Laughing, Uncle Buzz gave her a one-man round of applause.

JJ couldn’t have been more pleased. “I need this practice if I’m going to be a pilot someday,” she said. In her mind, however, she was thinking, *a spaceship pilot*.

These lessons were a thrill, but they had a serious purpose. Thanks to their recent Challenger Center ad-

venture, JJ and her friends knew something that Uncle Buzz did not: An alien invasion was coming in the not-too-distant future, and Earth had only a generation to prepare for it. The skills they learned now might someday mean the difference between life and death for the human race.