

ONE

Chungking, China 1943

Anya Pavlovitch crumpled a piece of paper so tight it left fingernail impressions on her palm. “What makes him think I’m the right person for this assignment?” She reread the order.

EDMUND R. ATWATER
OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION
HONOLULU, HAWAII

ASSIST DOWNED NAVY PILOT.
U.S. TRANSPORT TO AID YOU.
MEET AGENT AT DESTINATION.

A cool breeze caused loose strands of hair to brush across her face. Anya fingered them back into place. *What about my ring? The only remembrance I have of my parents, thanks to that treacherous assassin Sun. What about what I want? I translate code for OWI. Now I’ve unwittingly become an agent.*

The roar of the plane engine grew louder over the Chungking airfield. “I know there’s a war on, but how much can one woman take?” She watched Mac’s plane, an enormous transport that resembled a gray whale, lift off the dirt runway headed for America. “He’d tell me ‘buckle up Sister. You have a bumpy road ahead of you.’” She smiled, saluted the plane as it banked left.

I’ll tell Mr. Atwater that I respectfully decline the offer. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. He’ll understand.

Mac looked out the aircraft window AS the plane headed west. They were still low enough that he observed Anya on the ground give him a wave. It had been several months since they had arrived in Shanghai. Their mission together started out rocky, but she had proven herself a worthy partner in his estimation.

I hope she's not angry about my suggesting her for the assignment. She needs to believe she's destined for this type of work. The only way to make that happen is to throw her into it—again.

Mac leaned back in his seat. *All I have to look forward to is sitting out the war behind a desk.*

I suppose the snow is gone back home. Summer will be on the horizon. I'm sure the chores have been piling up for my return; remove storm windows, inspect roof, clean gutters, mow lawn. Endless weekends of drudgery. Anya doesn't know how good she has it. I envy her in every possible way.

A tall, lanky man in faded khakis walked up to Anya. “Sergeant Walters, ma’am. We’ve been instructed to escort you south.” His youthful jaw sported a spotty scruff. *Promotions must be handed out fast these days.*

He handed her an olive drab knapsack.

“What’s this?” she said.

“Supplies, ma’am. You’ll want them where you’re going.”

“Where am I off to?”

“The jungle, ma’am.” He turned and marched back toward the airfield shack.

Anya tried to put all the pieces together. Her thoughts reeled as to why she had been chosen for this assignment. *I don't know how to rescue anyone, however, I did save Mac's life back in Shanghai.*

How am I the only one suited for this job?

Her mind bounced back in time to when she and Guy had rescued Mac from Sun's torture. The memory of Guy's death caused her chest to tighten. Mac's rescue had led to the loss of the love of her life. She had also assisted the Shinjing resistance in the rescue of their leader. *Maybe I can do it, but we're talking about the jungle—poisonous critters, biting insects, the hidden enemy. On second thought ...*

The sergeant turned. "Coming, ma'am?" He entered the shack.

Anya hurried her pace. "Can you take me to your commander's office? I need to send a message." She followed him through the shack to the street where an Army Willy's waited for them. They left Chungking and drove south along a rural backroad that snaked through the countryside. The cerulean sky was intensified by the juxtaposition of lush green rice fields alongside tall stocks of brilliant scarlet and white poppies. *"How can something so beautiful be so harmful?"*

It took them over an hour before the sergeant pulled into a gated area monitored by U.S. military police. They passed through the guard checkpoint to a makeshift camp with rows of dark green pyramid tents pitched on tamped down brown grass. Compared to the beauty she had seen earlier, the drabness did not escape her attention.

The sergeant pulled the jeep in front of the largest tent. Anya and Sergeant Walters entered to find a young man hunched over clickety-clacking on a typewriter. World and local area maps hung from a rope that stretched across one side of the tent. The soldier paused from typing and looked up. "What's up, Sarge?"

"The lady needs to send a message."

“The commander is out. You’ll have to come back.” He returned to his typing.

“Look,” Anya picked up the nameplate off his provisional desk, “Corporal Jackson, I need to send a message to the War Department in Honolulu and I must send it now. Got it?”

The corporal squirmed in his chair. His eyes shifted to the sergeant then back to Anya. “I ... I.”

“Don’t stutter. Just tell me where the radio is.”

“Tell her, Corporal,” the sergeant said.

The corporal stood up, hands at his side at attention. “Tent three. It’s in tent three, ma’am.”

Anya half expected him to salute her as she turned and walked out. “Where the heck is tent three?”

“This way, ma’am.” They walked on wooden plank sidewalks. A dusty dirt road lay between two rows of identical tents. Hoots and howls followed by several wolf-whistles erupted from inside a truck as it passed. Anya coughed from the intense combination of rancid motor oil and petrol exhaust. She dismissed the yowls as childish male antics.

“Sorry about that, ma’am,” the sergeant said.

She tried to keep up with his fast pace. “Anya. Please call me Anya.”

“Can’t ma’am. It’s not our way.”

“Our way?”

“The Army, ma’am.” He halted. “We’re here.”

Anya heard the hum of the generator outside of tent three. The two entered. A tall black box with several register meters and glowing dials on the front panel eclipsed the room. Next to it, sat a clerk wearing earphones plugged into a small

black box. Above the desk hung a poster depicting a scantily clad woman with curvy legs. The clerk tapped a telegraph key. He failed to notice them until he had finished transmitting his Morse code message.

He turned and eyed them warily. “What are you doing in here?”

Sergeant Walters opened his mouth to speak, but Anya blurted out. “I have to send an urgent message to OWI in Honolulu.”

“Let me see your authorization.”

“I don’t have any. I work for Edmund Atwater, the director. It’s urgent I communicate with him. Now.”

“Sorry, ma’am. There is nothing I can do for you without direct authorization.”

The click-clack of footsteps from behind caused Anya to spin around on her heels. A distinguished man with a bit of gray at his temple, light blue eyes, and square chin peered down at her. She knew from the eagle insignia on his collar that he was their commander. The sergeant and the desk clerk both immediately stood at attention and held their salutes until the commanding officer acknowledged them.

“What’s going on here?” He returned a salute. “At ease.”

“Colonel Colson, Sir,” Sergeant Waters stood with his feet wide apart and hands clasped behind his back. “Miss Pavlovitch wants to speak to OWI in Honolulu.”

“Miss Pavlovitch, are you in the habit of going over heads to get what you want?” the Colonel said.

Anya studied the tall officer who, in her estimation, had an understanding face. “Sorry, Sir, but I must contact my boss.”

“What’s so important that you have to speak to

Honolulu?”

“It’s my assignment, Sir. I’m not sure I am the right person.”

Colson rubbed his chin. “Maybe we can do one better. Follow me.”

She liked this officer. He had an urbane manner with an easy charm. And he was going to give her what she wanted.

The three retreated to the Colonel’s tent. They passed Corporal Jackson who continued to type as his eyes trailed them. On the other side of a makeshift curtain sat a cot with a footlocker at its end. Beside it was a small metal table. A slate blue box rested on it. The colonel opened the box. Inside was a phone handset.

Two knobs—one red the other black—had wires attached that stretched outside the tent. Under the handset was a dial. The Colonel picked up the handset, placed his finger in the last hole identified with the number zero, and turned it clockwise. It made a rat-a-tat sound as it came back around. Anya heard a muffled voice through the receiver.

“Colonel Colson here. Connect me to OWI Honolulu.” He paused then hung up. “They will call us back when the call goes through. Could be a few. Let’s see.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “It’s 1:00 p.m. here, 7:00 p.m. yesterday there. He may not be in.”

“He’ll be there. He works late. No family there,” she said.

“Tell me Miss Pavlovitch, what are you doing in China?” Colson said.

“I was shanghaied into assisting an OSS officer, and now I can’t seem to get out of this country.”

Colson smiled.

The phone box rang several minutes later. Colson answered the call. "Yes, this is him. Is Atwater in?" Colson handed the handset to Anya. "He's in."

Anya swallowed hard as she accepted the phone. She did not want to disappoint Atwater, but she had to tell him the assignment was too much for her to handle.