



Songbird Under A German Moon

By Tricia Goyer

Excerpt provided courtesy of www.TriciaGoyer.com

Chapter One

Thump, thump, thump-thump.

Twenty-year-old Betty Lake gripped her bench seat's front edge, sure the airplane's engine shouldn't sound like that. To her ear, the repeating thrums sounded like a drummer's tempo, warming up for a night of big band. But unlike the drummer's tempo, the thumping didn't stir excitement in its audience's faces.

Sudden silence replaced the joking and laughing of the few dozen soldiers seated around her. The fearful gaze of the soldier sitting across from Betty confirmed her guess. The airplane was having problems. A shudder moved through her even more pronounced than that of the plane.

The twin engine C-47 was a paratrooper transport, certainly not a luxury airliner. Forty passengers sat facing one another against the fuselage on long benches attached to the airframe, with only lumpy, hard-packed parachutes for cushioning. The unheated air nipped at Betty's nose.

That parachute better stay right here—under my rump where it belongs, she thought as the airplane lurched in the air, causing her stomach to drop. She was the only female aboard the utilitarian aircraft. From the attention of the guys as she boarded, Betty could tell they appreciated the company of an American gal. She'd tried to pretend she wasn't afraid, wasn't cold, wasn't tired, but soon the shallow reserves she'd been drawing from would surely run dry. She tightened her jaw and urged herself to stay strong, despite the engine's continued thumping. *Come on, you can make it. Keep chugging along.* She patted the bare aluminum that was her seat.

Just a few months ago, this transport plane ferried soldiers across the English Channel, depositing them to fight on the front lines. The men did their jobs—or died trying—and now she was heading deep into Germany on a different mission—to sing for the remaining soldiers on Occupation Duty. To bring a few moments of joy to the GIs who dreamed of returning home, but instead had to guard the defeated people of a ravaged land.

Trying for a calming deep breath, Betty nearly choked on the odor of fuel, of soldiers' bodies that had been too long without a bath, and on something else—fear. She could imagine the soldiers' thoughts—*I didn't survive the war to die in a transport plane accident*. And she couldn't imagine coming this far and not singing.

It wasn't that she didn't understand the dangers before setting out. Dozens of performers had died “doing their part.” Some in airplane accidents, some hit by enemy fire, and others who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, it hadn't stopped her from coming. Singing for the soldiers was all Betty had wanted since she'd first heard of USO singers and comedians; acts like The Andrews Sisters and Bob Hope. When she'd first seen clips of their performances on the newsreels—entertaining troops, bringing smiles to soldiers' faces, and delivering the good ol' USA to soldiers' foxholes—she daydreamed about being one of them.

I can't die now. I should get to sing at least one song—and I'd rather not have that song be in the angels' choir, if I can help it.

The thumping became a roar. Betty sat erect and cocked her ear. The shake, shimmy, and rumble of the airplane made her wonder how long it would hold together. Her hands searched for the armrest that wasn't there and found the knee of the soldier seated next to her instead. She quickly pulled her hand away and averted her gaze from the soldier's smile.

“It's okay, dollface. You can cling to me for courage,” declared the red-haired, freckle-faced man.

“I don't believe my mother would approve, sir. And if this plane goes down, it will do so with my good reputation intact.” Betty winked, trying to make light of the situation. Trying to calm the pounding of her heart.

The chuckle of the redheaded soldier, mixed with the hoots of others near enough to hear her remark, told Betty her words did as she intended. She made them smile and found herself smiling, too.

“So tell me—” She turned her head and looked directly into the soldier's eyes. “Do you have a girl waiting at home?”

The soldier's cheeks reddened. “Well, no one is waiting. I wish there was...”

“From the way you say that, it sounds like you're thinking of someone special? Maybe someone you've been fancy on for a while?”

“How did you know? Are you a mind reader?” His eyes widened. “No—not quite. I just have a way of getting people to open up to me, that's all. My mother says it's a gift. My father says I need to stop butting into other peoples' business, but I can't help caring.” She lifted an eyebrow. “So don't try to hide the truth. There is a girl you care deeply for, isn't there?”

“Yes, I, uh, suppose there is. Her parents live two houses down from my parents' place. We sort of grew up together.” Then he leaned closer. “I've never told anyone this before, but I've been thinking about writing her—”

“You should.” Betty nodded. “Growing up on the same street, I’m sure you’ll have plenty to talk about.” She laughed. “And you no doubt already know her address.”

“Yeah—right.” He looked away, lifting his gaze as if the words were already forming in his mind.

The airplane shimmied some more, and she saw the soldier’s smile fade just slightly.

She couldn’t do anything about that engine, but maybe she could lighten the mood. *If I can catch my breath first.* After all, her official job as a USO singer was that of a morale booster—she just hadn’t realized how soon morale would need to be boosted.

An explosion shook the plane. Betty winced, grabbing the hand of the same redheaded soldier. Her stomach jolted, and she swallowed hard against the rising nausea. This time he didn’t say anything, but just squeezed her hand lightly as if to say, *I’ll do what I can to protect you.*

One of the guys from down near the tail of the plane—a tall, handsome soldier with light brown hair and a chiseled face—rose and hurried toward the cockpit. Betty supposed he was another pilot, uneasy with the idea of sitting back and waiting to see what happened. He moved through the fuselage with a John Wayne swagger, which she was sure was due to the aircraft’s swaying and rocking. As he passed her, he looked down and offered a nervous smile. She hoped the smile meant things would be under control soon. She didn’t want to think of the alternative.

They were twenty minutes away from Nuremberg, Germany. Twenty minutes—then an hour-long drive away from her new life and new career in Bayreuth. No, it was more than a career, it was a dream.

“Don’t worry, miss,” an officer seated across from her said as he leaned forward. “Sounds like a little engine trouble—nothing these pilots haven’t handled before.”

Letting go of her “friend’s” hand, Betty brushed hair from her eyes, where it had fallen during the plane’s shimmying. “Thank you, sir. I’m not worried. If these pilots survived Nazi fighter planes and ground artillery, surely they’re not gonna let one little ol’ engine stop them.” She curled her lips into a smile, hoping her grin looked half as confident as her words sounded. In her old job, she’d seen these planes on the production line. She’d spent two days training to work on them before she was given a job that better fitted her skills—singing at the airplane factory’s canteen.

Betty dared to glance out the plane’s window at the white clouds scattered throughout the sky, thinking of the countless newsreels she’d watched at the Paramount’s Saturday matinees. Her mind replayed the black and white images of bombers filling the air as they flew over Germany. Now, unbelievably, she was flying the same route. It was a miracle that she’d come this far, and no doubt it would take a miracle to get them the rest of the way.

Her daddy had said only Hollywood-type girls got picked for the USO, not recent high-school graduates with no formal training and only canteen singing on their resumes. Her older brother had told her the dream was impossible. *Didn’t he know that was the last thing he should*

have said? More than once Bobby'd tried to squelch her dreams, and more than once she'd proven him wrong. That's why, if anything would get them back on the ground safely, it would be the wings of this plane and her petitions to a faithful God.

She said a quick prayer and then scanned the pasty-faced passengers. Her knee jiggled like it always did when she felt her nerves turning her stomach into knots, and soon her lips began to move with the song "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer" running through her head.

"Though there's one motor gone, we can still carry on." She sang it once, low enough for only her seatmate to hear. But then she repeated it. Soon, everyone sang along.

The thumping, the underlying backbeat to the airplane's loud roaring, accompanied their song perfectly.

* * * * *

Even though Army Air Corp photographer Frank Witt had been seated in the fuselage, and even though he hadn't taken one day of flight school in his life, he knew something was wrong as soon as the C-47 climbed out after their last fuel stop.

Please Lord, let us make it there safely. After what happened to Lily— Frank let the thought fade. He couldn't think about losing his sister in a flying accident without the pain cutting deep to his soul. Ever since her death a year ago, he'd thought more of his own life. He wanted it to count. He wanted his assignment on Earth to matter. His photographs mattered—but his undercover work mattered more. He just hoped his parents wouldn't lose another child. Although the war in Europe was done, there were many factions who still fought for their place, their power, in the new world. Factions that, no doubt, would rejoice if this plane crashed here and now.

When the Gooney Bird had finally reached its assigned cruising altitude, the vibration, which had been constant, changed noticeably as the engine's speed changed, causing a continuous rise and fall of the engine's roar. His guess was the copilot was working with the mixture controls, looking for the sweet spot where the 1000-hp Pratt & Whitney Twin Row Wasp engines sounded best and the instruments showed normal. These engines were considered bullet-proof, and in-flight problems were rare. *Wouldn't you know we'd be the ones to get the trouble—and on the last leg of the flight.*

Before take-off, Frank had been shooting the breeze with the pilot and co-pilot when the ground crew had warned them the area had received four inches of rain overnight and there was concern that water had managed to find its way into the high-octane fuel storage tanks. Frank guessed that was the problem now. At least he hoped it was. He couldn't help but think back to a few of his other flights, when engine trouble had nothing to do with Mother Nature.

His mind raced as he considered those who still wished him dead. There were too many to count—most of whom weren't locked up in Nuremberg awaiting trial. The men and women Frank had ticked off were those who drew as little attention to themselves as possible, just as he had done during the war. Even his closest friends and co-workers didn't understand that the

photos he took on bombing runs meant little compared to the ones he took “off duty,” during his tours around the English countryside and through London’s busy streets. He’d foiled a sufficient number of enemy plots to cause someone to want to see him crash and burn. Frank just hoped that today’s trouble had nothing to do with him, especially since the aircraft carried the prettiest girl he’d ever seen, done up in her perfectly fitted USO jacket and skirt.

A loud explosion shook the aircraft, and the cabin brightened as belching flames shot past the right-side windows. Frank glanced around and noticed the faces of the others losing the little color they’d maintained.

Without hesitation, he rose and hurried to the cockpit, feeling as if he were walking the deck of a storm-tossed ship. He stepped into the cockpit doorway, interrupting the co-pilot’s words. When they acknowledged his presence, Frank stepped inside and stooped down close enough to the very busy pilots to converse with them.

“Captain, the starboard engine blew a cylinder.” The co-pilot’s anxious breath sounded hollow. “The cowling is ripped open, and we have flames. I’m killing the fuel supply to that engine.” “Got it.” Dewey, the pilot, nodded, his gaze intent on the gauges. “Increase mixture to the port engine to keep it cool, open the cowl flaps, and maintain full throttle. But watch the temps.”

“Things okay in here?” Frank leaned back against the bulkhead for support. “Have we been sabotaged?”

Laughter spilled from Dewey’s lips, and Frank chuckled too, yet inwardly he knew it wasn’t a joke.

“What’s wrong, Frank, you scared? Think you’ve flown ninety missions against the Germans, and now you’re gonna buy the farm ‘cause of an equipment malfunction?”

“Nah, I trust you and Norm. I just wanted to see if you had anything I could report to our passengers. I saw some of the new guys reaching for their chutes. Suppose this is the scariest thing they’ve faced since signing up. At least it will give them something to write home about, since they missed the war.”

“We’ll be fine. There aren’t any mountains in our flight path and the weather’s good at our destination—except for—”

“Except for what?” Frank asked after a pregnant pause.

“Well, we can make it there on one engine—unless it’s a fuel problem.” The pilot’s eyes remained fixed on the fuel gage. “If the fuel’s contaminated, we’re gonna have a situation on our hands.”

“Gee, Dewey,” Frank smirked. “I think you’ve seen too many films. ‘We’ve got us a situation on our hands, boys’? You’re starting to talk like those bottom-of-the-rung actors in the movies they’ve been showing lately.”

Dewey cracked a smile. “Shh—not so loud. We have a star aboard. She might hear you...”

“Temps going up on the port engine and she’s losing RPMs, Captain,” Norm said.

The smile on Dewey’s face faded.

“Get on the horn with Nuremberg. Inform them we are coming straight in and have them get the emergency crews standing by.”

“Captain,” Norm’s voice rose an octave. “Charts show a run of high-tension wires over one hundred feet high on the approach path for the active runway—”

“Keep the wheels up and only drop twenty degrees of flaps until I call clear of wires, got it?”

“Roger.” Norm nodded.

Dewey turned back to Frank. “You better head back and belt up. There’s nothing you can do, and I have a feeling it’s gonna get bumpier before it gets better.”

Frank nodded and placed his hand on the door handle. He supposed it didn’t matter what had gotten them into this situation. Sabotage or not, all he could do was ride it out.

“And Frank.” Dewey’s words stopped him.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t act like you’re scared. Last thing I need is a bunch of new recruits trying to go out the hatch, if you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, of course.” Frank tried to ease the tension on his face. Usually he had no problem hiding his emotions, but today it was harder. Especially when he noticed the girl’s eyes on his.

She’s too young, too pretty, to die today.

Visit www.triciagoyer.com for more sample chapters and details about upcoming releases!