

OUT  
*of the*  
BLUE

S. L. ROTTMAN



Published by  
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS  
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue  
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

[www.peachtree-online.com](http://www.peachtree-online.com)

Text © 2009 by S. L. Rottman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Maureen Withee  
Book design by Melanie McMahon Ives

Printed in the United States of America  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rottman, S. L.  
Out of the blue / written by S.L. Rottman.  
p. cm.

Summary: After moving to Minot, North Dakota, with his mother, the new female base commander, Air Force dependent Stu Ballentyne gradually becomes aware that something terrible is going on in his neighbor's house.

ISBN 978-1-56145-499-0 / 1-56145-499-0

[1. Children of military personnel--Fiction. 2. Military bases--Fiction. 3. Moving, Household--Fiction. 4. Child abuse--Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.R7534Ou 2009

[Fic]--dc22

2008052839

## **COMMON MILITARY ACRONYMS AND TERMS**

AFB—Air Force Base

ALS—Airman Leadership School

Base Regs—Base Regulations: rules/laws on base

BX—Base Exchange: department store

Class Six—liquor store

Commissary—grocery store

DV—Distinguished Visitor

LOR—Letter of Reprimand: report of misconduct that is placed in your file

OPR—Officer Performance Report: annual evaluation

PCS—Permanent Change of Station: a move to a new location

PT—Physical Training: mandatory exercise

SF—Security Forces: base police

Shoppette—convenience store

SOP—Standard Operating Procedure: the way things are always done

TDY—Temporary Duty: business trip

TLF—Temporary Lodging Facility: hotel

USAFA—United States Air Force Academy

VOQ—Visiting Officers' Quarters: hotel

XO—Executive Officer: assistant

### **Enlisted Ranks and Insignia**

Airman Basic—no insignia

Airman—one stripe

Airman First Class—two stripes

Senior Airman—three stripes

### **Noncommissioned Officer Ranks and Insignia**

Staff Sergeant—four stripes

Tech Sergeant—five stripes

Master Sergeant—five stripes down and one on top

Senior Master Sergeant—five stripes down and two  
on top

Chief Master Sergeant—five stripes down and three  
on top

### **Commissioned Ranks and Insignia**

Second Lieutenant—gold (“butter”) bar

First Lieutenant—silver bar

Captain—two silver bars

Major—gold oak leaf

Lieutenant Colonel—silver oak leaf

Colonel—silver eagle

Brigadier General—one star

Major General—two stars

Lieutenant General—three stars

General—four stars

### **Author’s Note**

Some liberties have been taken with the physical layout of both Minot Air Force Base and Minot, North Dakota. Air Force bases have the amazing capacity to change a lot in a short amount of time—and yet stay the same for decades.

Through the years, the Air Force, along with the other branches of military services, has had several recruiting slogans, including “Above All,” “Aim High,” and “Cross into the Blue.”

*1 August  
Minot, North Dakota*

**U**h-oh. Looks like they made a mistake.”

Mom glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. “What do you mean?” she asked.

I pointed to the sign above the gate. ““Only the Best Come North,”” I read aloud. “But for some reason, they invited you.”

“Ha ha, Stuart. Very funny,” she said as she got her ID out for the gate guard. “Do you have yours ready?”

I handed her my ID. The guard gave a rather sloppy salute to the driver in front of us and turned to say something to his buddy in the guard shack. I hoped for his sake that he’d shape up when it was our turn. In an effort to distract Mom, I asked, “Do they always do one hundred percent ID checks here?”

“There’s an exercise going on. I saw a sign a few yards back.” She pulled up next to the guard. “Good afternoon,” she said to him, handing over the IDs.

“Good afternoon,” he repeated in an offhand tone as he scanned her ID. I could tell when he reached her rank, because he suddenly stood a little straighter.

“Welcome to Minot, ma’am!” He handed back our ID cards without looking at mine and snapped a sharp salute. “Lodging is located on the right at the first spotlight. I’m sure they’re expecting you.”

“Airman Weekes,” Mom read his tag in a very cordial tone. “According to the sign we just passed, there’s currently a one hundred percent ID check in progress for all personnel. Is the sign wrong, or are you merely too busy to check all IDs for this vehicle?”

“N-n-o, ma’am,” Airman Weekes stuttered.

“No to which question?” Mom’s tone was still friendly.

“Both, ma’am. We’re doing hundred percent checks, and I saw both IDs.”

“You saw my daughter’s ID?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I groaned and leaned my head back against the headrest. This poor airman was digging his own grave with a power shovel and he didn’t know it. He was too flustered to lean down and look into the car to see that I wasn’t her daughter.

“Airman Weekes, who is your supervisor?”

I handed Mom her notepad and a pen. She was always taking notes and had notepads everywhere.

Airman Weekes recited his supervisor’s name and then said, “I hope you ladies have a good day.” He finally bent down far enough to see into my side of the car.

I gave him a big grin and batted my eyes.

The look of shock that crossed his face was almost worth the last long two hours of our trip.

I knew better than to say anything to Mom as we

made the short drive to lodging. Not only was she considering Airman Weekes's poor performance, she was also inspecting her new base.

Mom was assuming command of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing. Minot was one of the few bases in the Air Force that housed two wings, the 5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing and the 91<sup>st</sup> Space Wing. The Bomb Wing was essentially the B-52s and support groups. The Space Wing was the Minuteman Missiles and their support. But the Bomb Wing owned the base, and as commander of the Bomb Wing, Mom was now commander of the whole base.

Leaving the gate, we drove toward a few office buildings. When we turned at the light I could see rows of houses—new ones. I had spent most of my life moving in and out of old homes, but here they were renovating base housing. I wondered if our house would be new or if we'd be in an old one again.

As Mom turned into the hotel parking lot, I tried to read the sign.

“Sac...Sack-a...”

“Sa-ka-ka-we-a,” Mom pronounced the word for me, turning into the parking lot.

“Sakakawea Inn,” I tried again, looking at the image of the Native American woman on the sign. “She looks a lot like Sacagawea to me.”

Mom laughed. “One and the same. There's a difference of opinion about her name. Up here, the favored pronunciation is Sakakawea.”

“Okay.” I rolled the name around in my mouth a few more times, trying to get it right. After living so many places, I've found that it's easier to fit in if you

can at least pronounce local names the same way the residents do.

Fortunately, check-in at Sakakawea Inn went smoothly. The moment Mom gave her name and rank—Colonel Tina Ballentyne—everyone was eager to help. I’m used to seeing Air Force personnel, from one-stripe airmen to lieutenant colonels, immediately show deference to her. By the time I was old enough to realize that people treated her differently, she was already a lieutenant colonel. Captains and majors jumped whenever she snapped her fingers.

“If you’ll wait just a moment, ma’am, we’ll escort you to the VOQ.”

“That’s okay,” Mom said. “I’m sure we can find it if you tell us how to get there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The sergeant pulled out a map and gave Mom the directions to the building where the Visiting Officers’ Quarters were located. Our household goods were scheduled to arrive the day after tomorrow, so I’d have one day to look around before settling into the new house.

Most U.S. Air Force bases are laid out in similar style. The BX, or Base Exchange, is usually pretty close to the Commissary, the grocery store. Base housing is normally confined to one side of the base, and when the base has been well planned, as in Minot, housing is on the opposite side from the flight line. There’s usually a restaurant in the Officers’ Club—sometimes one at the Enlisted Club as well—and a couple of fast-food places. They usually have a library, barbershop, post office, chapel, theater, gas station, child development center, and gym. Some bases have a swimming

pool and a school or two. Essentially, an Air Force base is a little city, and everybody ultimately answers to our version of a mayor, the base commander.

As we rolled our suitcases across the parking lot, I thought I could hear birds singing in the distance. The pleasant noise was drowned out when retreat blared over the PA system. We put down our luggage and turned in the direction of the loudspeaker. There was a two-second pause, and then the national anthem began to play.

Mom stood at attention, shoulders back, hands loosely cupped at her sides. The sharp breeze blew a strand of her curly red hair across her face, but she made no move to brush it back.

I stood next to her, hand on my heart. A couple of cars drove by, and she glared at them. When the anthem is played at a military base, cars are supposed to pull over and stop. I knew that Minot Air Force Base was not off to a good start in Mom's opinion.

The anthem finished, and we once again pulled our suitcases toward the VOQ.

A small brown animal skittered across the sidewalk in front of us.

"Prairie dog?" I asked as it disappeared down a hole.

"Ground squirrel," she said.

Now that I knew what to look for, I saw holes all over the place. Three or four of the critters stood at attention next to one of the bigger openings. I realized that it hadn't been birds that I'd heard earlier; it had been these little rodents chirping.

Mom was shaking her head. "This is going to be a lot of work," she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “This is going to be hard.”

Mom turned quickly to look at me. “Why would *you* say that?”

I shrugged, embarrassed that I had said it out loud. “It just is.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Mom said, pulling out the room key. “Remember, we can do anything, as long as we work together.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking down at her, something I’d enjoyed being able to do for the past year.

Mom was a big believer in teamwork. But this time we didn’t have much of a team. This time, we were down to a duo.

\*\*\*

As an Air Force brat, moves were second nature to me. This was my seventh in fifteen years, and I knew the moving drill. Usually it wasn’t a big deal. But this one was different.

My brother Ray had packed all his stuff last week, and now he was off to the University of Oklahoma for his freshman year. I’d given him grief about choosing a cow-town school, and he’d rubbed it in hard that our new assignment was taking me to a much smaller cow town. “Like a one-cow cow town,” he’d said. After my first glimpse of Minot, I was beginning to agree.

My parents met at the Air Force Academy and married right after graduation, even though their first assignments had been at separate bases. After three years of a long-distance marriage, just before my brother was born, they were both assigned to Minot

Air Force Base here in North Dakota. Mom was a B-52 pilot and Dad was a missile maintainer, and from what I hear, everything was good. When they weren't able to get a follow-on assignment together, Dad decided to hang up his uniform and stay home with the growing family. As a pilot, Mom got extra flight pay, and it made more sense for her to stay in.

But I guessed all those years of watching her career soar while he stayed home finally caught up with Dad.

A few weeks ago, Ray and I were having a pizza dinner alone with Dad when he announced that he wasn't going to Minot. "It's time for me to get away for a while," he told us. "Besides, I didn't like it in Minot the first time. I can't imagine that it's gotten any better."

"So what are you going to do?" Ray asked, recovering from the shock much faster than I thought he should have. He hardly seemed surprised.

"To start with," Dad said, "I'm going home."

I blinked. We didn't have a "home." Some Air Force families had places they called home—the state where both parents were from, or the city where they'd spent the most time—but we didn't. Mom was from New York, Dad from Vegas. But both sets of grandparents had always come to see us, not the other way around. I'd been to my grandparents' houses maybe three times in my life.

"Where's that?" Ray asked, making me feel better. At least I wasn't the only one who didn't know where "home" was.

"Nevada," Dad said. "Your grandmother's not doing well, and I think it's time for her to move out

of that big house. After I talk her into it, I'm going to help her find a nice retirement home and then fix up her place."

"And help her sell it?" Ray asked, picking up another piece of pizza.

"We'll see."

Ray and I exchanged a glance. "What do you mean, 'we'll see'?" he asked.

"You're both bright boys," Dad said with a sigh. "I'm not going to pretend that you two don't know that things haven't been great between your mother and me lately."

I froze.

"You're splitting up?" Ray asked.

It was a good thing my brother kept asking all the questions. I could barely breathe, let alone speak.

"Not exactly," Dad said. "For right now, I'm going to help my mother sort things out. I don't know how long I'll stay in Vegas. It's been years since I've lived there." Dad looked at me. "What's wrong, Stu? I've never seen you let a piece of pizza sit on a plate that long."

Dutifully I picked up the pizza and took a bite. I could have just as easily been eating the box it came in. Had he really just asked me *what's wrong*? After saying he was leaving us, he asked me *what's wrong*?

"You know," he said to me, "Minot's a good place."

"You've always said you and Mom took the only two good things out of Minot—me and Ray."

"I should have known that statement would come back to haunt me. Minot is...well..."

"Cold. Desolate. Hicksville."

“True. But it’s also a close-knit community, especially on base. People pull together and help each other out. You’ll get a warm welcome and do just fine.”

“Bet I’d do just fine in Vegas,” I muttered.

He surprised me by agreeing. “Yes, you would,” he said. “You’re a good kid, Stu. You’ll do fine anywhere. But between the two choices, you’ll do better in Minot.”

“What choices? I wasn’t given a choice!”

“Another good point. You weren’t.”

We stared at each other, me angry and Dad patient as always.

“Is it over between you and Mom?” I finally asked.

“I don’t know yet. But things can’t go on between us the way they have been. Maybe some time apart will help; maybe it will be the final straw. We’ll have to wait and see.”

I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I just nodded.

He clapped his hand down on my shoulder. “We’ll always be a family, Stuart. No one can ever take that away from us. But families change. They have to. Ray goes to college this year, and you go in a few more. But through it all we’re still going to be a family.”

*Really?* I thought, glaring at him.

We’d moved every two or three years, so often that leaving friends and familiar places behind seemed normal. But we’d always left together, the four of us. It had always been Captain or Major or Lt. Colonel Ballentyne and her boys. Now it was Colonel Ballentyne and her boy.

It just didn’t feel right.