

SAPPHIRE SKIES

BELINDA ALEXANDRA

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

O N E

Orël Oblast, Russia, 2000

He had never stopped searching for her and now the moment of truth had come.

Dawn was breaking over the Trofimovsky Forest when the military car that had carried General Valentin Orlov and his son, Leonid, from Moscow came to a stop at the beginning of a fire trail. A dozen people with shovels and buckets were standing around a mechanical digger and drinking tea from thermos flasks. The summer jackets and pants they wore were crumpled and the men were unshaven. They must have been here all night, Orlov thought, running his hand through his own neatly parted hair. He recognised his friend Ilya Kondakov, the aircraft archaeologist, among them.

Orlov respected Ilya. Although their annual searches of the old battlefields of Orël Oblast were motivated by different reasons, at least Ilya had regard for history and the twenty-seven million Russians who had lost their lives during the Great Patriotic War. Orlov had discovered too many graves and crash sites where relic hunters had been before him. He shuddered at the

memory of the skeletons left open to the elements. The stolen identification capsules and personal items meant that those soldiers would forever be missing: both in official military records and in their loved ones' lives.

The driver stepped out and offered his hand to Orlov to help him out of the car. The gesture was a courtesy but it irritated Orlov. He might be retired but he did not like to be reminded of it. In his mind he was still the youth with the smooth forehead and chestnut hair who had first put on a military uniform nearly seventy years ago.

'Good morning, General Orlov,' said a young man in an air-force uniform, saluting him. 'I am Colonel Lagunov. I hope that the overnight drive was not too arduous for you? Marshal Sergeyev was certain that you would want to be present today.'

The representative from the Russian Ministry of Defence made Orlov realise how seriously this new find was being taken. What had they discovered that caused them to be so sure this was Natasha's crash site? As a result of his and Ilya's searches, many Russian pilots had been recovered but Natasha had always eluded them.

Ilya strode down the slope and shook hands with Orlov and Leonid. It seemed that he and Lagunov had already met.

'I'm glad you could come. I wasn't sure if it was too soon after your operation,' Ilya said to Orlov. 'I'm sure this is it.'

'Why?' asked Orlov, ignoring Ilya's reference to his health.

Ilya indicated the fire trail and Orlov walked beside him towards it. Lagunov and Leonid followed a few steps behind.

‘The area is being surveyed for a new road,’ Ilya explained. ‘This is virgin forest and the trees are so close together and the undergrowth so thick that if it wasn’t for the piece of wing the surveyors stumbled across, I doubt the site would have been found.’

‘Yes, but what makes you so sure it is ... Senior Lieutenant Azarova’s?’

Ilya stopped and looked directly at Orlov before reaching into his jacket and taking out a piece of bent metal. ‘We did a topsoil search around the site. Among the bits of metal and Perspex we found the data plate with the numbers 1445 on it.’

Orlov drew back at the sight of the plate. He had an urge to fall to his knees but resisted. Instead he jutted out his chin. He was used to mastering his emotions. The serial number of the Yak that Natasha was piloting when she went missing had been 1445. It was as good as confirmation.

‘How deep is the plane?’ Orlov asked. There was a quiver in his voice. Ilya would have noticed it but he was sensitive enough to pretend he hadn’t.

‘I’m guessing from the readings from the metal detectors it’s somewhere between four and five metres under the surface,’ he said. ‘We didn’t want to use the mechanical digger until you arrived.’

‘Thank you,’ muttered Orlov.

The forest closed around them and the men trudged along the trail in silence. The balsamic aroma of the birch trees stimulated Orlov’s nostrils. The grassy undergrowth was damp and springy against his legs. There was something comforting about the white trunks of the trees, resplendent in their summer foliage. ‘Birch’ was an ancient word that meant ‘to keep’. The forest

had held Natasha all these years. It would have hurt her to know that all this beauty was doomed. She had once told Orlov that the world was being destroyed by mankind's incessant need to be somewhere else. Natasha had been referring to the Germans who had invaded their country in 1941, but over the years Orlov had often wondered what she would have said about his career. He had spent his post-war life training men and women to go beyond the spheres of human existence.

A twig cracked on the trail ahead of them. Orlov glanced up and for a moment the mists of his inner turmoil parted and there stood Natasha, beautiful with her white-blond hair and grey eyes. He had loved her with his heart and soul.

'I knew you'd come ... eventually,' he heard her say, as her mouth curved into a smile.

A weight pressed on his chest. 'I've missed you,' he said. 'How I've missed you!'

Natasha's image faded and Orlov found himself staring at a deer. The animal lingered for a moment, her red-gold hide twitching before bounding away. He took the map of Orël Oblast from his pocket, although he'd carried every field and stream of it in his memory for years. In the summer of 1943, the Trofimovsky Forest had been deep in enemy-occupied territory. What had made Natasha disobey rules and fly so far into it? Was it because of what he had told her that afternoon?

The sounds of birdsong and summer insects gave way to human voices as they approached a clearing marked out with stakes and ropes. A female journalist with the *Moscow Times* printed on her notepad was speaking with one of Ilya's volunteers, while a photographer took pictures of the surrounding area.

‘When a fighter plane like the Yak Senior Lieutenant Azarova was flying hits the ground nose first at full speed, it torpedoes into the earth to a certain depth,’ the volunteer explained to the journalist. ‘If the ground is soft, it forms a crater which quickly fills. Unless there is noticeable debris around the area, the crash site and the pilot may never be found. There are secret tombs like this all over Europe.’

The journalist was only half-listening. She was distracted by Orlov’s appearance. ‘Is that who I think it is?’ she asked.

Orlov lifted his gaze to the tree line. His eyes discerned where the plane had sheared through the trees and younger saplings had taken root around the site. He saw for himself the truth of Ilya’s description: you could walk within a metre of this place and never realise that a plane was buried there.

His thoughts were interrupted by the rumble of the mechanical digger approaching along the fire trail. What he would give for a moment of quiet so that he could stand alone with Natasha in the majesty of the forest and remember her as she had been, before this whole grisly business got underway. The other volunteers walked in behind the digger. Orlov grimaced when he saw Klavdiya Shevereva with them. The retired school mistress had managed to find out about every recovery operation for Natasha’s plane. Klavdiya was responsible for establishing a collection of newspaper clippings on Natasha, and had even persuaded Natasha’s mother to donate her daughter’s dancing shoes and scrapbooks to the small museum she ran in the Arbat. While Orlov appreciated Klavdiya keeping Natasha’s memory alive — ‘Natalya Stepanovna Azarova is a national heroine who deserves to be honoured

as such' — he sometimes found her interest in his beloved distasteful, like that of an obsessed fan stalking a film star.

Behind Klavdiya marched a group of school students. They were accompanied by a priest clothed in the gold finery of the ancient church. The priest was a thoughtful gesture, organised by Klavdiya no doubt. It was something Natasha would have appreciated. Orlov regretted his unkind thoughts about the school mistress. Natasha, who had been obsessed with film stars herself, probably would have liked her. But Natasha had possessed the gift of getting along with people. Orlov leaned against a tree and acknowledged that he was irritated because he had always wanted her to himself. Now he had to share this intimate moment with the whole world.

The priest sprinkled holy water over the site and blessed the operation. Klavdiya gave her usual speech: 'Young women like Natalya Stepanovna Azarova fought alongside men in the Great Patriotic War to save the Motherland. We must never forget her ultimate sacrifice.' Then the digger moved in and began its work.

As the grey earth yielded to the machine's power, Orlov saw the eighty-three years of his life pass before him. It seemed to him that he had barely been alive before he met Natasha; and after her disappearance his life became an exercise in endurance despite all his achievements. The whole reason for his existence had been squeezed into the months he had known her.

At around two metres into the ground the digger bucket struck metal. Orlov recoiled at the sound. Ilya moved in and brushed aside the mud to reveal tailplane wreckage. The stench of airplane fuel was overpowering. Volunteers stepped forward to sift through the soil for anything that would confirm the identity of the pilot and

plane. It seemed to Orlov that after all these years of waiting, things were moving too quickly. He wiped his face and realised he was sweating.

More pieces of the airplane's frame were discovered. Then the twisted fuselage was lifted from the ground. Leonid stepped forward and took Orlov's arm to support him. 'Are you all right, Father?' he asked. Orlov didn't answer him. He couldn't take his eyes off the mud that was being washed from the cockpit. She'll be in there, he thought.

He had a sudden urge to flee the scene but he remained where he was, his eyes fixed on the volunteers who were sifting through the soil looking for human remains. Orlov knew the skeleton would be fragmented. The plane had gone in nose down. No pilot would have stayed in one piece at that level of impact. His hope was that Natasha had been killed in combat and was already dead when the plane hit the ground. At least there was no evidence of a fire.

When the cockpit was clean, Orlov shuddered to see how well preserved it looked despite the bent foot pedal and smashed instruments. Ilya waved to Orlov and pointed to the control column. 'The gun button is still set to FIRE,' he called out.

All Orlov could hear after that was the blood pounding in his ears. His chest felt tight. Leonid insisted that he take a seat on a nearby rock. He accepted a sip from Leonid's water bottle but it tasted salty and did nothing to ease his parched throat. Dear Leonid. His son was a grey-haired fifty-seven-year-old and a father himself, but Orlov still thought of him as the sweet boy with the brown eyes who always looked up to him. Did Leonid ever suspect that his mother had not been the love of Orlov's life?

One of the female volunteers gave a cry. She had been washing something in a bucket and now ran towards Ilya holding whatever it was she had discovered in a towel. What had she found, Orlov wondered, dread pressing in on him. Teeth? Toes? A piece of shattered skull with strands of hair still stuck to it? He winced at the memory of a previous summer's dig when he and Ilya had discovered the deceased aviator's boots with the remains of his feet still in them. Orlov did not want to think of Natasha's creamy white body appearing like that.

He shut his eyes again and remembered her as she had been: leaning against her plane and surveying the sky in that intense way she'd had. She was only five feet tall but she'd had a way of walking and standing that made her seem like a person of much grander stature. Even as an old man he still swooned at the memory of the silkiness of her skin the first time she had lain beneath him.

'The important thing is to stay calm,' he could hear her telling him. It was her way of making fun of Orlov, for that was his famous saying. It came as the result of an attack on their airfield a few weeks after Natasha had joined the regiment. A hangar was damaged and two planes on the runway were destroyed. Orlov and Natasha had thrown themselves into a ditch seconds before the ground they had just been walking on was strafed. 'The important thing is to stay calm,' he'd said and she had never let him forget it.

'Can you identify these? They were in the cockpit.'

Ilya's voice startled Orlov. He looked up to see his friend holding out the towel. His breath caught in his throat when he realised what Ilya was showing him. They were not human remains, but the sight of them still made him weak: a gold filigree compact and a matching

lipstick holder. They identified Natasha as the plane's pilot more unequivocally than even the data plate. An image of Natasha powdering her face and applying lipstick before going into battle flashed before Orlov. Make-up was strictly against air-force dress code and, as her squadron leader, he had sent her to the guardhouse many times for ignoring the rules. Eventually, after realising the foolishness of locking up his best wingman when good pilots were scarce, Orlov had turned a blind eye to her disobedience.

He nodded at Ilya. Over the years, he and Ilya had dug up nearly eighty sites together. Every pilot had mattered to them, but this site was the most important of all. Yet even with the proof of the data plate and cosmetic cases, Orlov still had trouble believing that they had finally found Natasha.

'This is it!' Ilya told the volunteers, who had stopped working to watch Orlov's reaction. 'This is Natalya Azarova's crash site.'

The dig continued. The volunteers, driven by the fact they were now excavating the grave of a famous heroine, worked with double the energy. Klavdiya, despite her bent back and varicose veins, worked the hardest. She cried with triumph when she discovered ammunition boxes and guns that were also marked with the serial number of Natasha's plane. Orlov could no longer stand passively by. His doctor had warned him against too much physical exertion, but he no longer cared. If this is my last day then so be it, he told himself as he got down on his hands and knees to sift through the dirt piles. He was momentarily distracted by the shrill cry of an eagle. It soared above the clearing, wings outstretched. It was massive; most likely a female.

Something sharp pricked Orlov's skin. Glancing down he saw that he was holding a round object and that his palm was bleeding. He took whatever it was to the rinse bucket. When he had washed away the dirt and recognised what he had found, a wave of grief overwhelmed him. He sat down in the dirt and tugged at his collar. Leonid, frightened that his father was having another heart attack, rushed towards him. But he stopped short when he saw the delicate object Orlov was holding in his trembling fingers: a sapphire and diamond brooch.

'It was her call sign, wasn't it?' asked Leonid. 'Sapphire Skies.'

'It was her lucky charm,' Orlov replied softly. 'But it didn't help her that day.'

By late in the afternoon, the mechanical digger had removed all the wreckage of the plane and the volunteers had searched the topsoil of an area wider than had originally been marked out. They had located most of the interior of the plane — the seat, controls, Natasha's personal belongings — but nothing of Natasha herself nor her parachute. Ilya walked around the site deep in thought then gave the volunteers the instruction to secure it and gather the search equipment. Klavdiya placed the cosmetic cases and brooch into a protective metal box and pressed it to her chest.

Leonid indicated to his father that the military car had returned to take them to their hotel.

Ilya approached Orlov and the two men held each other's gaze. There was no need for them to state the obvious. The day's dig had finally solved the mystery of where Natasha's plane had crashed, but without Natasha's remains, Orlov was in turmoil. He did not

want to look at Lagunov, the air-force man. Instead, he glanced at the setting sun, as if the answers he sought might somehow appear there. For years now, he had been convinced that his beloved had been killed in an air fight. There could be no other explanation for why she had not returned to him. But today's discoveries had made it very clear: Natasha had not gone down with her plane.