

CHAPTER THREE

If Angela Moretti wanted anything, it was to be left alone, but her magnificent, and sometimes terrifying, flight earlier in the day had the whole base buzzing. In the mess hall, her own WAFS as well the few of the male pilots on the base congratulated Angela on her flying skills. At a separate table the nine Russian pilots and the pilot and co-pilot of the transport were eating or rather devouring the American base's food like starving tigers. Angela had read about the sieges of Leningrad and Stalingrad and knew that food in Russia was in very short supply. Again, Angela could see the blonde woman fixing her gaze upon her, her face was soft, like a teen's with ice blue eyes. Angela desperately wanted to know if the woman was really a combat pilot but thought the barrier between them by virtue of their languages would make any conversation impossible. That is until she saw her conversing with her Russian compatriots and then getting up to walk over to several of the mechanics and an American lieutenant, then back again to the Russian's table. It finally dawned on her that the young blonde Russian was acting as their translator.

Suddenly one of their pilots, the one she'd seen become ill after he'd stepped off of their plane, got up and lurched toward the front door of the mess hall. She could hear him faintly, retching and throwing up. Over on his table, Angela could see the man's plate of food had barely been touched. After that, he didn't return. *Maybe he's got the flu*, she thought. Trying to ignore her sudden fame, Angela concentrated on eating her dinner.

"Care to dance Grace?"

Sure thing Colonel . . . I mean John, Nothing like a good Glenn Miller tune. Say, looks like everyone's having a pretty nice time, even the Russians. They were pretty standoffish earlier but they seem to have loosened up. Some of them are even dancing with my girls."

"Ha, yeah, I think maybe a little lubrication may be breaking down the barriers. I can't say anything 'cause they're not my men but I thought I saw a vodka bottle being passed around a little earlier."

Grace Chapman just shook her head. “Ah, goes with the territory I suppose. Say, I don’t see that pilot of theirs that was sick at dinner.”

“No, neither do I, I think he went to their barracks. Must be a stomach bug I guess. And I don’t see their lady pilot, or your hot shot, Angela, either. Wow, she’s a real pistol. Told me straight out she wished she was at the front killing Germans instead of ferrying planes. Doesn’t that beat all?”

“Believe me John, she has her reasons. Now come on, let’s get some dancing in before the song ends.”

Angela could see her, over by one of the P-39s. She was checking the undercarriage then looking over the air intakes to the oil cooler. With her curiosity nearly boiling over, Angela started across the tarmac but then she stopped. *Maybe I should have an ice breaker*, she thought.

Heading back to the base’s mess hall, Angela grabbed two cups of coffee and walked over to the young blonde. “Hi, I brought you some of coffee. I heard you spoke English. You look like you’re studying the Cobras pretty intently. Is there anything I can help you with, you know one girl to another?”

The blonde looked at Angela, and reached to take one of the cups from her hands. She brought it to her lips, drank a mouthful and just stood there, with her eyes closed, reveling in the rich flavor. “*Spaseba*, I mean, thank you. It’s been so long since I’ve had real coffee, I forget what taste is like.” Then the young woman recognized who had given her the wondrous liquid gift. “Oh, you are pilot I saw today. I was amazed. I did not expect it.”

“From a woman you mean?”

“*Nyet*, ah, no, not from a woman; from an American woman. I did not realize you had one of such skill in your country. You have easy life in America. No one is bombing your cities, killing your people, yet I see you as good people. You help us very much with your airplanes. This one, P-39 I have never flown before. I must study it before tomorrow.”

“Wait, you’ve never flown a P-39 before? Then what are you doing here?”

“I was ordered to come. Every exchange of aircraft must have one Soviet who can speak English. These men’s regiment had one: Arkady, but he was killed three days ago. I was student of English before the Fascists invaded.”

“But you’re a pilot, aren’t you?”

“*Da*, ah, yes, we fly YAK-1 fighters in my regiment.”

“Wait, you’re a *combat* pilot?”

“Yes, I have six kills to my credit.”

“Holy Moses, then it’s true. You Russians really *do* have women combat pilots?”

The girl looked confused. “Of course, there are many of us, hundreds in fact. You don’t know this? I flew with 586th Regiment: all women, until last year, now I’m in mixed fighter squadron.”

“Tell me about it. What’s it like? I’d give anything, anything in the world to fly combat and to kill Germans.”

A hard look came to the Russian’s face. “You want to fly combat? You American women are all how you say . . . princesses here. What do you know about war? What do you know about the *svoliticy* Fascists! They haven’t raped your sister and then killed your father when he tried to stop them. They burned down my parents’ home. They burned our whole village. The only reason I’m alive is because I was away at university. But you, you will go home to big house, good food, with nobody bombing your cities. You know nothing of our struggle.”

Angela clenched her fists in anger. At first she wanted to hit the Russian for what she’d said, but then, she realized, this woman was a kindred spirit. Maybe the only other woman her age that could understand how she felt. “You’re wrong. I do know what you feel. My brother, Mickey, was part of the invasion of North Africa; you know the second front your Stalin wants so much from us. After Pearl Harbor, Mickey wanted to do something; anything to hit back for America, except instead of sending him to fight the Japs, the army sent him to kill Krauts. He was just seventeen. He lied about his age to the army. Mickey was with the 509th parachute infantry. They were first in, dropped behind the German and Italian lines only the pilot of their C-47 missed the drop zone by at least four miles. They came down right in the middle of an enemy position. About half his company was killed before they even made it to the ground. Only eight of them were still

alive, my brother included. They were surrounded. They kept fighting until they ran out of ammunition. My parents got the telegram just before Thanksgiving, the one that says we regret to inform you that your son has been killed in action.”

The Russian nodded. “Yes, I see, but many die in battle. At least he died fighting.”

Angela took a deep breath, to steady her emotions. The last thing she wanted was to cry in front of this girl. “But he didn’t. He was murdered. A few weeks ago I got a letter from Jimmy O’Connor. He was in Mickey’s outfit and he was his friend. Jimmy was out of it for a long time, and in a hospital. He lost his memory but then it came back. After Mickey and the others made it down, they tried to hold their position. They must have parachuted into the middle of an enemy battalion. They were eight against maybe a couple of hundred. Jimmy said they held out for over an hour until their ammo was gone. By then, another one of his outfit was dead. They were coming for them and they could hear the enemy’s voices. Mickey told the others he understood them, they were Italians. You see, my parents were born in Sicily. They speak Italian at home. Mickey figured they’d give up, figured the Italians would treat them okay. Jimmy said they put their hands up and that Mickey was talking in Italian with them. He thought everything would be all right because the Italian soldiers were pretty friendly. They even gave Mickey and the other guys some water and cigarettes. But then the Krauts showed up, only they weren’t regular army, they were SS. The Italians started arguing with them but one of the Krauts hit an Italian officer with his rifle butt and made them all clear out.

“Then . . .” Angela’s breath caught. She forced back a tear. “Those bastards tied Mickey and the others’ hands behind their backs. Made them kneel down and then . . . shot each one of them in the back of the head. Only Jimmy survived. It’s funny you know, we Italians always say the Irish have thick skulls. Maybe it’s true or maybe the son of a bitch that shot him had a weak powder charge in his bullet. Instead of going through his skull, the bullet went around it, just under his scalp and came out his forehead: Knocked him out cold. The Krauts left him for dead. A day later, after the I-ties and the Krauts pulled back, some Brit troops found him wandering around. He didn’t know who he was, or where he was, and he couldn’t remember what happened to him . . . until a few weeks ago. Then he . . . he wrote me a letter to tell me. Those stinking lousy Kraut

bastards murdered my little brother, made him kneel down and shot him like an animal! I want to kill them all, lousy stinking Nazis! I want to see them all dead!”

Angela couldn't help it, the dam that she had held in check over the past weeks had finally broken, and her tears streamed down her face. She didn't want to look at the Russian girl but when she did, Angela could see she was crying too, sharing her pain. Finally she pushed the tears away from her eyes with the palms of her hand. “I . . . I'm sorry, my name is Angela Moretti. I didn't mean to cry like that. What's your name?”

“I am Ekaterina Leonova, I'm a junior lieutenant, but . . . you may call me Katya. And, I'm sorry for what I said earlier. You do understand my pain and I yours. Would you . . . would you help me become familiar with this aircraft? By the way you flew it today, Angela; you appear to be the master of it.”

For the first time in weeks, since Jimmy O'Connor's letter, Angela's face broke into a wide smile. “You can call me Angie,” and she reached out to hug the young Russian girl. “I'll help you all you want, but first, let's go back over to the mess hall and get another cup of coffee and while we're there, let's have some of that leftover pie.”