

# Chapter 1

“What did she say?”

Charlotte’s glare at her father’s question brought a chill to the Mercer’s cozy living room. He’d heard what she said and thought asking her mother to repeat it was funny. She wasn’t amused.

Char stood and pushed her chair a few inches away from the fireplace. The flames burned as intensely as her anger at herself for losing control of the conversation. She’d rehearsed every word and his first remark threw her off the script. She shook her shoulders and sat straight. It didn’t matter, because she wouldn’t give up.

Harriet Mercer, Char’s mother, sat quietly next to her husband until he dragged her reluctantly into the conversation. She too suspected his motives and met his eyes. “You heard what she said, Phillip. She wants to fly an airplane.”

Char’s breathing grew difficult as she watched him study his scotch and gather his frequently expressed beliefs. He’d voiced his arguments on a woman’s proper place and physical and mental limitations often enough that she could recite them. The expression on his face told her she’d 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 her 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 said in her practiced steady voice. “This country’s first woman pilot was licensed in 1911, and then flew across the English Channel. Women fly planes and break aviation records all the time.”

“If you’re talking about that Earhart woman, she didn’t make out too well.” He continued, ignoring her groan. “I want to tell you something humorous I heard at the office recently. Two accountants were chatting and one said he’d heard that if we become involved in this war in Europe, American women would be building and flying airplanes. The other fellow smiled and said that he rather doubted it because there wasn’t room in the cockpit for a mirror.” He raised his glass to cover a smile.

If he’d meant to heighten her anger, he succeeded. For a few seconds, Char’s arguments jammed in the narrow passage of her throat. Only her unwavering determination to fly fueled her response. “If you did hear 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 is your wanting to fly airplanes. You know as well as I do that men are better equipped for those activities. We’re physically stronger and you need strength to fly a plane. We also have the basic intelligence and mechanical aptitude that women lack.”

“I don’t know any such thing.” She shouted and gave up on the steady voice plan. “How many planes have you flown to know what’s required?”

Harriet stood—her thoughts easily read. “You might be right about men having a basic intelligence, Phillip. I’ll check on dinner. I believe I’m better equipped for that type of work.” She left with a noticeable frosty trail in her wake.

“You two women are always ganging up on me. Why isn’t your brother ever around when I need him?” Phillip put the glass down, tugged at his vest, and adjusted in the wing chair to face his daughter. “Charlotte, I don’t understand why you’d you want to spend time learning something you’ll have to give up once you’re married. I can tell you right now, 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 that I’d marry a man who wouldn’t *allow* me do what I wanted. It’s not the nineteenth century anymore, Dad, and corsets aren’t the only controlling thing women have discovered they don’t need.”

Phillip had looked tired at the conversation’s start, and his face showed signs of surrender. He finished his drink and

set the glass on the table. “And how do you intend to learn to fly?”

She didn’t know if the conversation would go that far and took a breath. “They’re offering a Civilian Pilot Training Program at Northwestern and opened the class to women. Maxine and I want to enroll. It won’t be a problem because we’ll be there for school everyday anyway.”

“Maxine too?”

“Yes, Mr. Davies signed the papers.” She pointed at the coffee table where her own papers sat.

“Then, I can see I’m outnumbered. Let’s hope we don’t find ourselves involved in that war in Europe. We’re still recovering from the stock market crash. At least we’re trying to recover.”

## Chapter 2

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, shadows of the first Japanese bombers darkened ship decks in Hawaii's, Pearl Harbor. In less than two hours, the attack that damaged or destroyed the eighteen vessels anchored there also ended debate about the involvement of the United States in World War II.

The hurried entrance into conflict exposed another problem—tremendous shortages of manpower and materials in the nation's defense industries. The government created the Defense Plant Corporation to fill the deficiencies and within two years, they'd financed construction or expansion of more than a thousand factories.

Government and industry's decision to employ a previously neglected labor force had a major impact. Women became instrumental in winning the war. 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 laborers and rationing of everything from shoes and coffee to sugar and gasoline helped to greatly increase production in all areas. Eighty-five hundred planes a month rolled out of factories, twice the number previously manufactured in an entire year. More than half the aircraft arrived at bases, ports, and other locations around the country, ferried by civilian women pilots.

In August of 1943, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, WAFS, and Women's Flying Training Detachment, WFTD, joined to become the Women Airforce Service Pilots, WASP. Twenty-five thousand women applied to the WASP program. Almost two thousand qualified and entered training. Successful graduates tested and ferried military aircraft, and completed other piloting jobs to free up men needed for active service.

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

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.

The pilots 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 didn't diminish the courage or resolve of women determined to wear the silver wings. Charlotte Mercer was one of those women.

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In 1940, Charlotte and her friend and neighbor, Maxine Davies, entered the newly offered Civilian Pilot Training Program at Northwestern.

Developers planned the training course for non-military personal. Their hope was to build a cache of aviators who would eventually fly for the military if the nation entered the growing conflict in Europe.

The planners knew people would object to using colleges and universities for what some considered military training. To assuage those fears, they opened the classes to women, confident that when the public saw women pilots involved, they'd assume the training was not serious.

Few expected women to apply for the ten percent of classroom space allotted. None thought they'd be turning female applicants away.

Char and Maxi filled the ten percent of their class of twenty. Though the instructor never tried to hide his disapproval of women pilots, they managed to finish the sixteen weeks of instruction and receive their licenses. After completing the class, they continued earning flying 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, he left a note of apology and news that he'd lost their considerable assets except for the house and property. Less than a year later, Char and her mother sold everything, and moved to an apartment in Chicago.

With no money for college, she had little hope of returning to school and less of flying. Char took a job at a dime store near where she and her mom lived.

“Look at this.” Maxine ran into the store waving a newspaper with enough force to extinguish unseen flames. “The Air Force is looking for women to fly military planes.” Char grabbed the paper and ignored her customers at the cash register, though they seemed equally interested in the announcement.

“A letter came this morning inviting me to apply, and I stopped at your apartment. Your mom said this came for you.” She handed Char a letter from the Women Airforce Service Pilots. “They checked records of women flyers in the state and asked us because we have our licenses and the required two hundred hours.”

Maxi watched Char struggle to open the envelope and shoved her hands in her jacket pockets. She had to, or she would have ripped it from her fingers. Shards fell to the floor as she nervously tore the envelope open. When she read the

contents, the dime store clerk took a deep breath and smiled. She was going to fly.

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The first step in earning their wings was a personal interview with the WASP training commander. If they made it, the WASP training base west of Chicago would be their home for seven months. Char sat in the commander's office and waited for the serious looking woman to speak.

Only thirty-two, Commander Mathison held dozens of flying records. Her responsibility at the base was the WASP training program, while twenty-eight year old Commander Dunaway oversaw the ferrying of planes by graduated WASP who'd earned their silver wings.

It surprised Char to see how grave the commander remained throughout the interview. Flying always made her smile.

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

Char wondered if her face reflected the complete 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 completely. She hadn't expected her to ask why she signed up. “I love to fly and I want to help end the war.”

When the words popped out of her mouth, she curbed her immediate desire to pound her fists on her forehead. Instead,

she held her breath and waited for Commander Mathison to recommend she apply for 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 be taught to fly the army way and the differences 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 began the seven months of training. They’d receive two hundred hours of flight instruction and four hundred of ground.

The program varied little from that of male pilots. They marched, exercised, studied, and flew planes. The one thing male pilots had that the women lacked was respect. That lack of respect showed in ways that were often insulting and sometimes deadly.

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“I hate that Link trainer.” Maxi repeated for the fourth time as they left the building that housed the flight simulator. Suddenly in bright sunlight, she tried to refocus her eyes after an hour of staring at instruments inside a hot, cramped, blackened box.

The Link trainer taught pilots to fly 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 nothing but dials and hear nothing

except orders from an instructor seated outside. Pilot responses prompted the Link to react as an airplane would.

“It’s not as much fun as flying in a plane, that’s for sure, Maxi, but I’d rather be flying in that simulated storm than learning how to do it in weather that was really that dangerous.”

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

“I don’t either.” It took Char a minute to adjust to the bright sunshine, too. She thought she’d heard an airplane engine misfiring and did a quick scan of the sky around the base.

“Hey, Maxi, why is Babs coming back to the field. She’s supposed to take that A-24 to Indiana.” She pointed up at the Douglas dive-bomber returning somewhat unsteadily to the airstrip.

“I don’t know, but the engine sounds bad.” They both shielded their eyes from the sun and watched Babs put the airplane into a turn for the approach.

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

“Char, I thought I saw smoke coming from the engine.” Maxi did see smoke, and in seconds, it poured from the plane in two long black streams. The smoke trails followed her increasingly erratic path.

Everyone stopped to watch the smoke thicken and mix with flames. She was too low to jump and couldn’t seem to gain enough altitude to try. “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 and the fire truck screamed to the landing strip, then stopped. They had to wait to see where she’d bring it down, and how.