

ACE 44

*Treatment of a screenplay
by Vladimir Alenikov and Mathew G. Crisci*

*Inspired by the book, **Call Sign, White Lily**, by M.G. Crisci*

The complex, bittersweet love triangle that is ACE 44 begins in the 1930's.

A daring and attractive Moscow teenager, LILIA ZVANTSEVA, learns to ice skate like the wind, constantly challenging the boys. She falls in love with flying. By the age of 16 she trains men to fly. At 18 she enters the Russian Air Force and quickly becomes a flying ace and respected lieutenant.

A handsome, rugged young man from Siberia, VLADIMIR SERGIN, hunts bears for sport with his peasant father. In his mid-20's he enters the military to thwart the advances of Hitler. He also becomes a respected ace and Captain of the elite 473rd flying regiment. He falls in love with Lilia after she is assigned to his squadron.

An American M.I.T. graduate in his late 20's, the son of Russian parents, GREGORY MORTON, enters the U.S. officer training program. Because of his fluency in Russian, his intimate knowledge of fighter planes and his training skills he is promoted to Major by the age of 30.

After Hitler's invasion of Russia, America agrees to build 3,600 of its advanced P-39 fighter planes for a depleted Russian Air Force. As part of the agreement, that nations agree that 100 Russian are to be secretly trained in the rural community of Elizabeth, North Carolina, far from public view.

Segrin's squadron – 6 men and Lilia comes to the small Elizabeth city for this special secret training. Morton is the one who is responsible for their training. It is here Lilia, Sergin and Morton come to train, to live, and to love during an intense 10-day training program.

Morton quickly learns Lilia, the daughter of a wrongly executed State railroad manager, is like no woman he has ever met. Lilia realizes Morton is like no Russian man she has ever met. He is intelligent, sensitive, bi-lingual, understands the American *and* Russian way of life, and...is engaged to another.

Through circumstance, Lilia comes to spend some private moments with Morton to the chagrin of the increasingly jealous Sergin. The more Lilia and Moron learn of each, the stronger the attraction. As the training concludes, Lilia is genuinely conflicted. *How can one woman maintain such deep affection and respect for her Russian mentor while falling in love with a man from an entirely different world?* On their last evening in America, Lilia makes a surprising

choice. She and Morton exchange vows of love on the dance floor of a local western bar with a deeply disappointed Sergin in clear view. They decided to spend life together after the war. Morton promise to write her every day.

Upon her return to Krasnoyarsk Air Base in Siberia, Lilia befriends an outspoken wing person, ARINA BUDINA, mid 20's, and soft-spoken, problem-solving mechanic, OLGA SPRINKINA, late 20's. A despondent Lilia explains the fact that she has not heard from Morton. Arina and Olga dismiss Morton as a fleeting wartime happenstance and advise her to choose Sergin because "he is close, he is real Russian, and he loves you deeply."

Unbeknownst to Lilia, Morton's daily letters have been deemed suspicious by the head of base security, GENNADIY KUTENZOV, mid 40's, and never delivered. During the ensuing months, Lilia completes over 100 missions and registers more solo kills than her male counterparts. Reluctantly, her exploits are publicized in Pravda news stories and war posters. The Russian press nicknames her the "Führer's Worst Nightmare," making her an inspiration to all Russian women and a major embarrassment to Hitler's elite Luftwaffe.

Morton learns of Lilia's wartime exploits through newspaper stories left by pilots he subsequently trains. He tells his socialite fiancée, HANNAH WOODLEY, early 30's, about Lilia. She scoffs bitterly. Morton also gains permission from his commander, JOSEPH BRITTON, late 40's, to fly to Krasnoyarsk to retrain the first Russian aces on new P-39 operating enhancements. Both understand the real reason for the trip.

Concurrently, Sergin and Lilia successfully battle the Nazis in the air, while on the ground, Sergin proposes marriage and pledges to love Lilia "as no man has ever loved a woman." Initially, she hesitates, still hoping to hear from Morton. After a forced landing during which Sergin risks his life to save Lilia from a group of vicious Nazi ground troops, she agrees to marry.

The war stops for a few fleeting moments. Lilia and Sergin are unofficially married by commanding officer, COLONEL MICHAEL BORISOV, late 30's. After a tender, moving ceremony, attended by the entire regiment, they spend their wedding night in Borisov's tent, a gift from Borisov.

The following day, a major air battle takes place in the nearby skies. Arina's plane explodes in front of Lilia's eyes. An angered Lilia disables the enemy plane, causing the pilot to parachute. Sergin riddles the man with bullets as Lilia screams "enough." Ironically, the very next day, in yet another skirmish, Sergin is seriously wounded in front of Lilia's eyes. He tries to parachute to safety but is ripped to shreds by a Luftwaffe ace's relentless machine guns. Lilia, trying to save Sergin, is seriously wounded, but manages to return to base.

Morton, unaware of what has transpired, lands in the middle of the night. He learns from Borisov the wounded, war-weary Lilia rests in a hospital bed. He also discovers Sergin has perished. Morton decides to bring some levity to the grim situation. He nears her bed wearing a surgical mask, and does a humorous surprise reveal.

After they share recent experiences on a nearby base bench, Lilia realizes Morton indeed wrote every day. At the very moment they renew their vows of love, the base is rocked by enemy fire. Every available plane is ordered to the air. Lilia insists on joining. Morton protests. Lilia comforts Morton by explaining they will never again be apart.

Lilia makes a rare mistake in the skies. She angrily pursues a lone enemy plane into a cluster of dark, dense clouds. Suddenly, she finds herself surrounded. Morton watching through binoculars helplessly urges for her to retreat. The Nazi squadron leader sneaks up behind Lilia with both cannons blazing. He shatters her wings. Borisov arrives with reinforcements. The Nazi squadron leader, now vastly outnumbered, calls for retreat. Borisov skillfully positions himself under the leader's plane, and shoots straight up. The Nazi plane explodes into a fiery mass.

The wounded Lilia is unable to regain full control of her plane. She attempts a forced landing on the runway. She bounces off the tarmac into the nearby woods and bursts into flames. Morton comes running, pulls her from the plane and tenderly carries her motionless body to a nearby bed of wildflowers. Morton whispers, "I love you" in her ear. Lilia's eyes open briefly and she smiles at Morton. Her eyes close slowly for the final time. Morton sobs uncontrollably.

The story ends with joyous dream sequence that depicts life as it might have been after the Nazi nightmare. The important people from Lilia's war years — Arina, Olga, and Borisov, among others — have been invited to a New Year's celebration at Lilia's parent's apartment in Moscow. During the subsequent dialogue and toasts we learn they have all started families and careers. Lilia, now a commercial pilot with Aeroflot, is the last to arrive. After apologizing for her tardiness due to inclement flying weather, she introduces her new husband and their new daughter. Lilia's father approaches, "A pleasure to finally meet you." Lilia's husband reaches out to shake hands. The story comes to a sudden end before the reveal, leaving the moviegoer to wonder which man Lilia ultimately choose.

The End

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