

BIRD'S EYE VIEW, CHAPTER ONE

The control room was warm and cozy in the quiet hour before dawn.

To relieve the tension while waiting for the bombers to return from their raid on Berlin, two girls played chess and another read aloud society gossip from the Tatler. A teakettle simmered on the hot plate.

Rose looked up sharply from her knitting needles when the gentle rain against the windowpanes began to make a scrabbling sound. "It's changing to sleet," someone said in a low voice.

The first snow had fallen on Yorkshire's desolate moors that morning, and all personnel were ordered to shovel the runways and brush off the aircraft. The homesick Canadian boys had frolicked like overgrown children, throwing snowballs and washing each other's faces.

Although Rose longed to join the horseplay, it was against orders to fraternize with the aircrews because she outranked them. When nobody was watching, she lifted her face to the skies, opening her mouth to feel the cold kiss of snowflakes on her tongue.

But this icy sleet was something else altogether.

"Update on the weather, please." The control officer spoke to the meteorologist sitting at his wooden desk in the corner, surrounded by his maps and instruments.

"One moment, sir. I'll ring and see what's up." He picked up the black telephone handset on his desk and spoke briefly, then hung up with a grim expression.

"It's a ruddy ice storm, sir, blowing in from Norway."

Immediately the room was electrified. Everyone pushed back their chairs and hurried to the long bank of windows overlooking the runway.

An aircraft could ice up in minutes. Not only did this add tons of weight, but if even the very thinnest layer of ice distorted the upper curve of the wings, the aircraft's balance was affected and it became impossible for the pilot to control. Iced up, a thirty-ton bomber could tumble from the sky like a falling leaf.

The station's forty-eight bombers, now strung out over the cold, black sea, running short of fuel after ten hours in flight, some trying desperately to limp home with flak damage and wounded men, were just beginning their descent.

"What's the forecast?" asked the control officer. All faces turned toward the meteorologist. "Not so good, sir. The temperature's dropping like a stone."

Nobody needed the official report to see that the sleet was rapidly worsening. A cloud of icy pellets rattled off the windows and a thick white blanket descended. The parallel rows of searchlights lining the runway were no brighter than flickering candles in the ghostly fog. Rose saw the dim shapes of ground crew running and sliding across the icy tarmac, the crash wagons moving into position.

The young clerk beside Rose made a small agonized sound in her throat. Rose knew she was secretly engaged to a rear gunner. The two girls clasped hands tightly as they stood at the window, straining their eyes into the whirling white darkness.

Then, over the sound of the storm, the first faint engine was heard.