

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 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.

That his response came as no surprise to Charlotte made it no less infuriating. She summoned every bit of patience to stay quiet while she waited for her mother to answer, but her intense green eyes glared 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 Char to push the overstuffed chair a few feet further away. Her biggest concern was that she’d lost 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. The women knew it would be difficult to get his approval, but Harriet suspected his sudden loss of hearing was an attempt to make fun of their daughter's ambition. That, she decided, was infuriating. "You heard what she said, Phillip. Charlotte wants to fly airplanes."

The temperature climbed, but other than moving the chair to the porch, Char saw no escape. She stayed seated and took a deep breath as he examined his scotch and sorted through his beliefs on a woman's proper place and limitations. She had 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.” His glass rose in a feeble effort to cover another smile.

Had Phillip meant to increase his daughter’s annoyance, he succeeded. Char became so incensed that for a few seconds her words remained wedged in her throat, until her desire to fly pushed them free. “If you really heard that conversation, 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 gave 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. Phillip often remained seated during their discussions.

Harriet also rose 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." She left with a noticeable frosty trail in her wake and Char returned to her chair.

"You two women like 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 looked tired at the start of their conversation and 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 question, Charlotte took a second to respond. "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." She pointed to an unsigned application on the coffee table.

“Well, it would appear that 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 sudden entrance into battle brought to light serious manpower and material shortages in the national defense industries. To handle those shortages, Federal agencies created the Defense Plant Corporation and within two years, the agency 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. The new supply of labor and strict rationing of everything from shoes and coffee to sugar and gasoline created a record increase in aircraft and weapons production. 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.

Opposition to women flying occurred in every level of the public and private sector, but those objections did not stop women from taking to the air. 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. After graduating, women 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, confident that when the public saw women pilots involved they would not take the training seriously. Few expected women to apply for the classes. None thought they would 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 lost 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.” At the animated announcement, 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 and watched in grinning silence as Char tore open the flap with shaking fingers and shredded scraps drifted to the floor. When the dime store clerk finished reading, 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. Under her command, one hundred and eight new cadets started every seven months. 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 the commander 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 and in six months 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 for a third time as they left the building that housed the flight simulator. After thirty minutes of staring at instruments inside a cramped darkened box, she forced her eyes to focus in bright sunlight.

“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.” 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.

“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. She 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 seemed 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.

CHAPTER 3

Everyone held their breath as Babs approached with too much speed at too steep an angle. The nose slammed into the ground and exploded on impact. Only the fire truck advanced toward the inferno. Those watching stood in numbed silence.

Char shook herself and recovered enough to head in the direction of the plane, followed closely by Maxi. A wall of fire held them and everyone else back as the front of the A-24, including its cockpit, burned. Acrid smells of burning rubber, gasoline, and another pungent odor filled the air. The fireman closest to Babs looked back at the man behind him, waved away smoke, and shook his head slowly. When that simple motion registered, a few screams from onlookers pierced the thunderous sound of the fire. Until that moment, no one believed Babs hadn't survived.

Babs Taylor flew ferrying missions with the advanced WASP. All pilots in her group who were not delivering planes came from the barracks and stood as near as possible to the burning shell. Minutes earlier, Ferrying Commander Jo Dunaway realized that Babs was in trouble and ran to the tower to make radio contact. Either her radio was broken or Babs couldn't answer. Dunaway saw the plane hit as she returned to the field and every muscle

in her body tensed. After a few minutes, she dropped her head and stumbled to her quarters.

Many trainees remained on the field, frozen by the crash. Several ran back to the barracks and relative safety of their cots. For the new group, it was the first time they'd seen anyone they knew die, and die so horribly. Char heard footsteps and spun to see Commander Mathison running toward the advanced pilots. She couldn't tell from her face what the commander felt, but then she couldn't sort out her own feelings. A few hours earlier, Babs told her how thrilled she was to fly the A-24. Now she sat silent in what remained of her airplane. Char forced herself to remember that Babs died doing what she loved. She couldn't think about what had gone through her mind those last few seconds before impact. A fiery crash was every pilot's worst nightmare.

"What should we do?" Maxi spoke in a numbed whisper.

Char tipped her chin at the advanced WASP group. "Let's see if anyone knows what happened."

Voices rose as they approached the advanced pilots. "We can tell her family someone blew up her plane and she roasted to death."

Neither Maxi nor Char knew all the advanced pilots personally, but they recognized Commander Mathison's irritated voice. "I don't want to hear one word about sabotage. We don't know what happened here."

"Commander Mathison's right. Those A-24s are piles of junk that they wouldn't expect anyone but dispensable WASP to fly. They don't need to be sabotaged."

The commander's glare had enough intensity to ignite the dried grass at their feet. It quieted the mutinous pilot. "Keep your opinions to yourself, Saunders. Where's Dunaway?"

"She went back to the barracks."

"I'm here." Commander Dunaway rejoined them carrying a piece of paper. "This is her family's contact information. Joyce, why don't you handle the collection? Do you want to take her home?" Saunders gave a pained nod as Dunaway hugged her. "I'll call and let them know. I'm sorry, Joyce." Saunders took the paper from Jo Dunaway and kicked at the runway as she turned away.

The two commanders moved a few steps from the crowd. They were physical opposites. Dunaway's deceptively petite body was solid muscle but looked almost frail alongside Commander Mathison's tall and sturdy frame. Jo's usually undisciplined chin length sandy hair stood in contrast to the short brown styled look of Mathison. Differences ended there. Jo Dunaway and Emily Mathison were both dedicated and skilled pilots qualified to fly every plane in the American fleet. They shared one other great passion—the women pilots. "She's right, Emily. Those planes should be dumped."

"I'm aware of that, Jo, just as I'm sure you're aware they'll bring them no matter what you or I recommend. Let me know if you need help with anything." Mathison gave a vague wave and left with a last look at the smoldering remains.

"What did you mean about the A-24s?" Char asked Joyce Saunders as she approached.

Joyce's jacket sleeve was already damp when she raised it to wipe her face. "I don't know what I meant. Babs was the best. I mean pilot and friend. Why didn't she open the canopy?" Joyce turned to the wreck with an agonized look and Char tried to imagine what she'd be feeling if Maxi sat in that plane. She couldn't. "The A-24s were obsolete before they saw action in the Pacific, but they wore them out completely on the Japanese. The engines are shot and beyond repair, and there's structural stress damage on half of them. I've heard of three that have gone down with WASP. Babs is the first one to die." Minutes passed before Joyce spoke again. "I'd better go. I have to collect money for her family and find someone to help take her home." She held out her leather flight helmet and Char and Maxi dropped in some change.

"Good luck with the family," Maxi said. "I'm sorry about Babs." Joyce left without comment.

"Come on, Max, let's go back to the barracks. I'd rather not be out here when they remove Babs."

The sounds of laughter and conversation, bickering and fun that often filled the barracks were not present that night. Most pilots had gone to bed early to forget what they'd seen. No one would, and those who could sleep, did so uneasily.



The following morning after calisthenics, Maxi and Char sat in the mess hall picking at a yellow rubbery substance on their plates made from powdered eggs. "I meet with Major Deavers today. My scores are in, so I should hear if I passed."

“You have doubts, my favorite aviatrix?” Maxi grinned. “You’re the WASPIest pilot on base and first to finish all your tests.”

“WASPIest isn’t a word, but thank you.” Char drank her coffee and frowned. “Two trainees from group eighteen dropped out this morning.”

“What did Mathison say?”

“Darlene heard her tell them if they dropped out after seeing a plane crash, they wouldn’t have made very good pilots.” Char studied a forkful of the yellow glob and put it on her plate untouched.

“I suppose that’s true. Maybe they should’ve waited a few days to see if they could handle it. You know how when a thing first happens you think you can’t. Then as time passes, it’s a little easier.”

“You’re right, Maxi. They only had a month left. All those hours of flight instruction and ground time. It does seem a waste.”

“If a wreck like that happened in the first month or two of training, we might have seen more people drop out. It was terrifying to see Babs go down that way. Any news about the crash?”

“Saunders said that the cabin was so filled with smoke and fumes she’d have passed out before she hit.”

When Char’s words registered, Maxi’s fork fell and she pushed the plate away. “I wish you’d saved that until after breakfast. It’s hard enough to face.”

“Sorry, Maxi. She also said that no one’s mentioned what caused the fire. She’s not pleased.”

“Do they think the ground crew sabotaged it?”

“I suppose until these guys show us respect as pilots, we’ll wonder.”

“Do you really believe that the men who don’t think women should fly will treat us with respect?” She would soon learn the answer to Maxi’s question.



Char stood at attention in front of Major Deavers. She had arrived at his office only minutes earlier, confident that she’d passed. She couldn’t believe what she heard. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m not sure I understand.” Afraid she understood all too well, Char struggled to breathe.

“You heard me, Mercer. Prove to me that you want your wings.”

“Unless I agree to go to bed with you, I won’t get my silver wings?” It had to be a bad dream. “But what about my scores and flight tests? I’ve passed everything.” Char never doubted that she’d fly with the WASP. She’d sailed through her training courses and did every flight maneuver required and more. Link checkouts weren’t a problem. Neither was flying with a hood over the cockpit because she could have done the exercises with her eyes closed. If the major meant what he said, the only way she’d see those silver wings would be in her dreams. “I’m sorry Major Deavers, I can’t do that.”

He reacted at once, slamming his fist against the desk, quick and hard. Char, not expecting the reaction, fell back a step. “You don’t move when you’re at attention. Do you understand? If you girls want to play in the military, you’ll have to learn to behave like soldiers. How do you

think male cadets earn a promotion?” In view of her present situation, she kept her mouth shut. “They obey orders,” he told her and turned his attention to his desk, dismissing her without looking up. She’d spun stiffly on her heels and headed for the door, but stopped when he called her back. The major waved a piece of paper with an amused look on his face. That made her even more uncomfortable.

“I had a visit earlier today from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Miss Mercer. They have a project that needs our cooperation. Actually, this will involve only your cooperation. You’ve saved me from having to choose between the girls. You’ll be working with the FBI at the defense plant.”

“Major Deavers, sir, I came here to fly.”

“Yes, you’ve mentioned that. Maybe you’ll fly airplanes someday, Mercer, but for right now, you’ll build them.”

She stared at the base commander. His desk, like his uniform was perfect. Nothing out of place on his furniture and no errant creases dared to show on his clothes. The major’s imperfections weren’t visible, but Char saw them. He hated women and at that moment, she hated him. When his grin returned, her stomach rolled, but she had to ask, “When will I get my wings?”

“If you do your job well, and make your country and your major proud, maybe I’ll give you another chance.” He dropped the paper and wrote a quick note before handing it to her. “This letter will help explain your assignment. I’ll let them know I’ve selected you and Commander Mathison’s secretary will give you complete

instructions. You start at the plant on Monday, but meet your contact tomorrow morning. I'm confident you'll make a fine 'Rosie'. Have you ever done any riveting, Miss Mercer?"

She stormed to the barracks ready to explode. Her entire world had fallen apart. Fifteen minutes earlier, she'd entered his office expecting congratulations and the news that she'd completed the program and would graduate and receive her wings. Now, instead of flying airplanes, she'd make them. The letter, still clenched in her hand, said she would receive instructions about where to meet an FBI agent the following day. He would explain the mission. "The mission?" Her frustration and confusion grew as she reached the barracks. What he'd said amounted to blackmail and she could do nothing. Would he really keep her from flying with the WASP? Char straightened, forced herself not to cry, and entered the building.

"Congratulations!" Her three roommates hooted and hollered from underneath a banner stretched across the small room. It read 'You're getting your wings, flybaby' and had a drawing of the WASP mascot Fifinella, the winged female gremlin Walt Disney designed. Fifinella looked happy, but when Char heard her fellow pilots' congratulations and read the words, she felt as if an airplane had plowed into her chest. Waning control over her tears dissolved, and she fell on her cot to bury her face.

“Char, what is it? You’re graduating aren’t you? Of course, you are.” Maxi put her hand on Char’s shoulder and sat on the bed. “What’s going on?”

“I’m finished. I’m not going to get them.” She shouted into the pillow.

Maxi pushed her friend’s shoulder to hear her words. “You’re not getting what?”

“My wings, I’m not getting my silver wings.” She pulled her shoulder from Maxi’s grasp and fell back on the cot.

“What are you talking about? You’re the best pilot in the group, maybe of all the trainees. How could you not get your wings?”

Without releasing the pillow, Char turned on her side to look at her friend. “I refused the major’s request, so he said I won’t graduate or get my wings.”

“What request?”

“That I go to bed with him.”

Confusion clouded Maxi’s youthful face. When Char’s answer finally made sense, even her solution was naive. “We can report him, can’t we?”

“Who would we report him to, Max? He’d say he thought I was asking for it and the male officers on the review committee would agree with him. Commander Mathison won’t want to get involved. She’s afraid any publicity at all will stop the program. My career is over.”

“What happens now? I can’t believe you won’t fly with the WASP.” Maxi looked at her gravely. “If you don’t graduate, I’ll quit.”

“No you won’t. Don’t even say that.”

“Okay, I won’t say it, but only because I won’t have to quit. You’re going to get your wings. Did he tell you anything else?”

“I have to do a *mission* at the defense plant. Major Deavers said if I do a good job making airplanes I could try for my wings again. He meant he’d give me a chance to change my mind. That won’t happen and I’ll never get my wings.”

“You don’t have to change your mind. We’ll figure this out.” Maxi reached for the paper that had fallen from Char’s hand and smoothed it on her pant leg to read. “Is this your mission?” She held it up and waited for her nod. “Did you read this, Char? It says your assignment is undercover work. Oops, it also says you’re not supposed to tell anyone. Your secret’s safe with me, and I’ll tell everyone that our creepy major gave you that detail at the plant as punishment, which he did.”

“Maxi, what’ll I do if I can’t fly with the WASP? After all these months, I never doubted, and now...I’m going to wash out.”

“You’ll fly. We’ll figure it out when you’re done with this defense plant job. We graduate in a month and our entire group will wear the silver wings. I’m sure of it.” Maxine slipped the folded paper under Char’s hand. “You’ll find out what this mission is about tomorrow. Maybe they’ll help you get your wings. I’ve never known a person who should fly more than you, Mercer. If you had feathers, you’d be a damn bird.”