

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.

His response, although not a complete surprise, was still infuriating. Charlotte summoned every morsel of patience she could find to remain quiet while her mother answered, 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 seemed amused.

Flames blazed in the fireplace with as much intensity as her passion to fly and prompted Char to push the overstuffed chair a few feet away. What concerned her most was that she had lost control of the conversation in such a short time. After hours of rehearsing, his first remark had thrown 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. Both 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 unacceptable. "You heard what she said, Phillip. Charlotte wants to fly airplanes."

The temperature in the room climbed, but beyond 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."

"That Earhart woman didn't make out too well." He ignored her groan and continued. "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."

Had Phillip meant to increase his daughter's annoyance, he succeeded. Char became so incensed that for a few seconds the words remained lodged 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 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 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." 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 had 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. “And just how do you intend to learn to fly?”

The sudden shift surprised Char and she took a second to respond. “They’re offering a pilot training program at Northwestern and they’ve opened the class to women. Maxi and I want to enroll.” Her next-door neighbor and lifelong friend 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 seems I’m outnumbered. Let’s just 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.

There was opposition to women pilots from every level of the public and private sector, but those protests 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. Their uniforms followed strict military code and they 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 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 finished the sixteen weeks of instruction and received their licenses despite the general disapproval of classmates and instructors. 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 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.

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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 training 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. Anything the commander threw at her when it came to airplanes or aviation she could explain in a heartbeat. She hadn’t anticipated a question about why she wanted to join the WASP. “I love flying 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.

“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 confirmed Maxi’s words and poured from the engine following her erratic path. 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 stopped at the edge of the landing strip, its piercing siren muted, as if holding its breath along with the others.