

# CHAPTER 1

“What did she say?” Even as he spoke, the corners of Phillip Mercer’s mouth edged upward. Years of practice helped him stop the encroaching grin and he replaced it quickly with a look of confusion. A look he directed first at his daughter and then his wife.

The ten years since the stock market crash gave Phillip plenty of time to perfect those looks. When he needed to sooth an irate investor at his brokerage firm, the practice proved useful. None of his expressions, however, would persuade the two women who knew him best that he hadn’t understood his daughter’s words.

His response came as no surprise to Charlotte, but anticipating his attitude made it no less infuriating. She’d summoned every bit of patience to stay quiet while her mother answered, but her intense green eyes glared at him across the room. He’d heard what she said and thought asking her mother to repeat it was funny. Only Phillip found it amusing.

Flames blazed in the fireplace with the same intensity as her passion to fly and prompted her to push the overstuffed chair a few feet further away. What concerned her most was

losing control of the conversation in such a short time. After hours of rehearsing, his first remark threw her off the script. She squeezed her shoulders together, straightened her spine, and sat back, resolute. His smug attitude meant nothing. She wouldn't, she couldn't give up.

Charlotte's mother, Harriet Mercer, an attractive woman of forty-five, found her husband's tactics somewhere between infuriating and laughable. They'd known it would be difficult to get his approval, but Harriet suspected the reason for his sudden loss of hearing was to make fun of their daughter's ambition. That, she decided, was infuriating. "You heard what she said, Phillip. Charlotte wants to fly an airplane."

The room warmed further, but only the porch remained as an option for her chair. Char stayed seated and took a deep breath, watching him examine his scotch and sort through his beliefs on a woman's proper place and limitations. She'd heard them often enough to recite from memory. Judging by his expression, she was about to hear them again.

"Charlotte, you're a woman. A spunky one without question, but a woman nonetheless, and women don't fly airplanes. I was never quite sure we should have allowed you behind the wheel of an automobile."

The word 'allowed' blistered Char's eardrums, but she refused to comment on it or his automobile remark. She'd driven for three years with no problems while he'd had two accidents and numerous tickets. "Dad, it's 1940." She spoke in her practiced steady voice. "In 1911, Harriet Quimby, the

first woman in this country to earn her pilot's license, flew across the English Channel. You read newspapers and listen to radio broadcasts. Women fly planes and break aviation records all the time."

"If you mean that Earhart woman, she didn't make out too well." He ignored her groan. "I want to tell you about a humorous conversation I heard at the office. Two accountants were discussing the war in Europe and one suggested that our involvement would force American women to build and fly airplanes. The other fellow smiled and said he doubted it. As far as he knew, there wasn't room in the cockpit for a mirror." Ice clinked as his glass rose to cover another smile.

Had Phillip wanted to increase his daughter's annoyance, he'd succeeded. Char became so incensed that for a few seconds her words lodged in her throat until her desire to fly pushed them free. "If you really heard that conversation at work, and I think you invented the ridiculous story, it isn't funny, and it doesn't make sense."

"What doesn't make sense, Charlotte, is your wanting to fly. You know men are better equipped for that kind of work, just as we're better able to captain ships. We're physically stronger and you need adequate strength to control something as powerful as an airplane. We also have a basic intelligence and mechanical aptitude that women lack."

"I don't know any such thing, and neither do you." She jumped to her feet and shouted, giving up completely on the

steady voice. “And how many planes have you flown to know what’s required?”

Charlotte stood an inch taller than her mother’s five feet seven inches, and two inches above her father’s round frame. Both women suspected that was Phillip’s motivation for remaining seated during their discussions.

Harriet had also risen at her husband’s remark and listened to Char’s response before adding her own. “You might be right about men having a basic intelligence, Phillip. I’ll check on dinner. I’m better equipped for that work.” She left with a noticeable frosty trail in her wake and Char returned to her chair.

“You two women enjoy ganging up on me. Why isn’t your brother ever around when I need him?” In no hurry to face his daughter, Phillip set the glass down, tugged at his vest, and adjusted in the wing chair. “Charlotte, what I don’t understand is why you’d bother to learn something that you’ll have to give up once you’re married. No husband in his right mind would allow his wife to fly.”

There was that word again. This time she couldn’t ignore it. “I doubt I’d marry a man who wouldn’t *allow* me to do what I wanted. It’s not the nineteenth century, Dad, and corsets aren’t the only controlling thing that women have discovered they don’t need.”

Phillip’s face looked exhausted at the start of their conversation. Surrender replaced fatigue as he emptied the

glass and set it on the table with a sigh. “How do you intend to learn to fly?”

Surprised at the direction the conversation had gone, Charlotte took a second to summon her prepared response. “They’re offering a pilot training program at Northwestern and they’ve opened the class to women. Maxine and I want to enroll.” Her next-door neighbor and lifelong friend Maxi shared her desire to fly.

“Maxine too?”

“Yes, Mr. Davies already signed the papers.” Her shaky finger directed him to an unsigned application on the coffee table.

“Well, it would appear I’m outnumbered. Let’s hope we don’t find ourselves involved in this war in Europe or they’ll have you girls flying military planes.”

# CHAPTER 2

At eight o'clock on the morning of December 7, 1941, shadows of the first Japanese bombers darkened ship decks in Hawaii's Pearl Harbor. In less than two hours, the surprise attack that damaged or destroyed all eighteen vessels anchored there also ended debate about US involvement in World War II.

The hurried entrance into battle exposed serious manpower and material shortages in national defense industries. To handle these shortages, Federal agencies created the Defense Plant Corporation and within two years, DPC financed construction or expansion of more than a thousand factories.

Government and industry's decision to employ a previously neglected female labor force proved an unprecedented success. Women quickly became instrumental in the war effort. Two hundred thousand enlisted in the military and twelve million, many who had never worked outside their homes, took jobs in factories, shipyards, offices, and as civilian workers on military bases.

With the new supply of labor and strict rationing of everything from shoes and coffee to sugar and gasoline, aircraft and weapons production exploded. Eighty-five hundred planes a month rolled out of factories, twice the number manufactured in an entire year before the war. A fact unknown to most was that more than half the planes arrived at bases and ports around the country ferried by civilian women pilots.

Many opposed women flying and there were protest in every level of the public and private sector. That did not stop the growing number of female pilots. In August of 1943, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron and Women's Flying Training Detachment combined to form the Women Airforce Service Pilots—the WASP. Twenty-five thousand women applied to the program. Almost two thousand qualified and entered training. Successful graduates tested and ferried military aircraft and performed stateside piloting jobs to free up men for active service.

WASP transported every make of airplane in the American armament, including training, pursuit, and transport planes, along with fighters and bombers. Federal law prohibited women from flying military planes into combat or outside US boundaries.

These pilots lived and worked at one hundred and twenty bases around the country. They wore uniforms that followed strict military code and took orders as if they served in the armed forces. They did not. They had no life or accident

insurance, no death benefits and could not be buried in a military cemetery or receive a burial with flags and honors. WASP could achieve no rank of significance outside their organization, nor could they give orders to men. Those considerable obstacles did not diminish the courage or determination of women hoping to wear the silver wings. Charlotte Mercer was one of those women.

In 1940, Charlotte and her friend and neighbor, Maxine Davies, entered the new Civilian Pilot Training Program at Northwestern University. Developers planned the course for nonmilitary personnel. Their hope was to build a cache of aviators should the US enter the growing conflict in Europe. Promoters expected objections to using colleges and universities for what some considered military training. To allay those fears they opened classes to women. Administrators felt that when the public saw women pilots involved they would not take the training seriously. Few expected women to apply for the class. None thought they'd find themselves turning female applicants away.

Char and Maxi filled the allotted ten percent of their class of twenty. They managed to finish sixteen weeks of instruction and receive their licenses despite their instructor's disapproval of women pilots. After completion, they continued to earn hours until 1942 when Charlotte's world changed.

The twenty-one-year-old college student entered the library of their large home north of Chicago and found her father dead by his own hand. Next to the gun on his desk was

a note of apology and news that except for the house, he had managed to lose their considerable assets. In less than a year, Charlotte and her mother sold their home and moved to an apartment in Chicago. Without money, there was little hope of returning to school and even less of flying. Char took a job at a Woolworths near where she and her mom lived.

“Char, look at this.” Maxine ran across the dime stores hard wooden floor waving a newspaper with enough force to extinguish unseen flames. She gulped to catch her breath. “The Army needs women to fly military planes.”

Char abandoned her customers at the cash register and grabbed the paper, reading until Maxi pulled it from her face. “Char, listen to me. A letter came this morning inviting me to apply, and I stopped at your apartment. Your mom said this came for you.” She handed her an envelope from the Women Airforce Service Pilots. “They checked records of women flyers and asked us because we have our licenses and the required two hundred hours.”

Maxi shoved her hands in her jacket pockets to keep them from ripping the mail out of her friend’s shaking fingers. She stood silently as Char tore open the flap letting shredded scraps fall to the floor. When the dime store clerk finished reading its contents, she took a deep breath, gave Maxi a hug, and smiled. She was going to fly.



The first step to earning their wings was a personal interview with the training commander at Douglas Aircraft west of Chicago. If successful, the WASP training base, which shared the Douglas site with a defense plant, would be their home for seven months. Char sat in front of the commander's desk and waited for the serious looking woman to speak.

At thirty-two, Commander Mathison, who led the training program, held dozens of flying records. One hundred and eight new cadets started every seven months under her command. Twenty-eight-year-old Commander Dunaway oversaw the ferrying of planes by graduated WASP who'd earned their silver wings.

“Miss Mercer, why do you want to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots?”

Char hoped her face didn't reflect the void in her brain. She'd expected to answer questions about flying. Anything the commander threw at her when it came to airplanes or aviation she could explain in a heartbeat. She hadn't expected a question about why she wanted to join the WASP. “I love to fly and want to help end the war.” She silenced a groan and waited for Commander Mathison to recommend she find a job writing war posters.

“Those are the two most important reasons to sign on. We'll find out if you have what it takes to fly military planes. You'll learn to fly the Army way. The difference will become clear when you start training. Welcome aboard.”

Despite what Char considered a lame answer, she and Maxine made it into the program. Six months later, they had finished most of the two hundred hours of flight training and four hundred hours of instruction on the ground. Training varied little from that of male pilots. They marched, exercised, studied, and flew planes. The one thing male cadets had that the women lacked was respect. That lack of respect showed in ways that were often insulting and sometimes deadly.



“I hate the Link trainer.” Maxi repeated her statement a third time as they left the building with the flight simulator. After thirty minutes of staring at instruments inside a cramped darkened box, she forced her eyes to focus in bright sunlight.

The Link trainer taught pilots to navigate by instruments alone, a crucial skill for flying at night or in bad weather. It had a single seat cockpit with an actual instrument panel. Once the roof closed, a pilot could see only dials and hear nothing except orders from an instructor seated outside. Pilot response prompted the machine to react as an airplane would, though a crash was much less painful.

“It’s not as much fun as learning in a plane, Maxi, but I’d rather fly in that simulated storm than a real one.”

“I know it’s helpful, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Maybe it’d be easier in December or January when it isn’t a hundred degrees inside. Between you and me, I think the instructors keep that box jumping to make us sick. I don’t ever remember flying through that much turbulence.”

“I don’t either.” It took Char’s eyes a minute to adjust, too. As they did, she spotted an approaching A-24 and heard the engine misfire.

“Hey, Maxi, why is Babs coming back to the field? She’s supposed to deliver that plane to Indiana.” The Douglas dive-bomber continued its unsteady approach.

“I don’t know, but that engine sounds bad.” They shielded their eyes as Babs put the airplane into a turn.

“She’s too high. She’ll overshoot the runway,” Char yelled. Babs realized it too and pulled up, then veered right to circle around again, struggling to keep the plane level.

“There’s smoke coming from the engine.” Two long black streamers poured from the plane’s engine following her erratic path and confirmed Maxi’s words. The smoke thickened and mixed with flames. She was too low to jump and unable to gain altitude.

“Come on, Babs, bring it in.” Char looked toward the hangers. “Where’s that fire truck?”

As Babs positioned the plane in line with the runway, the engine sputtered and died. Smoke and flames engulfed the fuselage. “Oh, god, she’s coming too fast.”

“The cockpit’s filled with smoke. She can’t see. Why doesn’t she open the canopy?” Maxi grabbed Char’s arm as the fire truck screamed to the landing strip. It stopped on the edge of the field to see where, and how the plane came down.