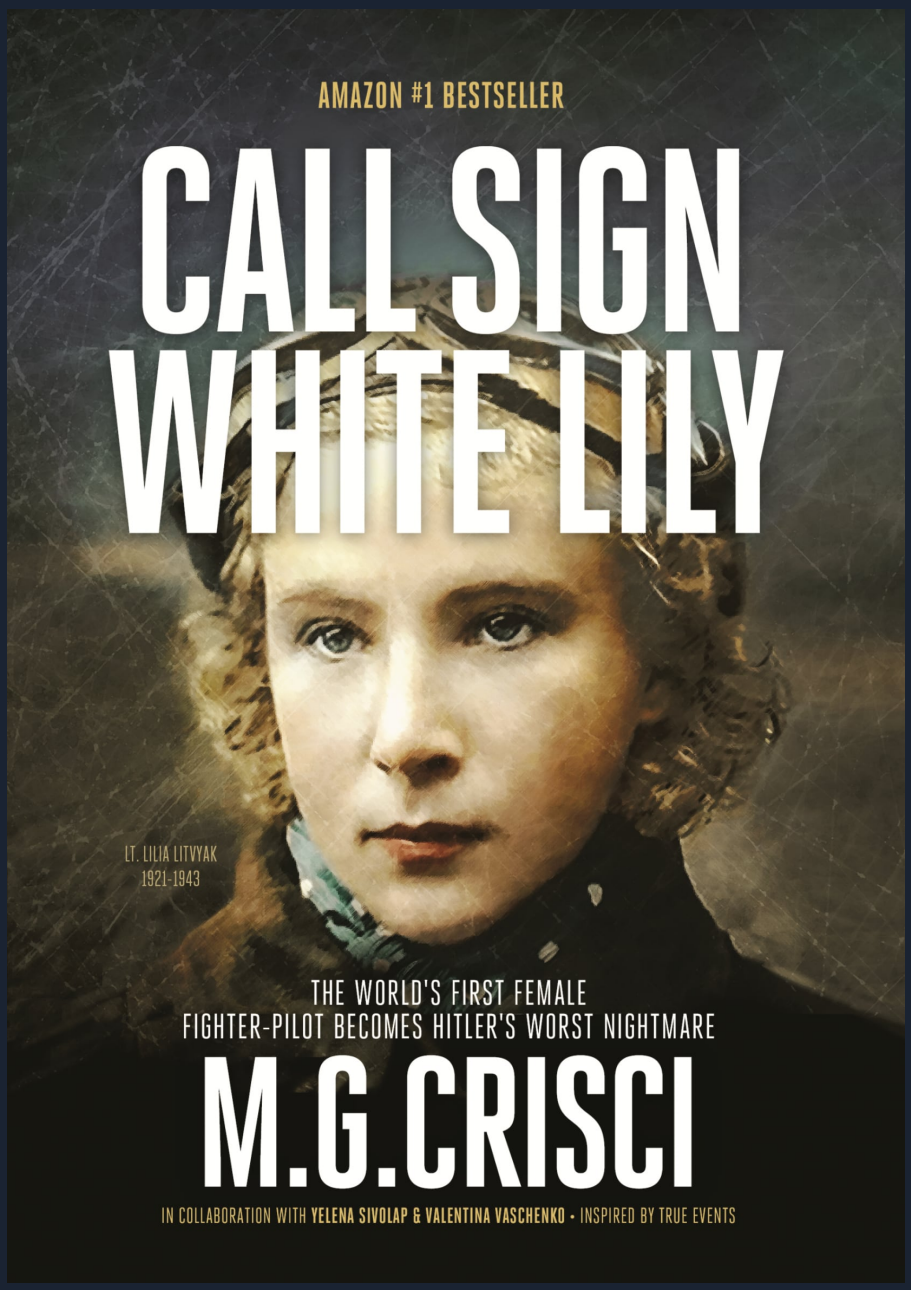


Call Sign White Lily

M.G. Crisci

BookGist Summary

Call Sign White Lily

by M.G. Crisci

Genre: HISTORY / World (HIS037000)

Key Takeaways

• Lilia Litvyak's defining ambition is to fly: from childhood swings and skating to aviation lessons, she repeatedly turns a dream dismissed as unsuitable for women into practical achievement.

• Her parents shape different but complementary parts of her character: Vladimir fosters patriotism, curiosity, and courage, while Anna teaches resourcefulness, self-reliance, and a lasting love of beauty and wildflowers.

• The story portrays Stalin-era life as a mixture of genuine social change and state violence. Vladimir's unjust arrest and execution expose how suspicion, informants, and unchecked authority can destroy an ordinary family.

• Lilia's success depends not only on individual daring but also on teamwork. Major Marina Raskova, mechanic Inna Pasportnikova, pilot Katya Budanova, and other comrades contribute skills essential to survival and combat.

• The women pilots challenge gender barriers in a military that doubts their abilities, yet the book stresses that recognition is uneven and often arrives only when wartime necessity overrides convention.

• The Night Witches' improvised night-bombing tactics show how knowledge of an aircraft's limitations can become an advantage: quiet gliding, low-altitude approaches, and changing attack routes help vulnerable biplanes surprise the enemy.

• Combat transforms Lilia from an idealistic young pilot into an increasingly effective fighter, while the deaths of friends and her beloved Lyosha make the human cost of victory impossible to ignore.

• Lilia's lipstick, scarves, flowers, and painted lilies are not merely decoration; they express her identity and insist that military service need not erase her womanhood.

• The framing story emphasizes how memory can be recovered through collaboration: Valentina Vaschenko, Inna, local residents, and young scouts spend decades finding Lilia's remains and restoring her name to the historical record.

Who Should Read This Book

Call Sign, White Lily is best suited to readers of World War II history, historical fiction, aviation stories, and biographies of women who challenged institutional barriers. It follows Lilia from a curious Moscow childhood to combat aviation, pairing flying and military detail with family life, friendship, romance, grief, and the long campaign to recover her story. Readers interested in the Soviet experience of the war will also encounter a perspective less familiar in many English-language accounts. The book is more novelistic than a conventional biography: its author explicitly describes it as historical fiction, with imagined scenes and dialogue built around a real person and historical events. Readers seeking a rigorously documented military history should consult the references and independent historical sources alongside it. Those who enjoy narrative-driven works about women in combat may find it a moving complement to books on the Soviet Night Witches and other wartime pioneers, with unusual emphasis on Lilia's personal identity and the community that kept her memory alive.

Chapter Summaries

Foreword

The author recounts how a conversation with a Russian-born taxi driver, Boris, challenged his limited understanding of the Soviet Union's enormous losses in World War II. A later museum exhibition deepens his resolve to tell a Russian-centered story and to recognize the Soviet-American alliance. Research leads him to Lilia Litvyak and then to Ukrainian curator Valentina Vaschenko and translator and collaborator Yelena Sivolap. Their partnership, built through correspondence and visits, becomes the foundation for a historical novel intended to restore attention to Lilia and to women's achievements in male-dominated societies.

Chapter 1

Born in Moscow in 1921 to former peasants Anna and Vladimir Litvyak, Lilia enters a family marked by affection, hard work, and her parents' hopes for a better life. The chapter flashes back to how Anna's practical intelligence caught Vladimir's attention in a potato field and how the couple moved to Moscow, where he built a career as a carpenter and railway worker. As an infant, Lilia displays unusual coordination, night vision, and fierce determination—traits dramatized through her insistence on keeping flowers beside her crib. Her parents' modest home and warm partnership establish the emotional foundations of her later independence.

Chapter 2

As Stalin consolidates state control, Anna and Vladimir accept government jobs, believing regular work and wages will improve their family's prospects. Anna discovers fashion magazines and experiments with lipstick and homemade floral fragrances, introducing Lilia to the idea that personal appearance can be a source of pleasure and self-expression. Vladimir's railway career takes him away frequently, but he and Lilia share a ritual of going to the park swings. Their outings nurture her love of speed and height, while her insistence that she wants to "touch the sky" foreshadows her future in aviation.

Chapter 3

The Litvyaks take young Lilia to the May Day celebrations in Red Square, where Vladimir explains the family's gratitude to the Soviet state and warns her that political discussion belongs in private. Lilia's questions reveal that she is already thinking beyond the official slogans she hears. Her friendship with neighbor Elena begins through games, but a quarrel exposes the Demidovs' jealousy of the Litvyaks' larger apartment and better furnishings. The chapter introduces the resentment that will later become dangerous under a system where private grievances can be turned into political accusations.

Chapter 4

At the advanced School No. 1, Lilia excels academically but frustrates teachers with questions about collectivization, shortages, and the treatment of peasants. Her mother defends her curiosity, while the school principal insists that children should absorb state doctrine rather than debate it. Lilia's extraordinary memory lets her retain lessons without conventional studying, and her leadership emerges in games she invents for classmates. When her friend Katya falls from a tree, Lilia stays calm, organizes a makeshift stretcher, and sends older students for help; Katya nevertheless dies from her injuries, introducing Lilia to grief and crisis.

Chapter 5

Lilia teaches younger neighborhood children to play "Puddles," encouraging them to solve problems rather than simply follow instructions. Her patience and generosity are evident when she coaches Lyudmila in belly-sliding races and gives the younger girl her spare warm cap. These small acts portray Lilia as a natural teacher: competitive, inventive, and attentive to

others. Her childhood skills in observation and practical instruction later become central to her work training pilots and leading fellow airwomen.

Chapter 6

At eleven, Lilia asks Anna to teach her to sew and helps make a red skirt on her mother's German sewing machine. She chooses a design with folds so that she can feel like a bird in flight when she runs through the park. The sewing lesson reflects the close, affectionate relationship between mother and daughter and Lilia's growing ability to turn ideas into finished work. When their project delays dinner, Lilia persuades Vladimir to accept leftovers, showing her confidence and charm within the family.

Chapter 7

Vladimir tells Lilia the folk tale of Morozko, in which a patient, modest girl is rewarded while her rude stepsister is punished. He presents the story as a lesson about humility and asking for little, but Lilia questions how much is too much and whether the tale's moral is fair. The bedtime story also reveals Vladimir's faith in inherited traditions alongside his political convictions. Lilia promises that, when she has a family, she will visit her parents often—a tender pledge that gains poignancy as the story's later losses unfold.

Chapter 8

Anna introduces Lilia to wildflowers, teaching her to notice their colors, shapes, and changing seasons. Their walk through the meadows becomes a lesson in how people sometimes complicate what nature makes simple, while the white lilies they find give Lilia a lasting floral emblem. Vladimir also teaches Lilia to catch and release fireflies. Flowers and small lights become recurring symbols of home, tenderness, and hope—comforts Lilia will carry into the hardship of war.

Chapter 9

Lilia's natural athleticism and disciplined practice make her an outstanding speed skater. She times herself, surprises her skeptical father with her speed, and adopts the number 44 after choosing it as a lucky sports number. When the boastful Lev challenges her, Lilia uses strategy as well as speed to beat him twice. Her victory earns his respect and establishes a pattern that will define her aviation career: she prepares carefully, reads an opponent, and refuses to accept that a woman's participation is inherently absurd.

Chapter 10

The Litvyaks' New Year celebrations blend family affection, folk music, and the playful traditions of Father Frost and Snegurochka. Lilia realizes that her parents play the mythical visitors but chooses to protect the tradition because it brings joy to the children. The chapter also follows Lilia's interests in piano, sewing, and fashion. She learns to design her own

clothes and becomes popular with boys, yet the narrative presents her vanity as one part of a broader, energetic personality rather than a distraction from her ambitions.

Chapter 11

Lilia begins keeping a diary that captures her curiosity about nature, her love of Russia, and her dream of becoming a military pilot. Poetry—especially the work of the politically disfavored Sergei Yesenin—gives her a private language for emotions and ideas that cannot safely be spoken aloud. When Vladimir discovers a Yesenin poem in her diary, he fears that its presence could endanger the family. They burn the page, but the poem remains with Lilia, illustrating how censorship can destroy a document without erasing the ideas and feelings it contains.

Chapter 12

After Soviet children's New Year celebrations are restored, Vladimir secures Lilia a coveted invitation to the Kremlin's Column Hall. Anna and Lilia spend weeks creating a red velvet "Queen of Roses" dress, which makes Vladimir proud and lets Lilia present herself as a young woman on her own terms. At the celebration, Lilia wins a folk-dance competition and receives a small statue of Father Frost. The statue becomes a cherished keepsake, later accompanying her through military service and serving as a link to childhood and family.

Chapter 13

Lilia becomes captivated by aviation and studies every book, photograph, and article she can find. The record-setting Soviet pilots Marina Raskova, Valentina Grizodubova, and Polina Osipenko show her that women can accomplish extraordinary feats, even as classmates and adults assume flying is a man's domain. When Lilia tells Anna she wants to become a pilot, her mother objects on grounds of danger and convention. Vladimir postpones his decision, leaving Lilia's ambition unresolved but undiminished; she continues preparing herself while waiting for a route into aviation.

Chapter 14

Vladimir is ordered to travel east to train railway workers on a project tied to the expansion of the Trans-Siberian system. The assignment separates him from his family and hints at the coercive labor and political repression that the official explanation leaves unstated. Before he leaves, Lilia sews him a warm shirt and places a photograph of herself and Anna in its pocket, explaining that the wool will warm his body and the picture his heart. She also promises to keep fireflies beside her at night, turning an earlier family ritual into a source of comfort during separation.

Chapter 15

While Vladimir works in Siberia, their neighbor Maya secretly reads his letters and turns ordinary family remarks into alleged evidence of disloyalty. Maya's husband Semyon, an NKVD officer, and railway official Lazarev help transform suspicion into a fabricated investigation. Vladimir is arrested, tried without meaningful defense, and executed. Anna and Lilia receive only an official notice declaring him an enemy of the state; their home is taken and they are watched. The loss destroys Lilia's faith in the justice of the government she had been raised to support.

Chapter 16

In the aftermath of Vladimir's death, Anna and Lilia struggle with reduced income, social isolation, and fear of surveillance. Lilia continues school and takes work, but she secretly applies for a clerical job at the Taganka Flying School, lying to Anna because she believes aviation is her only path toward flight. Lilia quickly proves herself as an efficient organizer and studies pilots' techniques from the ground. When male instructors refuse to train a woman, she persists, striking a bargain with Anatoliy Morozov: he will teach her to fly, while she promises to teach him how to kiss.

Chapter 17

Lilia begins flying lessons with Anatoliy, absorbing aircraft controls, manuals, and practical techniques at remarkable speed. She takes over the controls early, completes a daring landing, and passes the instructor's test, becoming the flying club's youngest pilot and its first woman pilot. Their relationship is affectionate but unequal in age and experience, and Lilia keeps her own ambitions firmly in view: she wants to become a fighter pilot. During a public demonstration, Anatoliy's new Yak crashes and he dies, leaving Lilia with another devastating personal loss just as her flying career begins.

Chapter 18

Anna worries about Lilia after the deaths of Katya, Vladimir, and Anatoliy, while both women struggle to reconcile their love of country with the cruelty of the state. A newspaper article about women's contributions and the dissolution of a women's rights department prompts them to question whether official promises of equality can be trusted. Lilia tells Anna she has become a flying instructor and intends eventually to join the military as a fighter pilot. Anna fears for her safety and suggests changing the Litvyak name because of Vladimir's political record; Lilia refuses, insisting that she will live and die with her father's name.

Chapter 19

At Taganka, Lilia faces the prejudice of male trainees who do not want a woman instructor. Georgiy Shereshewsky, the manager's son, becomes her student and proves a demanding pupil; Lilia pushes him through advanced maneuvers while insisting that the purpose of training is readiness, not spectacle. A publicity article about her skills brings a flood of

students, though Lilia resents being turned into a symbol. In practice, however, the attention helps establish her authority and allows her to train 48 pilots, strengthening both the airfield and her own credentials.

Chapter 20

Elena Demidova approaches Lilia under pressure from her father, Semyon, to gather information that could be used against her. Lilia's rigorous instruction, including aircraft mechanics and emergency procedures, gradually makes Elena respect her as a skilled pilot and an honorable person. Elena ultimately refuses to report Lilia and asks whether the authorities might have been wrong about Vladimir. Her father shuts down the question with the chilling assertion that the Party cannot be mistaken, underscoring how ideology can override evidence and personal conscience.

Chapter 21

Lilia repeatedly applies to join the Air Force as a fighter pilot and is turned away because women are not accepted for combat duty. At the same time, Major Marina Raskova rises in influence, argues for women's military service, and becomes a leading advocate for a women's air unit. Lilia confronts Raskova during a school visit, challenging her to use her authority to secure combat opportunities for women. Their first exchange is tense but consequential: Raskova recognizes Lilia's determination, while Lilia makes clear that symbolic praise for women is not enough without actual access to combat roles.

Chapter 22

Raskova presents her case for expanding the air force to Marshal Shaposhnikov, arguing that women could help meet the urgent shortage of pilots. Her proposal is initially dismissed amid ridicule and doubts about aircraft, but the German invasion in June 1941 changes the military calculation. With Soviet losses mounting, Stalin authorizes women's air regiments. Hundreds apply, and Lilia is accepted into the 586th Fighter Regiment despite concerns about her youth, personality, and commitment. The chapter marks the moment when a long private ambition becomes a historic military opportunity.

Chapter 23

The women arrive at the rough Engels Air Base and begin the difficult transition from civilian life to military discipline. The chapter introduces Lilia's future comrades, including the confident crop-duster Galina, the resourceful organizer Polina, and mechanically gifted Nina, whose varied skills make the unit stronger. Lilia's refusal to cut her long hair earns her three days in the guardhouse, where she turns confinement into an exercise challenge. The punishment teaches her that military service requires compromise and obedience, while her letter to Anna reveals that she is beginning to understand the difference between personal determination and functioning as part of a team.

Chapter 24

The regiment receives obsolete Po-2 biplanes rather than modern fighters, forcing Raskova to design missions around limited equipment. She orders night harassment raids on German positions, and Lilia volunteers to help develop the low-altitude tactics. Lilia demonstrates that the planes can glide silently with engines and lights off, then trains the squadron to repeat the maneuver safely. Her unconventional instincts earn Raskova's trust and the pilots' participation. The regiment's first combat mission is about to begin, with the women relying on surprise rather than speed or firepower.

Chapter 25

The women's first raids surprise German forces, destroying supplies and equipment before the pilots return safely. As the Germans adapt, the pilots improve their aircraft and tactics, but a later mission costs Galina her life when her damaged plane crashes into an ammunition dump. The death forces the squadron to confront war as more than a dangerous game. Lilia writes to Anna about the emotional burden of killing and losing a friend. The chapter also shows how the Night Witches' effectiveness grows, while Lilia argues successfully to transfer from bombing to fighter duty and begins training in a faster Yak aircraft.

Chapter 26

The narrative traces Katya Budanova's path from a poor rural childhood to factory work, aviation training, and a determined application to Raskova's regiment. Her experience assembling and testing aircraft gives her practical knowledge, though she exaggerates her combat qualifications to secure a chance to fly. The chapter also introduces Inna Pasportnikova, whose early knack for repairing a broken bus foreshadows her mechanical talent. When Katya and Inna arrive at Engels, their first encounter with Lilia is awkward, but Raskova assigns them to her team, bringing together a pilot, a wingman, and a mechanic.

Chapter 27

Lilia tests Katya's flying ability through a demanding flight, and Katya keeps pace through maneuvers that might have exposed an inexperienced pilot. Inna quietly improves Katya's aircraft and later works through freezing conditions and burns to prepare the planes for combat. The trio begins flying missions together, and Katya's encounter with a mouse in her cockpit earns her the nickname "Mouse Fighter." Their partnership becomes both effective and affectionate. Lilia adds the number 44 and white lilies to her plane, blending childhood memories and her mother's influence into a distinctive identity.

Chapter 28

Lilia, Katya, and Inna arrive at the Stalingrad front and are met with skepticism by Major Baranov and the male pilots of the 473rd Regiment. Lilia's first assignment pairs her with Captain Alexei Solomatin, a decorated ace who initially questions her experience but soon

recognizes her skill. Their first flight together reveals both professional compatibility and personal attraction. Lilia's credentials as a Night Witch and her experience flying Yaks win Alexei's respect, while their humor eases the tension of a unit unsure how to receive women in combat.

Chapter 29

Flying advanced Yak fighters over Stalingrad, Lilia initially struggles to fire effectively in combat, but Alexei coaches her through a dangerous engagement with German bombers. She eventually helps destroy a Heinkel, though the violence leaves her troubled by the moral cost of killing. The chapter builds Lilia and Alexei's relationship and shows how women adapt to a male-dominated air base, even inventing practical routines to wash and care for their hair. Lilia's individuality remains visible in her habits, while her growing combat skill wins respect from Baranov and the other pilots.

Chapter 30

As the battle for Stalingrad nears its end, Lilia and Alexei fly over the devastated city, seeing the ruined landscape and the human losses below. Away from combat, their regiment receives a rare period of rest, and the pilots arrange a dance gathering with music and improvised refreshments. The celebration lets the group imagine life beyond war. Lilia and Alexei grow closer, while Katya's playful "Clouds" game and the friends' shared hopes briefly restore a sense of ordinary life. Alexei begins writing Lilia a declaration of love but does not yet deliver it.

Chapter 31

Lilia tells Inna that she and Katya have committed to staying with the regiment, and then admits she is falling in love with Alexei. Their relationship is discreet but evident to their comrades; shared missions and quiet moments make it more substantial than the fleeting romances common at the front. A German aircraft challenges Alexei to single combat, and he wins the duel, returning safely. Soon afterward, another pilot, Niko Lataria, dies in a deliberate ramming attack, leaving Lilia shaken by the brutal choices war imposes. Lilia and Alexei finally speak openly about wanting children, making their emotional commitment explicit.

Chapter 32

The story shifts briefly to German ace Erich Hartmann and the Luftwaffe's confidence in its superior aircraft and experienced pilots. During an intense battle near Krasny Luch, Lilia's skill has advanced under Alexei's instruction, and she fights effectively against German fighters. Lilia shoots down Hartmann's plane, and a Russian pilot captures him after he parachutes into enemy territory. The capture is a major symbolic victory for the Soviet side and sets up the next chapters' conflict over how Lilia's achievement will be presented.

Chapter 33

Hartmann initially refuses to cooperate with his captors and demands to meet the pilot who shot him down. When Lilia appears, he dismisses her as a girl until she recounts the engagement and identifies the number 44 and lilies on her aircraft. Confronted with the truth that a woman defeated him, Hartmann's arrogance falters. He offers Lilia a watch, which she rejects and destroys. Hartmann later escapes, but the Russian officers decide to publicize his capture, turning the encounter into a propaganda opportunity.

Chapter 34

A Soviet propaganda officer recognizes the value of Lilia's story, while Lilia resists being turned into a public symbol. Her comrades nevertheless help a reporter describe her flying, her signature appearance, and the white lilies on her plane; the resulting Pravda feature makes "White Lily" famous across the Soviet Union. German authorities identify Lilia as a priority target, understanding that her success undermines their assumptions about women and military strength. The chapter contrasts the two propaganda systems and shows the tension between Lilia's wish to serve quietly and the larger public meaning attached to her achievements.

Chapter 35

On a day intended for reconnaissance, Lilia gathers wildflowers and returns to find Inna has modified her aircraft's flaps to improve its acceleration. An unexpected German attack turns the training into combat, and Lilia and her comrades return after a successful engagement. Afterward, Lilia and Alexei retreat into the countryside for a quiet evening. They exchange poetry, including Konstantin Simonov's "Wait for Me," and speak about love, faith, and the possibility of survival. Their promise to wait for one another gives emotional shape to the uncertainty of wartime life.

Chapter 36

Baranov develops low-altitude target practice to make his pilots harder to predict and more effective against faster German aircraft. Lilia accepts the training despite her confidence, while Katya initially believes her combat record makes further practice unnecessary. A sudden ambush by six Messerschmitts wounds Katya, and Lilia's improved firing technique helps her drive off the attacker. Soon afterward, Lilia's own aircraft is badly damaged; she makes an emergency landing, escapes before it explodes, and uses her red scarf as a tourniquet. During recovery, she returns to combat and destroys a heavily defended German surveillance balloon, earning the Order of the Red Banner.

Chapter 37

The book introduces Millie Brandt, a German woman who rejects Hitler's limited vision of women's roles and proposes an organization of women to support wartime operations. Her

work in the Trümmerfrauen initiative offers a contrast to the Soviet employment of women in combat. Stalin's propaganda apparatus reshapes the story to portray the Soviet system as more progressive, illustrating how both regimes use women's service to support political narratives. The chapter places Lilia's individual experience within a wider contest over gender, citizenship, and wartime image-making.

Chapter 38

Bad weather suspends combat and gives Lilia, Inna, Katya, and newcomer Raisa a rare chance to bathe, sing, and joke together. Their playful performance transforms the women's quarters into an improvised theater, briefly relieving the strain of military life. Raisa's song about separation reveals that her beloved Yuri has died, abruptly bringing the group back to grief. The women then share their hopes for peacetime: meaningful work, love, family, and better aircraft. Lilia imagines a future in civilian aviation and an organization that could help people from different cultures meet and resolve disputes.

Chapter 39

As the front grows quieter, Lyosha notices that Baranov is depressed about turning fifty and organizes a surprise birthday celebration. The regiment contributes cigarettes, a cleaned car, vodka, and a resourceful cake made from scarce ingredients. The party reveals the affection between Baranov and his pilots, who see him as a protective father figure. Lilia's domestic skills and military leadership coexist, while the scene offers a brief portrait of the warmth and communal life that soldiers create despite scarcity and danger.

Chapter 40

Katya writes to her dying father, describing her growth as a combat pilot and enclosing a photograph. He recognizes her and dies with the picture close to his heart, giving their separation a tender, painful conclusion. Soon afterward, Katya disobeys the limits of a mission by climbing to great altitude and attacking German bombers. She brings down several aircraft but is overwhelmed by a larger fighter group and killed. Lilia and Alexei search for her, and Lilia's grief revives the memory of her childhood friend Katya and deepens her fear of losing everyone she loves.

Chapter 41

After Katya's death, Alexei decides not to wait until the war ends to marry Lilia. He and mechanic Gennadii make crude rings from the metal of a downed German aircraft, turning enemy wreckage into a symbol of their commitment. Baranov agrees to conduct the ceremony during a stormy day when flying is impossible. The regiment gathers under a makeshift canopy, and Lilia wears a dress made by her mother. The wedding is modest but emotionally significant: the couple chooses love and a shared future despite knowing that war may separate them at any moment.

Chapter 42

Lilia gives Alexei her beloved Father Frost statue as a wedding gift. The next day, he is shot down while flying alone, and Lilia finds his body suspended from a tree in his parachute, along with an undelivered letter declaring his love and regret that he taught her to kill. Lilia insists on finding him a respectful resting place, and the regiment attends his burial near a village later renamed in his honor. She buries the statue beside him and tries to make sense of her loss. Inna stays with her, while Lilia's letter to Anna records the deaths of both Katya and Alexei.

Chapter 43

A dream imagines a postwar New Year's Eve in which Vladimir has survived, Lilia and Alexei are married with children, and the family is reunited with friends and comrades. Anna hosts the gathering, and familiar music, gifts, and family rituals restore the life that war has denied them. In the dream, Lilia plans to fly for Aeroflot, carrying her ambition into peacetime. The vision gives her lost future a vivid form, including a model plane marked with 44 and white lilies, before the narrative returns to the reality of her absence.

Chapter 44

After Alexei's death, Lilia is emotionally changed, consumed by grief, questions about political power, and doubts about why she survived when others did not. Yet she continues to fly, earns promotion, and performs missions with exceptional care for the pilots under her protection. During a dogfight, Lilia's plane is destroyed and she parachutes into enemy-held territory. She survives in the woods by using childhood lessons about water, food, and warmth, but loses her compass and wanders alone. The chapter emphasizes the gap between her public reputation as a fearless ace and her private exhaustion and vulnerability.

Chapter 45

Lilia reaches the home of Zina and Ivan Goncharenko, whose young son Anton finds her in the countryside. The family feeds and shelters her, and Lilia comforts Anton with a game of Sea Battle, briefly bringing play and safety into a dangerous world. German troops later raid the village, separating families and massacring civilians. Lilia hides but cannot save the Goncharenkos, leaving her burdened by guilt. She eventually makes it back to Soviet lines and is welcomed as a survivor, but insists on returning to combat rather than resting.

Chapter 46

In Berlin, Hitler demands an explanation for the Soviet success and singles out White Lily as a propaganda threat. He orders that she be eliminated and that her death be manipulated to suggest she had defected, revealing how much her existence unsettles the Nazi leadership. At the front, Inna receives permission to take an Air Force Academy entrance examination. Lilia is proud of her friend but fears another separation after losing Alexei and Katya. Their farewell exposes Lilia's growing awareness that even close companions may disappear from

her life without warning.

Chapter 47

On August 1, 1943, Lilia is delayed by a fuel-line repair but eventually joins a mission against German aircraft. She attacks aggressively, unaware that a large group of Messerschmitts has identified her as White Lily and is deliberately concentrating fire on her. Lilia's plane is badly damaged, catches fire, and becomes impossible to control. Trapped in the cockpit, she sings as the aircraft crashes near Kozhevnya. Her comrades find no trace of her, and official records list her as missing, leaving her fate unresolved for decades.

Chapter 48

The closing chapter follows the long aftermath of Lilia's disappearance. In 1943, a Soviet unit finds and buries her, but her identity is lost; after the war, local people salvage parts from wrecked aircraft, while teacher Valentina Vaschenko begins building a project to preserve the region's wartime history. With help from Inna Pasportnikova, local witnesses, and the Scouts of Glory, Valentina's search eventually identifies Lilia's remains in a common grave. The book recounts the correction of her military record, the memorials and school named for her, and her posthumous recognition as a Hero of the Soviet Union in 1990. The recovery of her name becomes a second story of courage—this time, the persistence of those who refused to let her be forgotten.

Lost in Time

A photographic section supplements the narrative with images of Lilia, her aircraft, family, comrades, memorials, and the museum dedicated to her. The photographs connect the novel's dramatized scenes to the people and places that inspired it. The section also documents the author's visits to the museum and gravesite and his meetings with collaborators and surviving witnesses. Its purpose is commemorative: to give readers a visual record of the effort to restore Lilia's story to public memory.

Afterword

Valentina Vaschenko describes the decades-long effort to locate Lilia and establish her identity, while Yelena Sivolap presents the book as a collaboration across cultures and a celebration of women's determination. Their accounts stress that preserving memory requires patient research, local knowledge, and the testimony of people who lived through the events. Other contributors praise the book's attention to Soviet wartime life and its attempt to broaden Western understanding of the Eastern Front, while acknowledging that historical fiction necessarily contains interpretation and that some details remain uncertain. The afterword frames the project as a call to remember the human costs of war and the shared hopes for peace.

Notable Quotes

""“Daddy, no worries. I want to touch the sky.”""

""“In Russia, a woman can be whatever she wants to be.”""

""“I was born a Litvyak. I will live and die a Litvyak.”""

""“The wool will warm your body; the picture is meant to warm your heart.”""

""“It’s not for the Luftwaffe,” said Lilia, “It’s for me.”""

""“I believe when this war is over, planes will fly the heavens carrying citizens, not just soldiers.”""

""“The best remaining additional reward for Comrade Litvyak should be in your memory.”""

Full Summary

In 1995, a conversation in a Miami taxi gave M. G. Crisci a startling new view of the Second World War. His driver, Boris, was a highly educated man from Moscow who had left Russia with his family for a better life, but was driving a cab because he spoke little English. When Crisci asked what had surprised him most in America, Boris replied that thirty million Russians had died and nobody remembered. He described the devastation inflicted on ordinary people defending their homeland, and Crisci began to question how little he knew about Russia’s wartime suffering and the Soviet-American alliance. Years later, an exhibition called World War II Through Russian Eyes gave him a vivid sense of that human cost and convinced him he should tell the story in an engaging narrative rather than a detached history.

While researching, Crisci encountered Lilia Litvyak, a daring young Russian pilot whose achievements seemed almost impossible: she was credited with 268 missions and fifteen solo victories, yet had been largely forgotten in the West. Unable to speak Russian, he eventually made contact with Valentina Vaschenko, a retired history teacher devoted to preserving Lilia’s memory, and her English-speaking friend Yelena Sivolap. After initial skepticism, the women welcomed Crisci and his wife to Krasny Luch, where he visited Lilia’s old neighborhood and grave and learned from people who had known her. Their collaboration helped shape a work of historical fiction grounded, the author says, in real people and events.

Lilia Vladimirovna Litvyak was born in Moscow on August 18, 1921, to Vladimir and Anna, former peasants from Istra. Her parents’ story began in a potato field, where Anna showed Vladimir that looking among the roots could yield a better harvest. Her practical insight impressed the hardworking young man, and they married soon afterward. Vladimir believed

the Revolution offered ordinary people a better life, and persuaded a reluctant Anna to leave the familiar farms for Moscow. He found work at a furniture factory, learned carpentry, and made her a small wooden sailboat, which they took to a pond and imagined sailing to distant shores.

They lived modestly in a cramped apartment, where Vladimir worked long hours at the factory and as a railway clerk. Anna was resourceful and determined; Vladimir was curious, politically engaged, and deeply affectionate. Their infant daughter revealed an early stubborn streak, once wriggling from her bed while Vladimir was distracted in an argument with a neighbor. She also became captivated by wildflowers. When Anna removed flowers from her crib after Lilia had fallen asleep, the child woke and cried until they were returned. A doctor attributed the episode partly to her remarkable coordination and night vision. As the family moved into a larger apartment, Anna used her wages and sharp eye for opportunity to help secure the new home.

By 1927, Stalin's shift toward state-controlled industry and agriculture had persuaded many working people that the new system would provide steady jobs and greater prosperity. Anna became a clerk in a state-run store, and Vladimir a railway switchman. Anna's interest in fashion magazines and homemade scents reflected her lasting appreciation of beauty; Lilia would come to share her delight in lipstick and wildflowers. Vladimir, meanwhile, excelled at railway work and was sent away to train employees in distant regions. Whenever he returned, he took Lilia to the park. She loved the swings, choosing one she thought would carry her higher, urging her father to push faster until she could imagine touching the sky.

May Day became a family tradition. At Lilia's first celebration in Red Square, Vladimir explained that Stalin had helped her parents escape peasant life and wanted the country respected. Lilia immediately wondered why soldiers were needed to make people speak kindly of the homeland. Her father encouraged her curiosity and patriotism, but also warned that political discussions in public could invite dangerous misunderstandings. At home, the Litvyaks' neighbors, Maya and Semyon Demidov, initially seemed helpful: Maya watched Lilia while Anna worked, and Lilia befriended their daughter Elena. But resentment grew over the Litvyaks' larger apartment and better furniture. When a quarrel over a children's word game ended with Maya accusing Lilia of cheating, the friendship began to sour.

At school, Lilia's defining habit was asking "Why?" Her questions about collective farms, industrial priorities, and food shortages troubled a principal who believed children should learn the state's account rather than debate it. Anna defended her daughter, while quietly recognizing that Vladimir had passed along his political curiosity. Lilia, who could remember nearly everything she read, needed little studying to excel. She also invented games for her classmates, encouraging them to think and solve problems. Her closest friend, Katya, was adventurous. During a school outing, Katya climbed a tree despite Lilia's warning and fell onto

a rock. Lilia stayed calm as the others panicked, directing boys to build a stretcher and sending two older pupils for a horse and carriage. Katya's backbone had been shattered; she died at nine. The loss was Lilia's first encounter with death and an early test of the practical composure she had learned from her father.

Lilia's kindness to younger children was remembered by Lyudmila Agafejeva, a neighbor who later recalled that Lilia was generous and always ready to teach them something. She invented a puddle-jumping game, but when Lyudmila wondered how to cross a particularly large puddle without getting wet, Lilia guided her to think of going around it herself. In winter, Lilia taught Lyudmila how to belly-slide faster down snowy mounds, explaining how to choose a bump in the slope, lift her head, and avoid buttons that might catch in the snow. After helping the younger girl beat a neighborhood rival, Lilia left her own warm cap behind; Lyudmila had none, and Lilia had two.

Anna also taught Lilia to sew on the family's German machine. When Lilia insisted on helping make a red dress, she chose the color because it reminded her of the Revolution. She wanted a wide skirt that would ripple as she ran through the park, making her feel like a bird in flight. When Vladimir came home to find dinner forgotten, Lilia showed him the finished dress and persuaded him to accept leftovers. Her parents' very different strengths met in the child: her mother's ingenuity and independence, and her father's encouragement of ambition and imagination.

Vladimir loved fairy tales as much as politics, believing traditional stories offered guidance for life. One winter night he told Lilia the tale of Morozko, in which a kind, patient girl is rewarded by Father Frost while her rude stepsister meets a terrible fate. Lilia questioned why the stepmother was cruel and, afterward, how much was too much to ask for. Vladimir's lesson was that God rewards those who ask for little, though his daughter remained unsure what that meant. Before he left her room, she promised that when she grew up and had a family of her own, she and her children would visit him and Anna often.

By spring 1937, Lilia's determination to fly had brought her to Taganka Airdrome, where she faced Anatoliy Morozov, the pilot who had refused to train a woman. She stopped his biplane and demanded a promise. When he asked what she wanted, she told him she intended to become a pilot and needed an instructor. To win him over, she offered an unconventional bargain: if he helped her earn a license, she would teach him how to kiss better. Anatoliy accepted.

Their first lesson introduced her to the controls and to his wry rules of flying: crashing, not flying, was dangerous; a good landing was one you could walk away from; and clouds might conceal a mountain or another plane. Lilia eagerly absorbed his explanations, then took to the air herself. She devoured the official manual and scored perfectly on Anatoliy's test, earning the chance to co-pilot. When he hesitated over whether they had enough fuel, she produced

the pump keys and soon had the biplane climbing, turning, and descending under her control. She landed smoothly, despite alarming Anatoliy with a steep approach. Two weeks later, at fourteen, she passed the instructor's examination, becoming Taganka's youngest pilot and its first woman pilot.

Lilia and Anatoliy's partnership was cut short when he took the first public flight of the new Yak fighter. His aircraft caught fire in the air; the radio carried his final panicked words before an explosion on the distant horizon. The loss came after Katya's childhood death and her father's murder, deepening the grief that had already changed Lilia. At home, she and Anna tried to make sense of a society that praised women's contributions while curtailing their rights. Lilia pointed to the disbandment of Lenin's women's department and asked whether women would ever be equal. Anna believed Hitler threatened the Motherland and that they must support its defense, but she shared Lilia's doubts about the state. When Lilia announced she would become a flight instructor and eventually a fighter pilot, Anna worried for her safety and warned that the family name might be a liability. Lilia refused to change it: she had been born a Litvyak and would live and die one.

At Taganka, that resolve met a different kind of resistance. Male candidates avoided training with a beautiful woman, fearing she would be too fragile. Lilia insisted that she was who she was, and that she could prove their assumptions wrong. The airdrome manager's son, Georgiy Shereshewsky, volunteered. After only ten lessons, she had turned him into a capable pilot. When he wanted to test himself with dangerous acrobatics, Lilia warned that her job was to prepare him for war, not an air show; still, she let him try. Her skill at low flying, night vision, and landings in darkness impressed the pilots she trained. A newspaper profile, arranged by the manager, made her Taganka's most sought-after instructor. Though she resented the publicity, she went on to train and license forty-eight men, supplying skilled recruits to the Air Force.

The publicity also attracted Elena Demidova, daughter of the NKVD chief whose family had benefited from Vladimir's arrest. Elena's mother urged her to befriend Lilia, gather information, and help bring her down as her father had been brought down. But as Elena learned to fly under Lilia's instruction, she saw an honorable, patriotic woman rather than an enemy of the state. She refused to report on her and even asked her father whether the authorities might have made a mistake about Vladimir. Semyon would not reopen the case: the Party, he insisted, was never wrong.

In 1939, Lilia tried to enlist as a fighter pilot and was turned away. The recruiting officer admired her record but said Stalin had not approved women in the Air Force. Meanwhile, Major Marina Raskova, renowned navigator and record-setting flyer, was pressing for women's combat service. When Lilia challenged her at a school gathering about why she had not proposed a women's flying battalion, Raskova promised to keep trying. The German

invasion in June 1941 transformed the argument. Hitler's forces destroyed thousands of Soviet aircraft and drove rapidly into Soviet territory. With the Air Force desperate for pilots, Stalin authorized Raskova to recruit women. Of 478 applicants, 296 were judged qualified for training in three battalions. Raskova warned them that many might not survive the year; none withdrew. Lilia, whose credentials made her one of the strongest recruits, was accepted into the 586th Fighter Regiment after Raskova challenged her to prove her courage and discipline as well as her flying ability.

At Engels Air Base, the women arrived to find rough barracks, an improvised runway, and a male staff divided between respect and condescension. Raskova imposed military order, insisting that the volunteers were soldiers who must obey commands and set a standard for women who might follow. Among Lilia's new comrades were Galina Petrova, a fearless crop-duster; Polina Fomicheva, an organizer with factory-management experience; and Nina Onilova, a gifted mechanic. When the women were issued ill-fitting men's uniforms, Nina altered them, working late into the night to help the whole group. Lilia, however, disobeyed the order to cut her long hair. Raskova made her submit and sentenced her to three days in the guardhouse. Lilia endured the confinement by exercising, recording 2,257 laps around the small room. She returned to the squadron exhausted but made up, still wearing lipstick. In a letter to Anna, she admitted she was learning that a soldier could not always have her way, however passionately she demanded it.

The unit's promised combat aircraft turned out to be fifteen obsolete Po-2 biplanes, made of wood and canvas, with a top speed of only 200 kilometers per hour. Raskova was ordered to devise a mission suited to the planes. She chose night harassment attacks: low approaches against German camps, with routes and angles changed from raid to raid. Lilia volunteered, drawing on her experience flying close to the ground. During training, she proposed shutting off engines and lights while gliding toward a target, then restarting them after releasing the bombs. The silent approach could make the vulnerable biplanes difficult to detect. She demonstrated how far a plane could glide, dropping below 500 meters and then lower still, despite Raskova's concern. Her display persuaded the other pilots to volunteer. Lilia trained the squadron through progressively lower glides until every pilot could cover sixteen kilometers without panic, repeating exercises until the whole group could perform them reliably. The method relied on teamwork as much as daring: each pilot had to trust her own skill and the preparation of her comrades.

On October 30, 1941, the women flew their first combat mission, with Galina alongside Lilia. The regiment's night tactics turned the aircraft's weaknesses into advantages. Their low, quiet approaches and shifting routes gave the Germans little warning, while the Po-2s could maneuver sharply where faster fighters struggled. The regiment's work would grow into the Night Witches' campaign, but Lilia's own path was about to change. Raskova transferred her to the fighter division and issued her a powerful Yak-1. Lilia excelled at flying but struggled to

fire accurately; she hesitated, released too soon, or let her shots stray. Raskova assigned her instead to defensive escort and training, a role Lilia accepted as a soldier, though she grew restless after thirty-five patrol flights. She had come to fight, and she continued pressing for the chance to prove herself in combat.

The pressure to prove herself in combat soon collided with an unwanted kind of recognition. A Soviet propaganda officer, Yakov Morozov, saw the interrogation poster of captured German ace Erich Hartmann and wanted to turn Lilia into a public symbol. Major Baranov warned that she would resist an interview, but the ministry treated the story as an order, not a choice. Lilia objected that her work belonged to the soldiers, not to the newspapers, and asked whether a man would be expected to pose as a symbol of beauty. Lyosha urged her to consider that public attention might encourage other women to serve. When reporter Captain Mikhail Sarafanov called her a “girl,” Lilia took offense and left, sending him instead to interview mechanic Inna Pasportnikova. Inna and Katya Budanova nevertheless supplied details about Lilia’s character and habits, including her scarves, her flowers, and the white lilies painted on her plane. Their account and a photograph appeared in Pravda under the title “Call Sign, White Lily.” The story made Lilia famous across the country—and made her a priority target for German pilots, who were ordered to destroy her aircraft, marked with the number 44 and its lilies.

The story also reached Heinrich Aldemar, a German intelligence officer studying Russian culture for Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. He recognized that a woman fighter pilot could undermine claims of German superiority, and urged that Lilia be eliminated. Meanwhile, Lilia’s own victories continued. She wrote to Anna that she was safe, devoted to the Motherland, and burning to drive the invaders out so that ordinary life could resume.

In April, Lilia sought the quiet of a walk and gathered wildflowers before a reconnaissance flight. She returned covered in mosquito bites, embarrassed to let Lyosha see her face. Inna, meanwhile, had altered the Yak’s forward flaps to help it accelerate and maneuver more effectively. When German aircraft invaded the area, the squadron scrambled before the changes could be tested. Lilia nearly left without her flowers, but Inna tossed them into the cockpit. After a fierce engagement beneath heavy clouds, Lilia returned with two victory rolls, her signal that she had downed two enemy planes. Inna’s adjustment had worked.

The women’s celebration was brief. Lyosha coaxed Lilia into a private walk, and the two found a quiet clearing among flowers and trees. They recited Pushkin to each other, then Lilia shared Konstantin Simonov’s poem “Wait for Me,” which she had kept close without knowing why. To Lilia, the poem was about love and faith, not war; to Lyosha, it spoke for people separated by battle and hoping for reunion. He asked if she would always wait for him. She promised she would, and he made the same vow.

Baranov wanted his pilots to become harder to hit and more surprising in attack, so he arranged low-altitude target practice. Lilia initially resisted the idea: she and Katya had flown eighty-seven missions together without injury. But she agreed that luck could not be relied upon forever, and Lyosha began teaching her to attack at high speed and close range, firing in short, concentrated bursts. Katya, after being injured in a sudden encounter with Messerschmitts, also accepted that she needed the training. Lilia's skill in the air was becoming matched by greater precision with her guns.

Soon she was wounded herself. After attacking a German bomber, her Yak's engine was damaged and she had to make a powerless landing in a field. She tied her red scarf around her thigh to stem the bleeding, then fainted when Baranov arrived. During a period of recovery in Moscow, she spent time with Anna and made her a white scarf from parachute cloth, promising it would carry the warmth of her love. Back at the front, another attack wounded her arm and shoulder, but a Soviet pilot from another regiment helped her escape a German pursuing her. Still determined to fight, Lilia then proposed a way to destroy a German observation balloon protected by anti-aircraft guns. She approached from the direction of the sun, blinded the defenders with its glare, destroyed the balloon and its gun positions, and returned in a low-flying celebration that cost the regiment two aircraft covers. Baranov began by threatening to make her pay for the damage, then congratulated her. She received the Order of the Red Banner for the attack.

The book contrasts Lilia's growing place in Soviet combat with the restrictions facing German women. Millie Brandt, rejecting Hitler's insistence that women belonged at home, managed to persuade Hermann Göring to support an organization called the Trümmerfrauen, or "Women of the Rubble." Its volunteers would guard prisoners, tend the wounded, bury the dead, and salvage belongings. Stalin's propaganda machine reshaped the story for Russian audiences, presenting German women's limited roles as proof of their inferiority to Soviet women serving in the military.

A spell of dangerous weather cancelled flying and gave Lilia, Inna, Katya, and the newly arrived Raisa a rare chance to rest. They bathed, sang and joked, transforming their quarters into an improvised party. Raisa's song, "Dark Is the Night," made each woman imagine the life she hoped to recover after the fighting. When Raisa revealed that her beloved Yuri had died, the mood shifted, reminding them how easily dreams could be taken away. Still, they shared their hopes. Katya imagined improving agriculture; Inna wanted to help design new aircraft; Raisa wished for a loving partner. Lilia imagined a family with Lyosha, but also a future in which aircraft carried people to meet and resolve their differences.

The girls' closeness extended to their commanding officer. When Lyosha learned Baranov was feeling old and forgotten on his fiftieth birthday, he organized a surprise celebration. The regiment contributed vodka, cigarettes, and work to polish the Major's car, while Lilia made a

layered cake from scarce potatoes, onions, and beets. Baranov was moved by the affection of the people he considered his children.

In June, Katya’s father was dying, and she wrote him a letter describing her flying and promising he would meet her friends after the war. He died shortly after reading it. Katya continued taking risks in combat, and one day climbed to ten thousand meters, where she found German bombers and attacked them alone. After downing two, she was surrounded by Messerschmitts. She fought back and destroyed two more, but her damaged plane caught fire. Her body was later found in brush on Russian soil. Lilia and Lyosha searched for her, and Lilia broke down when they found their friend. In a letter to Anna, she confessed that losing a close companion felt different from losing any other comrade, and that she did not know if she could endure another such loss.

The deaths around them changed Lyosha’s plans. Rather than wait for peace, he asked Lilia to marry him, fearing that postponement might mean they never had the chance. A mechanic fashioned their rings from the metal skin of a downed German plane. Baranov agreed to officiate, and, when bad weather grounded the regiment, the wedding took place beneath a canvas canopy, with parachute cloth as an aisle. Lilia wore her mother’s brown dress and a wreath of white chamomiles; the regiment sang as the couple approached. They exchanged the crude rings, kissed, and were surrounded by the comrades who had become their family.

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