



*Twelve Days Later*

“Well, I got your grandfather off to Lake Geneva. Now it’s just you and me until your dad comes when you’re released, which your doctor told me should be any day.” Mom moved from the doorway to the chair next to Grace’s bed. “You’ll be pleased to know we’ve kept your room the way you had it, so it will seem like home when you get there. Reenie and Lenny have orders to not go in there without checking with me first.”

“Thanks, Mom, but it’s okay if my sister and brother want to use the room. Well, maybe just Reenie. Lenny seems to create a mess wherever he goes. You didn’t have—”

“I have no idea who of your friends are still in town. You really haven’t been home except for a few days at a time since you left for college. Maybe when you’re well enough and get a job, you’ll meet people your age.”

Grace held up a hand. “Mom, stop. You’re rambling like you do when you’re anxious about something. I’m fine. I’m getting stronger, and I’m sure I’ll soon be back in Sweetwater ferrying planes in a few more months. I sent a note to the commander a

few days ago telling him I should be back on duty by the first of the year.”

Mom gave her a blank stare. “Did you say what I think I heard? I thought you were told you were discharged from WASP because of your heart condition.”

“That was when I first took sick and my rate of recovery was unknown. But I’m walking the hall a couple of times a day now and doing crunches here in my room.”

“You have weights in here?” Mom glanced around the room.

“No, but I figured out that my gear bag from the plane weighs about ten pounds. I’ve been using that. When I started walking last week, I could barely make it around the nurses’ station once. Now I’m managing it at least four times. I figure when I’m home I can walk outside and increase my distance. Hiking the lakeshore would be good too. I used to love taking the shore path out to Safe Refuge when it was still in the family.”

“That sounds like a good plan, but please don’t do anything until you get the go-ahead from your granddad. You don’t want to overdo until your heart muscle is strong enough.”

Grace waved a hand. “You’re forgetting I’m in better shape than most people, from flying those big planes and working out in the base gym. Granddad said that much himself.”

“I know, but he didn’t say you were ready to fly B-17s again, or should in the future.” Her mother stood and walked to the wheelchair in the corner of the room and rolled it over to Grace’s bed. “Let’s go to the conservatory for a change of scenery.”

“Sounds good, but I don’t need that chair. I can walk there.”

“You’ll do no such thing. It’s a floor below us, and you need to take the elevator and then walk another long hall.”

Grace knew better than to argue. Mom was as stubborn as she was. “What about if you bring the chair, and I’ll at least walk to the elevator on this floor and then sit in the chair the rest of the way.”

“Deal.”



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, the phone next to Grace's bed rang just as she returned from five laps around the nurse's station.

She picked up the receiver as she sat on the side of the bed. "Hello, this is Grace."

"Grace, Commander Benson here. How are you doing?"

Taken aback he called her by her first name without the usual Pilot Bauer, she gathered her wits and answered him. "Commander, so good to hear your voice. I'm doing fine, sir. Getting stronger every day and probably will be released in a few days. I sure miss everyone down there, though. Can't wait to get back."

Silence filled the connection.

"Commander, are you still there?"

"I received your note this morning."

"Wow, that was fast. Does the first of the year sound good for my return? I can't wait to sit in the 17's cockpit again."

"I'm sorry, Grace. I thought you understood when we last talked that you've been permanently discharged from your duties. WASP can't take a chance that the stress of flying bombers on a weak heart like yours could cause a heart attack or a stroke. That's why we had Miss Newport pack your things and ship them to your home in Wisconsin."

Tears welled in her eyes. Not finding a box of tissues, she wiped her eyes with the sheet. *Don't let him hear you crying, whatever you do.* "But, sir, I'm sure by January I'll be good as new."

"That may be true for someone in as good physical shape as you were, but regulations are regulations. If you had a heart attack while airborne and you didn't have a copilot as capable as Miss Newport is ... I shudder to think about it. I'm sorry, Grace. You were one of WASP's best, and we appreciate all you've done for our men. I'm sure you'll find a new way to use your flying skills. Please keep in touch."

Her stomach clenched and she swallowed hard. "I'm sorry

too. I understand it's not your decision. Thank you, Commander."

They said their goodbyes, and she grabbed the bedpan from her bedside table and threw up. The first time to upchuck since that day in the cockpit. Falling face down on the bed, she sobbed into the pillow.

"Grace, what's wrong?"

She raised her head and stared at Mom. "You were right. I'm no longer a WASP. They don't want me back. I really thought in my delirium I heard differently about my prognosis. My commander ... " She used her sheet to blot her tears. " ... called and told me how much WASP appreciates my service to the war effort, but they had to discharge me. I'm ready to go home."

"Oh, Grace, I'm so sorry. We thought you understood all that. I guess we should have clarified to make sure you did. You'll be happy to know I was just told you're to be released tomorrow. Your dad is on his way down here right now and will arrive by dinnertime. We can head back to Lake Geneva tomorrow."