

Chapter One

It's nice when someone is there to greet you; disconcerting when it's the general's aide.

The assignment had started normally enough. Yesterday, I'd ferried a factory-fresh pursuit fighter from Long Beach to New Jersey. I was all set for a direct flight home to repeat my standard routine, but juggled orders put me on a hopscotch course, ultimately delivering a P-47 Thunderbolt to Long Beach, shortly after dawn.

I jumped off the fighter's wing.

"Pucci Lewis." Lieutenant Hatch, a true ramrod in a natty, sharply creased uniform, addressed me.

"Yes, sir."

"Forget the paper work, Lewis, and leave the gear. Cochran wants you in the general's office, on the double."

My fingers fumbled as I unstrapped my parachute for the ground crewman waiting nearby.

“Yes, sir.”

Jackie Cochran, my boss and head of the Women Air Force Service Pilots—WASP—operated out of her ranch in nearby Indio or from Washington D.C. Why was she here? And what was so urgent that standard procedures, including the post-flight paperwork at BaseOps, were being set aside?

A month ago, we’d met under similar high-priority conditions at the Willow Run aircraft factory near Detroit. I had been “loaned” to the Detroit FBI field office to assist with an industrial espionage case. My pulse quickened. Was I needed on another home front security mission?

Hatch pointed with his chin to the leather bag I'd parked on the asphalt next to me while shedding my chute. “Bring the grip. You're gonna need it.”

No kidding. My B-4 bag went everywhere with me, as much a part of my day-to-day existence as the purse I'd carried in more traditional times. And, like a purse, the standard issue tote had too many essentials crammed into too small a space.

I lifted the bag and hustled to catch up to Hatch.

Miss C sat behind the general's highly polished desk, absorbed in an important telephone conversation. Her posture was rigid; her expression was tight. Holding up a finger to signal she

needed another minute, she spun around leaving us to stare at the tall back of the general's swivel chair.

General Griffith and Miss C went way back, but she was chummy with a number of Army Air Force generals, having competed against them in air races before the war. I knew about her in admiring detail. In 1932 she received her pilot's license after only three weeks of lessons and immediately pursued advanced instruction. She'd set three major flying records against all comers by 1937. In 1938, she won the prestigious cross-country Bendix Race, much to the chagrin of her male competitors, some of whom became those AAF generals.

Scuttlebutt about her association with the brass-hats frequently made the rounds in airport Ready Rooms, where we whiled away the hours waiting for our orders or for the weather to clear. It was assumed that we'd fill the time wisely, reading flying regs or the Pilots' Information File, a.k.a. The Pilots' Bible, but usually we just plain needed a break. We'd tell jokes, play cards, devour movie magazines, gossip. And there was plenty to dish when it came to Miss C. Her mysterious origins, her eccentricities, her millionaire husband and their unconventional marriage, her numerous professional accomplishments, the climb to her current executive position, and the cargo hold of enemies she'd assembled along the way.

A good Ready Room yarn would've been welcome as Hatch and I stood by. Looking sideways, I studied his chiseled profile. Muscles twitched at the edge of his tightly drawn mouth; otherwise, shoulders back, eyes ahead, he remained a statue. My gaze drifted to the wall above Miss C where a life-size portrait hung of President Roosevelt, complete with pince-nez, cigarette

holder, and jaunty smile. Reflexively, I returned the smile. Shifting my weight from foot to foot, hoping to work off some nervous energy, one calf brushed against the other. Adrenaline suddenly coursed through me, turning my face lobster red. I'd left my ankle holster on! I was authorized and trained to use a gun, but the pistol strapped to my leg was a non-regulation Smith & Wesson .38, a gift from my Gran Skjold who knew things could get rough for a single woman on the road. She'd been a dancer in a traveling vaudeville troupe when she first arrived in the States fresh from Sweden. At WASP graduation, Gran had passed along the holster and the S&W break-top, along with a few lessons on its use. Turned out to be the ideal gift. Whenever I was assigned a plane with specialized equipment, a .45 got handed over along with my orders. A .45 was large and cumbersome; the break-top, on the other hand, was compact and lightweight. Wearing non-regulation items required discretion, so normally I took the holster off before exiting my plane. Hatch had distracted me.

I felt the heat of a second burst of adrenaline. The .45! Check-in procedures required turning it in. Because they'd been waived, I still had that gun, too, inside the B-4 bag positioned on the floor next to me.

Packing a hidden arsenal at my feet could account for the rise in my body temperature, but my flight gear wasn't helping either. I peeled off my leather helmet and unzipped my jacket, quickly patting the WASP insignia over my heart. Filling the insignia's center was Fifinella, a cross-eyed winged gremlin and official mascot of the WASP, designed by Disney Studio. We considered Fifinella a good luck charm, protection against storms, mechanical failure, and any

other danger that may cross our paths. *Don't let me get caught with two hidden guns*, I silently pleaded to her.

Miss C's voice crescendoed behind the chair. "Don't bully me. I'm working on it."

She swiveled and the receiver hit its cradle with a clunk. "Hatch, that's all."

Hatch jerked to life. Miss C and I exchanged greetings while he about-faced and exited the room.

"What? Hasn't grown out yet?" Miss C was gaping at my hair as the door clicked shut.

A couple of months ago, on the road and bored, I'd decided to do something about its standard-issue color. From a corner drugstore I purchased a kit that promised to transform dishwater blonde to Tahitian Gold. What I got was tabby orange, the shade resembling the pelt of Sarah Bernhardt, my childhood cat. A self-trim to lop off the damaged ends and frizz had left me with a short, shaggy Amelia Earhart do.

"Ah c'mon, Miss C. We've been over this. You know how hectic ferrying coast to coast gets. Plus, hours under a leather helmet, my scalp gets sweaty." I finger-combed my hair. "This style fluffs right back into shape."

Miss C did not look convinced. "And the color?"

I grinned. "It's fun?"

Her dark eyes bore into me. My grin wobbled.

Miss C was a fanatic about appearance. *It's a woman's duty to always be as presentable as time and purse permit*, she liked to say. Polished steel in a jeweled case, she had a purse with

deep pockets, affording the fine designer clothes she loved. Today, decked out in a navy designer suit and cream blouse, every shimmering golden hair smoothed into gently permed waves, she looked as though she'd just stepped out of Central Casting.

“It won't matter,” she said at last. “You'll be in flight gear most of the time you're on camera.”

“*On camera?*”

“Sit.” She motioned to the chair opposite her.

I dropped to the edge of the seat. She shot her square jaw toward the telephone. “That was Roland Novara in Hollywood, director for Victory short on you gals. We're *lucky* to have him.” The lift of her brow reinforced the false ring of enthusiasm in her tone.

Victory shorts were documentary-style films about home front participation in the war effort. Usually twenty minutes in length, they showed citizens how to conserve, assist, and sacrifice, while painting rosy pictures of military branches for recruiting purposes.

“So the film's on again,” I said. “That's terrific. Someone pull some strings?”

Directors, like all goods, were scarce these days, and the WASP Victory short had been in the works for some time. Several months ago, Miss C sent me to Hollywood for a look-see. But I never set foot in the studio. The film was quashed after the director was recruited to work on an urgent hush-hush AAF training film.

Miss C's lips curled into a small smile. “General Griffith got involved. Thinks we can use the film to help build support. It's shameful we're being forced to lobby for a service that's so clearly

needed..." She sighed. "But it's got to be done. Opposition keeps coming out of the woodwork. Mainly returning vets, claiming my program is taking stateside jobs from them.

"But by God—" She smacked her fist into the palm of her hand. "You gals have worked hard. We're not about to let them waltz in, pull you off the flying jobs just because some men out there happen to want them. That tired argument that women aren't as qualified, don't have the same physical and mental stamina as the men--ha! A plane doesn't give a damn whether a pilot's male or female; what matters is whether you know its capabilities and can fly it. You gals are proof of that."

I nodded, acknowledging the vote of confidence. "Did you say, er, something about me and a camera?"

Miss C ignored the question. "The War Department's breathing down Novara's neck to finish up our film. He's feeling pushed. We're only one of several he's got in the works, including a training film with Clark Gable. AAF wants the Gable movie yesterday, too."

Clark Gable? Who'd care about unreasonable deadlines if Clark Gable was involved?

"Novara's also vying for a feature," she added. "Something with Cary Grant and John Garfield."

The stars' names tripped off her tongue as though they were all old friends. But then, why was I surprised? The guest book at Miss C's ranch read like a "Who's Who" of notables from film stars to baronesses to top ranking corporate executives, military officers, and politicians. Even the President. More intrigued by the moment, I leaned forward in my seat.

“Something else.” She cleared her throat. “Frankie Beall. Several weeks ago, when Novara started on our film, I reassigned her to Hollywood to assist him. Do you know her?”

I nodded. Frankie had been in the class ahead of me at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where we'd done our training. Although in different classes, we'd been assigned to the same dormitory or bay. The gals in our bay had come from a cross-section of backgrounds: an actress, a radio commentator, a flight instructor, a journalist. Frankie had been a schoolteacher. What was particularly memorable about her was how she always carried two cushions in her parachute bag for scooting herself forward in the cockpit to reach the rudder pedals with her feet. In spite of her five foot two height, Frankie could outmaneuver anyone in a PT trainer, and she'd earned a reputation as our unit's aerobatics ace. Though the bases we'd been assigned to weren't all that far apart, we hadn't seen one another since graduation. Too bad, I thought, suddenly reminded of our promise to keep in touch.

Miss C leaned across the desk toward me. The brown eyes that moments before had bored a hole through me, were suddenly so soft that I sensed she was holding back tears.

“Something's happened to Frankie?”

She nodded. “Yesterday, at March Field she took an A-24 up. They were rehearsing a target-towing segment for the film. She made a pass over the filming crew a-a-and—” She swallowed. “—engine quit.”

My stomach roiled. “Oh no . . .”

“Tower said she knew right away the trouble was big. Told 'em to get the crash truck out. Film crew saw it all. Said the plane lurched, then hung mid-air for what seemed an eternity... Nose dropped all of a sudden, and the plane plummeted down. Incredibly, Frankie managed to level out. But when she hit the runway...fuselage just snapped.”

I blinked several times. “Sh-she alive?”

Miss C's nod was barely perceptible. “A miracle. Tail section was completely demolished, but the wings and everything forward stayed intact, more or less. Cuts, broken bones, head injury's the worst of it. She's in critical condition. She struck something, maybe the control stick. There's a deep gash. Too soon to know if there's brain damage.”

She looked away for a moment. “I . . . was in Hollywood on business, so I stopped at the hospital last night. She's been unconscious since the accident. They've got a close watch on her.”

I took a deep breath, then let it out slow. “Stray bullet?”

Target-towing involved letting anti-aircraft gunnery crews practice their marksmanship by firing live ammunition at a muslin target shaped like a long wind sock, which you trailed behind your plane. Oftentimes the plane got riddled with bullets, along with the target.

Miss C shrugged. “Hard to say right now. A crash investigator is sifting the debris. It was an A-24 salvaged from the South Pacific. In bad shape before Frankie took it up.” Her lips pulled into a sardonic smile. “Novara had insisted that the tow plane be authentic.”

The premium on planes for the front had forced training units to make-do with the leftovers. I massaged the muscles at the back of my neck, recalling the “war-weary” I'd been in yesterday.

Also a Dauntless A-24 dive bomber, it'd been abused and so poorly maintained that the tail wheel had blown during landing at Camp Davis, Oklahoma. The pull to the right had been so strong, the plane and I waltzed right off the runway. Fortunately, the nose had pointed into a grassy area and not into the row of planes parked on the flight line.

Miss C splayed her fingers on the desk, frowning before folding them, absently tapping the conjoined fists against the desk's surface. She delighted in playing up her great features--the perpetual tan on her flawless skin; the gentle curls and highlights in her blond hair; the couture clothing sheathing the curves of her frame. But she avoided calling attention to her hands. They were very masculine. For this reason, she never used nail polish. But something beyond a manicure was on her mind.

"What is it?" My thoughts tumbled unchecked from my lips. "The crash. . . You suspect it's not an accident?"

Her focus whisked back to me, unmistakable fire in her eyes. "There's something fishy going on at March. Someone's sitting on the preliminary investigation results. I want to know why."

"Preliminary results? You just said the crash investigator was still--"

"I know what I said, Lewis. But I have my sources. A source. Frankie's crash was no accident."

"Sabotage?"

Miss C's sigh was audible. "It's a delicate situation. I can't just rush in, make demands. But I'm not going to let this go. Frankie's one of mine. I need someone from my camp to get up there and dig around."

That's reason I was here. My stomach knotted.

"You're sending me to Hollywood to take over for Frankie? *I'm* the designated camper?"

"It's the perfect cover. You'll ride herd on Novara to see that our documentary projects the proper image. Behind the scenes, you'll be looking into the whys of Frankie's incident."

"Ride herd?"

"Precisely. I'm here for a strategy session with General Griffith. In a few hours, we're off to Washington. Some behind the scenes meetings with certain members of Congress. Need to drum up support for a bill to militarize the WASP. It's the ticket to get you gals the recognition and benefits you're entitled to, same as other non-combat military personnel."

Starting up the WASP program had been such a sensitive and complex ordeal that to get the service up and running quickly we'd been hired by, and were still paid by, Civil Service. So we were civilians serving under military regulations, a status Miss C despised.

"While we're at it, we're going to try and get a better measure of the tide swelling against us." She grimaced. "And, we hope, find a way to turn it back."

"Can we get back to finding out the whys of Frankie's incident? To riding herd on Novara? What do you mean, exactly?"

She lifted a perfectly groomed, disapproving eyebrow. “You’re the one with intelligence training. Behind the scenes sleuthing ought to be second nature.”

Three months ago, in early August 1943, I’d been summoned to Office of Strategic Services (OSS) headquarters in Washington to participate in a specially designed, condensed training course. Miss C had not warmed up to sharing one of her assets.

“Sleuthing might be second nature, but riding herd is new. Before I can do the job, I need to know what’s involved.”

“On my way here from Indio, I stopped off in Hollywood to attend the preview of a feature film. It’s about women who fly for the military and it’s due to be released soon.”

“Great! What’s it called?”

“*Ladies Courageous*. But hold your horses. We’re not going to be recommending the picture to anyone. *Ladies Outrageous* is more like it! It’s sentimental, fictional trash. The women I saw on that screen couldn’t be trusted with kiddy cars, let alone airplanes. It’ll set my--*our*--progress back years. Think about it.”

Her voice rose, she all but stepped on a soapbox. “The primary aim of the WASP may be to support male pilots, but here’s a chance to officially document our physical and mental capabilities. Once we show that you gals measure up to the men, the possibilities will be enormous. Opportunities for women pilots will open up across the board. In the military, maybe in the private sector, too. Ideally, we’ll get a good foothold and the doors will remain open, even after the war.”

She was singing to the choir. Our flying stint with the military, we all knew, was temporary. It was assumed that when the war ended we would return to more traditional roles. Some women couldn't wait. Not me. I wanted the unconventional. A post-war career. As a commercial pilot. Or, dare I dream, *a pilot doubling as secret agent?*

Miss C fluttered a hand through the air. "Now this froth--this *Ladies Courageous*--comes along with the hackneyed message that women are motivated by their interest in men, not by their work. The movie's no tribute, it's a slander to our gender. An insult to my program!"

"Who sanctioned it?"

Miss C rolled her eyes dismissively, but I waited, eyeing her patiently. She might know all there was to know about wheeling and dealing with the brass-hats, but my education in the area was elementary, at best.

"Look, Lewis. The movie's bound to attract a big audience. The studio is billing it as a prestige feature. There'll be a lot of hoopla over the big name stars involved. Loretta Young, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Diana Barrymore . . . they're all in it." She leaned back in the executive chair and rubbed her trademark lapel pin, a silver propeller set with a large rosette center diamond.

Risking another roll of her eyes, I prodded, "How, specifically, did they manage to muck up *Ladies Courageous*? And who mucked it up?"

"Some boys at Universal Pictures. A big-name, Walter Wanger, produced it. Can't say they didn't get some things right. Loyalty and bravery come across to a relative degree. The women even perform some intricate flying maneuvers. But then the boys wrote in a bunch of petty

squabbles, some pouting, beau stealing, a few breaches of discipline and a crash or two. And, *voila!* They watered down our accomplishments.”

Miss C pounded the desk. “They're not going to get away with it! Done right, the WASP Victory short will be the perfect countermeasure to that degrading portrayal. We're going to stick to Novara like glue until we have a true depiction of what the WASP are doing for the war effort.” She was loaded for bear. “I've teed things up for you with Novara -- let him know that you have the appropriate experience to assist him. And, that you're to act as my official liaison on the set.”

The shock must have shown on my face.

“It's a lot of responsibility, I know,” she rushed on. “I would've stayed on in Hollywood myself, but General Griffith wants me in Washington. He knows the Army needs all the good pilots it can get and he's willing to do battle in Congress to keep us. Thinks my presence might make a difference.”

I blinked. Responsibility wasn't what had me worried. “What experience?”

Miss C's eyes widened in surprise. “You mean what qualifies you to act as a consultant to Novara?”

I nodded.

“Your experience at Midland Aircraft, of course.”

My mouth fell open. She was referring to what I'd done before joining the WASP. Out of college, I'd wanted to be a commercial pilot. Getting there, I knew, would not be easy. A job --

any job -- with an aircraft company seemed a good start. Midland Aircraft Manufacturing in Cleveland claimed “no openings,” so I went for broke, ad-libbed about the grand things that a public relations writer could do for them, talked them into it. No such position had existed at Midland before. And, luckily, I’d managed to hold on to the job until the Pentagon’s high demand for aircraft made my position redundant.

“I made up instruction manuals and informational blurbs to sell airplanes,” I protested.

“That’s not writing screenplays! I’m a pilot. I know zip about filmmaking.”

She fortified herself with a deep breath. “Lewis, I need someone capable and trustworthy on this assignment. My source at Midland gave you good marks.” Now a smile flickered. “Your record as a cadet and pilot are impeccable as well.” Now barely a whisper. “FBI says you’re an ace operative, too. Resourceful.”

I should have been beaming. Miss C gave out compliments like a Scotsman gave away gold coins. But if I was so resourceful, how come one of the bad guys in Detroit slipped away?

My gaze dropped to the saddle shoes that had bonded Miss C to me. At our first meeting during WASP orientation, she’d immediately recognized the shoes. They’d once belonged to Amelia Earhart. Not one to stand on niceties, she’d asked directly where I’d gotten them. My Uncle Chance, owner of Trinkets and Treasures, a curio shop in my hometown of Chilton, Ohio, found them at a charity auction and later gave them to me. Miss C and Earhart had been close friends before Earhart’s disappearance. A common interest, beyond flying, had been extrasensory perception. Miss C later confided that she’d even been tested for it. On July 2, 1937, when

Earhart was hopelessly lost on her round-the-world attempt, Earhart's husband, George Putnam, phoned Miss C, requesting that she use her ESP to find his wife's downed Electra in the South Pacific. Miss C passed along the hunches that came to her, but after three days she knew that the opportunity to rescue Earhart had passed. She went to a chapel, lit a candle and said a prayer for her friend, knowing she would never use her extrasensory power again.

At that first encounter, after I confirmed whose saddle shoes they were, I could see the longing for them in her eyes. While I would never dream of giving them up and she couldn't begrudge my connection to them, this mutual link to Amelia created our special solidarity.

Miss C's search for Earhart, mine for Cardillac.

Miss C had said she'd sworn off ESP, but here she was, reading my thoughts. "Anything new on Cardillac?"

Miss C preferred using the escaped agent's code name. A few weeks ago, in my debriefing after the industrial espionage assignment had ended, I'd referred to Cardillac by real name. *We don't dignify traitors with the use of their given names*, she'd chided.

Cardillac. The name sent me back so fast. Detroit, six weeks ago, a stiletto racing toward me, its needle tip slicing a line of flesh along my forearm, a searing sensation. Blackness, then light, my nemesis gone.

Exasperated, I shook my head. "Nothing."

She placed a folded fist on the desk and leaned into me, her dark eyes a piercing slit. "Trust me, Lewis. You have the can-do attitude I need in Hollywood. But understand this. The WASP

unit is highly vulnerable just now. We could lose the program if Hollywood isn't straightened out. And Frankie needs our help. You're the woman for the job."

She was right. You lose an airplane, you don't quit flying. You crawl back across the tarmac, heave yourself into the next cockpit. I lost Cardillac. Other sharks swam in the sea.

"When do I leave?"

Miss C quickly filled me in on the background of the Culver City studio near Hollywood where I would be working with Roland Novara. Formerly the Hal Roach Movie Studio, once home of the Laurel and Hardy films and the Our Gang comedies, it was now an official Army Air Force base, known as Fort Roach. The base studio housed the First Motion Picture Unit, or FMPU, organized nearly two years ago in early 1942, when AAF had begun its tremendous expansion. Composed of Hollywood directors, editors, writers, cameramen, and other talents who'd traded tailored suits and studio overalls for AAF khakis, the unit produced training films, propaganda shorts, even full-length features to cover every phase and problem of instructing all branches of the AAF. "You'll be in good company."

It got better.

"Ronnie Reagan's the Personnel Officer. Alan Ladd, Edmond O'Brien, Kent Smith, Van Heflin, Bill Holden, George Montgomery..." She ticked off the names on her fingers. "They're all attached to the unit, too. Don't look so starry-eyed. Actors of their caliber would never be assigned to work with the likes of Novara."

Before I could say, *but what about the picture with Gable*, Miss C rolled her chair backwards and lifted a key ring from the middle drawer. "I pulled in a chit with the general. He's agreed to let you drive his automobile to Hollywood. It's yours for the duration of the assignment, in fact. It'll come in handy getting back and forth to the base studio. Fort Roach is a few miles from where you'll be staying."

My eyebrows shot up inquiringly.

"I've notified my dear friends, the Dunns. They're a lovely couple, live in Beverly Hills. They'll be tickled pink to let you bunk with them. I'll tell you all about them while we walk out to the general's car."

She handed over the keys. "I left my Staggerwing at Clover Field in Santa Monica. You'll be working at the studio for the most part, but you'll need to make a few trips to March Field near Riverside. All the flying sequences for our film are being shot there. The trip is a pain, seventy miles of desert. The Staggerwing will come in handy."

She slapped the desktop. "Well, that covers everything. Let's go."

I figured she was oversimplifying things. I had no idea to what extent.