

Officers Prefer Blondes

By Cherry Lane



"You're the right girl and that's all that matters," Gary said.

STILL seething from that quarrel with Flight Lieutenant Russ Merrick in San Antone's swank officers' club, Honey Hamilton flashed by the machine-gunned emplacement of Randolph, sky-rocketed recklessly on towards Officer's Row, driving her red roadster hell-for-leather.

She was too busy thinking up the things she should have said to Russ, to see the tall pilot, still

in harness, striding across the street, until he loomed big as life in her windshield.

"Hey, Lady, lookout!"

His yell pulled her back to earth. She swerved, jerked at the emergency, stalled. "Whew!" She relaxed, limp with relief. Then her fright turned to fury.

"Why didn't you look out, yourself? Try to get out of my way? You—you just stood there and

dared me to hit you!”

A slow grin slid up to meet dancing blue devils deep in his eyes. “Can’t rub me out, lady. A lot of lousy Japs have been banging away at me for months and months—and here I am, Captain Gary Bond, at your service.”

Captain Gary Bond! Over his helmeted head Honey spotted the wicked P-40 Curtiss fighter in which he must have just swooped in. Cadets swarmed about the ship, touching it reverently, openly admiring its bullet-scarred fuselage, its businesslike guns, two each edge of the wings. It was an A.V.G. Tomahawk, all right. The yawning shark’s mouth, sure insignia of the A.V.G., Chiang Kai-shek’s order of Fei Hui, fighting tigers, leered at her.

Honey’s long lashes swept up and down. She frowned at this man who somehow matched his ship. Rakish, nonchalant, coldly competent. From his helmeted head to his booted feet he was different from the strictly regimented men she was used to.

On his brown leather jacket was painted a rollicking redheaded and winged damsel sans sarong. Intrigued, she asked, “Sally Rand?” wondering about the wings.

“Sally Rand, my eye!” He jerked off his helmet. His hair was crisp and red. Touching the little figure tenderly, he said, “This is Aurora, Goddess of the dawn. She flies with me everywhere I go. She asks no questions. Demands no explanations. Never needs new clothes. And”—his teeth flashed white against his bronze face—“incidentally, beautiful, she’s the only lady I know who rates wings!”

He *was* different! Honey wasn’t sure she liked that difference. As the commanding officer’s daughter she was used to a little more deference—even from Russ.

She introduced herself a little coldly. “I’m your one-woman welcoming committee, Captain. Where could I drop you off? Officers’ quarters?”

“Officers’ quarters.” He slid into the seat beside her, broad shoulders brushing hers, “And don’t hurry on my account.”

SHE meshed the gears and the car lunged. Gary braced himself, both feet jammed hard against the base boards. As they rounded a corner on two wheels, he cracked:

“I see you’re saving on rubber! But what about

our lives? Every American counts now, you know.”

Honey shook out her bright hair, slanted a scornful sideways glance, “For an A.V.G. Tiger man who bagged six Jap bombers single-handed aren’t you awfully timid?”

“Fighting Japs—that’s routine,” he told her. “But bouncing about Randolph with an incendiary blond at the controls— Say, do you drive like this all the time or just when you’re sore?”

She was sore, all right. Sparks fairly flew as she turned the glare she meant for Russ on Gary Bond. After all, it was partly Gary Bond’s fault she had quarreled with Russ.

“You’re not a woman,” Russ had grumbled. “You’re a military institution! Instead of finishing out our date like a normal girl, you leave me stranded in San Antone on payday while you drive back to the Field to glad-hand this big A.V.G. glamour guy.”

Russ had quite a lot to say about the A.V.G.

“I’m sick of hearing about those A.V.G. Super-Tiger Men! They get paid plenty to pull down medals and cut themselves a hunk of front page publicity, don’t they?

“Signed up with Chiang Kai-shek for the hell of it and all the mazuma they could get, didn’t they? Six hundred a month and an extra five hundred for every other bomber downed—is that chicken feed? And what do Uncle Sam’s men get? Huh!”

“But Gary Bond is back in Federal service now,” Honey had pointed out. “And the A.V.G. can fight. Always against heavy odds they knocked down more than two hundred Jap planes, lost only sixteen pilots—”

“They can’t fight a darned bit better than we can!” Russ snorted. “They just got the opportunity.” He added brutally, “Your Dad’s plain cracked to bring that Bond guy back here to wise us up to the wily Japs! We’re hep to them already. No A.V.G. man can tell us anything about fighting we don’t know!”

“Dad knows his business!” Honey snapped. “It’s good sound military sense to have this A.V.G. man train pilots to bring down Japs. They must have learned something up there over Burma!”

“Yeah,” Russ grinned. “They learned that when Burma fell, their little private Eden went *ppft!* No more excitement. No more big paychecks. Just nasty old routine. This guy won’t stick Randolph. He’ll find it too dull for him. Too dull”—Russ raised an eyebrow significantly—“or too exciting!”

It looked as if maybe the men were going to ice Gary, she thought.

"How do you like Randolph, Captain? I expect you'll find us dull after the exciting life you've left," she asked with a smile.

"I love Randolph. As for excitement—I like it quiet. Anyway, they tell me excitement's where you find it, and least expect it."

Honey still worried about what Russ had said. "Run along," he said sulkily. "Go pick up your Tiger Man. Me, I'll dig into my telephone book and find someone to paint this cow-town red, white, and blue."

Someone—that must mean Rita. Rita and Russ? Her hands clenched the wheel, knuckles white. Rita was dynamite. Russ didn't treat her like a sister!

THEY were whizzing past Administration. A group of cadets recognized Honey, waved, yelled, "Yoo hoo!"

"Yoo Hoo, Honey!" she said bitterly, in an aside to Gary, "That's my name on this field. Cadets take me as a course of instruction!" She was sick of being a dream girl to ten thousand men and a flesh and blood sweetheart to none. Darn it, the time had come to specialize. And she was specializing on Russ until Rita cut in.

"Lucky dodos," Gary said softly, his eyes caressing her loveliness. "They get to look at you every day. I trained over at Kelly. Don't ask me why, now."

She was too busy worrying about Rita to hear him. Unless she meant to hand Russ over to Rita, the time had come for direct action. Rita had to be removed. But how?

Suddenly, an idea flashed through her mind. Jelled. "Captain Bond," she asked abruptly, "do you like brunettes? Beautiful brunettes? In fact, ravishing brunettes?"

Startled, Gary was still stubborn, "No, I don't. With me it's blondes. Beautiful, ravishing blondes. I can't help it." Gravely he explained, "Officers and gentlemen prefer blondes."

Honey could be stubborn, too. She braked before Officers' quarters. "You're having dinner with us tonight." Lowering her voice confidentially, she added, "Come early, won't you? There's something sort of special I want to talk to you about."

Gary was looking at her as if he thought she was sort of special herself. "Sure," he said. "Of course.

Fine!"

With a gay smile and a wave of her hand, she drove on. A bunch of cadets barracks-bound yelled, "Yoo hoo!" Honey gritted her teeth, the smile vanishing. She was fed to her eyes on being yoo-hooded! It had to stop. Maybe, tonight Gary could stop it forever.

Soon Russ would be flying out of Randolph to fight on the Allied front. Honey, not Rita, would be the bride he left behind to keep the home fires burning until he flew back, again. It was Mrs. Russ Merrick, for Honey, or bust! And the fighting Hamiltons of Texas never busted!

Honey dressed for dinner in a blue gown the color of Texas bluebonnets—and Gary Bond's eyes. By ignoring brass hat tradition, she had wangled Russ into bringing Rita to dinner. Tiger Man Gary Bond would meet Tiger Woman Rita, and perhaps—who could tell—it would take! Anyway, it was worth a try.

WHEN the bell rang, she raced downstairs and greeted Gary enthusiastically.

"Well," he said, a little dazed by his welcome, "You seem mighty glad to see me."

"I am mighty glad to see you," she dimpled. "Only—" her eyes traveled over him. His careless attire of the morning had given way to the usual spick-and-span Khaki uniform. "You look just like everyone else! What happened to Aurora?"

"I tucked her into the top bureau drawer," he told her gravely. "When I call on blondes, I leave the little lady home. Jealousy, you know."

She took his cap, lead him into the living room, empty except for a cheerful fire beginning to crackle. "Take that chair." She fairly shoved him into the Colonel's favorite deep leather chair. "A whiskey and soda? A cigar? A cigarette?"

"Whiskey." He sank into the chair, sighed luxuriously, stretching out long legs to the fire. "No place like home." Taking the whiskey she offered he sipped it. "Y'know, beautiful, in China we A.V.G.'ers blew in fifty bucks a bottle for fire water like this!"

Honey perched on the opposite chair. "You had a pretty high time over there, didn't you?" she said. "Revelry by night in the hostels of Kunming. Squadron parties given by your Major and presided over by his fabulously beautiful White Russian wife. You see, rumors ride the wind back here to us at Randolph."

All at once she found herself wondering about the Major's Russian wife. Was she really so beautiful? Or was it just because she was the only white woman there?

"We had a few low times, too," he said dryly. "So low we wondered if we'd ever be able to come back home again."

Suddenly, he set down his whiskey glass. "Look. You didn't ask me over to prime me with questions about my fascinating past?"

"N-no." Honey felt her face grow hot. Broaching Rita wouldn't be as easy as she thought. Still, she had to tell him what he was in for. You didn't just throw a woman like Rita at even a Tiger man without first giving him fair warning.

"I asked you to come early tonight because—that is—" Darn him! Why didn't he stop looking at her so admiringly? As if there were something between them!

"Because," she took the bit in her teeth, "I wanted you to help me!"

"Swell," he smiled lazily. "All A.V.G.'s are handy. Cocktails to mix? Sandwiches to spread? Or a picture of your great-grandfather who lead the charge at Bull Run you want taken up to the attic?"

"I wanted to make you a proposition," she blurted.

"Go ahead. Proposition me. You'll never find a more willing victim."

Stammering, she explained. Gary heard her through to the end. Slowly, his smile faded. When she finished he stood up, towering tall above her.

She stood up, too. But she had to tilt back her head to peer up into his eyes. They were blue ice. And his face, a bronzed mask.

Her heart died. She had to remind herself she was a Hamilton of Texas and the Hamiltons never retreated—to keep from bolting.

"You're angry?"

"**W**HY should I be?" He laughed shortly. "I meet you, you give me the old come-on. And I find all the time you were scheming to use me as a sort of—uh—exterminator!"

"Nothing of the kind!" she cried, stung. "Rita's lovely in a lush way. You'll like her. What's so terrible about that?" She added, honestly, "Anyway, you never had a chance with me. I'm going to marry Russ."

"Provided I remove Rita!" he reminded her. "Look here, you designing woman, what makes

you so sure your gorgeous Rita will go for me? After all, there are ten thousand other men here."

"But you're Gary Bond. You're A.V.G. You're a hero!"

He snorted, "Hero, my eye! I only did what any other man here would do if he got the chance."

"That's what Russ said," Honey blurted. "He said you got all the money, the medals, and the publicity and—" Her voice trailed off as she realized this wasn't tact.

"Russ said that, eh?" he asked softly. "So that's the kind he is."

"Russ is all right!" she flared. "He just doesn't happen to like you!"

Gary chuckled. Slowly he sat down, picked up his whiskey. "I just don't happen to like Russ, and we've never even met. Bring him on. Bring 'em all on! I'm ready!"

After that the Colonel came downstairs, the other guests arrived. Russ and Rita were last—and late as usual. When Gary was introduced to Russ, antagonism, saber keen and twice as dangerous, flashed between them.

"So you're the A.V.G. fellow who's going to teach us how to fight!" Russ scoffed, his eyes scornfully taking Gary's measure.

"Sure am," Gary drawled. "Do you mind?"

Russ shrugged. "We can take it." He grinned meaningly, "Can you?"

After dinner, over coffee in the living room, Rita, whose reaction to Gary was even more than Honey had planned, pleaded to hear his amazing Six-Jap-Bombers-Single-Handed stunt. Reluctantly, Gary gave in.

"Being the only fighter up when the Japs attacked by surprise, I had to shoot it out while the rest of our squadron got their Tomahawks off the ground.

"I'd start firing at, say, one hundred yards, get in about fifty rounds, swing off, and fall away for the next one. That way I got six bombers. Then, the rest of our squadron came to my aid, broke up the remainder of the enemy's formation.

"The whole thing was routine." With a slow smile in the direction of Russ, he added softly, "Lieutenant Merrick, here, will tell you any flier would do the same under the same circumstances. Eh, Lieutenant?"

BEFORE Russ could answer, the Colonel put in, "Your modesty is highly commendable,

Captain, but shooting down six bombers single-handed, and thus enabling your squadron to get off the ground, is hardly routine. Your feat stands unparalleled in the annals of modern warfare.”

Silkily, Russ added, “Now that you’re back in Federal service, Captain, there won’t be any more excitement. Aren’t you afraid we’ll bore you here?”

“No,” Gary answered. “I rather look forward to polishing off your combat flying tactics. Incidentally, I rather look forward to training you, Lieutenant. I feel there are a few things an old A.V.G. man might teach you, even yet.”

After that the party broke up. Rita, dialing a hot rhumba orchestra from San Antonio, dragged Gary to his feet and cuddled up under the thin guise of teaching him new rhumba steps. Watching Rita mold her lithe body in its brazen red sheath to Gary, sent ice splintering along Honey’s spine. Her hands on the silver handle of the coffee pot were suddenly awkward.

Russ snorted in disgust. “Looks like Rita’s changed partners. Well, I’m checking out!”

Honey closed the door behind them and faced Russ outside on the steps, the staccato rhythms of the orchestra and Rita’s laughter were shut out.

“So Rita’s fallen for that big A.V.G. bowl of alphabet soup!” Russ laughed shortly. “Up to her hips in hero worship! I’m glad you’ve got too much sense to go into a burn over that phony medal-man.”

A guilty little twinge bothered her. “He’s really rather nice, Russ,” she protested. “You can’t run out on Rita like this. Who’ll take her home?”

“Let our hero squire her.” He added, “Drive down to the field early tomorrow morning and watch Randolph take this Tiger man to pieces! Boy! When we get through razzing him he’ll pile back into his Tomahawk and head her back to Burma.”

He mimicked Gary’s “I rather look forward to polishing off your combat flying tactics.” Adding viciously, “We’ll polish him off, but pronto!”

“Russ!” Honey protested. “You’d better be careful—sicking the others on him. Maybe, the A.V.G. can fight. Maybe, it isn’t all publicity!”

Russ chuckled, scooped her up, her sandaled feet off the ground, “Is there a law against kissing the Colonel’s daughter goodnight? There is?” His lips were upon hers, carelessly. For the first time she didn’t respond to Russ’s embrace but wriggled free.

RUSS strode whistling towards barracks, and she slipped back into the living room to resume her role of hostess with a heart strangely heavy. Rita’s throaty laugh and easy conquest of Gary irritated her. For a gentleman who preferred blondes, she thought, he could switch his color preferences mighty fast!

When Gary asked her to dance, she snapped, “Sorry! My rhumba has housemaid’s knee!” and went back to murmuring polite monosyllable to her father’s friends.

Rita wangled Gary into taking her home. Seventeen moonlight-drenched miles into San Antone, Honey thought viciously. What a lot of groundwork a sharp worker like Rita could get in during those seventeen miles!

“I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed this evening,” Gary said suavely, bending over her hand, while Rita put on a new face.

“You needn’t bother telling me!” Honey flashed, jerking free her hand. “I can see!”

He smiled quizzically down at her, “That’s a blond for you! Unreasonable. Didn’t you want me to intercept her passes? Did I do something wrong?”

Baffled, Honey was glad when Rita swept by, collected Gary, and left. Tears of frustration sparkled in her eyes. Only by exercising rigid military discipline did she resist banging the door after them.

I loathe Gary Bond! she fumed. I don’t care what they do to him tomorrow! I hope they do polish him off!

STILL, next morning, after a sleepless night, she was up bright and early, dressed in her American Woman Volunteer uniform to drive her Dad down to his office in Administration.

The Colonel was pleased, but suspicious. “Daughterly, aren’t you? What got you out of bed so early?”

“Conscience trouble,” she answered with forced lightness. “Dad, you may not realize it but your A.V.G. find is going to face more opposition on the line this morning than he ever did in Burma. And it’s all my fault, sort of.”

“Oh, so you admit something’s your fault?” the Colonel grunted. “Don’t worry about Bond. If ever there’s a flier who can protect himself, that redheaded Texan is it.”

Dropping the Colonel off, she parked before

Officers' Mess, and regardless of regulations, grabbed Gary's elbow as he swung out.

"You?" he paused, startled. "Last night you gave me the cold shoulder and subzero stare. Yet, here you are, beautiful and blond as ever!"

"Personally," Honey snapped, "I feel just the same way about you this morning as I did last night. Still, I have a kind heart!" Squaring back her shoulders, she said, "Before you let the Brass Hats throw you to the wolves, Captain, I think you ought to know that the men are stacking it up against you."

As she explained, his grin vanished. "Thumbs down on the instructor, eh? So, that's it!"

About Russ's attitude, she felt on the defensive. "Russ is popular. He's not used to having someone fly in with a lot of medals and lift his girl—"

"Lift both his girls," he corrected her, chucking her under her chin. Eyes blazing, tingling at his touch, she jerked away. "Don't be silly! I love Russ! This whole thing is my fault," she admitted honestly. "I thought I was so smart and had everything all figured out. It never occurred to me Russ would go into a burn and take this way of getting even."

"He's jealous," Gary shrugged. "Jealous of me. That's swell. It means he regards me as opposition. That's the first real encouragement I've had."

"You'll never be opposition to Russ as far as I'm concerned!" she cried. "I don't know what you base your optimism on."

"The A.V.G.," he pointed out gently, "are always optimistic. They always win. I'll make you a sporting proposition—much fairer than that proposition you popped at me last night. If I make Russ eat his words, will you stop throwing yourself at him long enough to make a few passes at me?" Before she could answer, he said smoothly, "After all, you love me, you know. You've loved me a long time. You're the reason I flew back here."

"But I never saw you before yesterday!" she cried.

"That's strange. I've seen you all my life. Just as I'm looking at you now."

DAZED, she let him lead her over to the flying field where his first class of pilots waited. "Stick around," he said. "Watch me treat these soft-cheeked, dewy-eyed lads to a stiff dose of what the A.V.G. gave the Japs. When I get through with 'em they'll all be calling me 'Uncle'!"

Russ, lined up along the hangar wall, winked significantly at Honey. As Gary addressed the men, Russ's grin grew to Cheshire cat proportions. It won't be long now, his whole attitude promised.

"I'm no good at making speeches," Gary was saying tersely. "Suppose we get right down to brass tacks. I'm here to wise you fellows on the ins and outs of actual combat flying against the enemy—give you the easy way, the information the A.V.G. picked up the hard way. However, I can't teach you anything as long as you figure I'm a stuffed uniform and you know it all. Who's your hottest pilot?"

Eyes shifted to Russ who squared back his shoulders, saluted, "Yes, sir?"

Gary looked grim. "Okay, Lieutenant Merrick. It seems to be unanimous. Climb into that little pursuit ship over there. You and I are going upstairs for a practice dogfight. The idea is to see who can kill whom first."

And to the other men, "I want to show you Randolph riots that an A.V.G. man can knock your hottest pilot out of the sky in nothing flat. Then maybe I can convince you I've got something on the ball."

Russ adjusted his helmet. "Let me get this straight, Captain. You're going to outfight me up there? Aren't you being awfully optimistic? This is Randolph Field, not Tokyo."

"Let's go, Lieutenant!" Gary answered. "Uncle Sam says 'Every minute counts!'"

Honey stood by, hands jammed nervously into her uniform pockets, face tilted to the sky, eyes wide against the sun, as Russ in his pursuit and Gary at the controls of his shark-mouthed Tomahawk roared up.

The other pilots stood in groups, faces raised, eyes fixed on the dogfight above them. The Tomahawk climbed to ten thousand feet. Gary stuck to Russ like a leech.

Honey held her breath. Her nails cut into her palms, as she watched the wildest brand of flying this side of Burma. From the way Russ flew, she gauged his thoughts. At first, cocky. Then, careful. At last, desperate, he tried to shake off Gary.

Quietly, relentlessly, the Tomahawk stuck to Russ's tail, refusing to be shaken off. The men about Honey began to murmur in admiration of Gary's technique.

"Man! That A.V.G. can hand it out!"

"Watch him take Merrick to pieces!"

“Maybe those six Jap bombers he banged out of the sky weren’t coincidental, after all. He’s got Merrick sweating.”

Gary finally signaled for Russ to reverse the order, to get on his tail and stay there. Russ tried to obey. Around and around they roared, Russ striving vainly to get Gary in his sights.

HONEY felt dizzy. And strangely jubilant. When, at last, Gary, for the second time, found Russ’s pursuit in his sights and the men said, “That ends it! Merrick’s dead! Bond’s turned the tables on him, all right. His guns are in position to shoot Merrick down,” it was all she could do to keep from cheering.

The two planes roared down. Russ, haggard and spent, stepped out of the pursuit. Gary, controlled and smiling, leaped lightly out of the Tomahawk.

“Well, Merrick, you didn’t do so badly for a novice. But if that dogfight had been the real McCoy, you’d rate two funerals.”

Turning to the men, Gary said, “Now, who else wants to try his luck up there with me?” A nervous silence settled. “No volunteers? Okay. I’ll take you alphabetically. Anderson—”

Honey turned and made her way back to her car, but Russ caught up with her. “Going my way?” he asked.

She looked up, her eyes strangely troubled. Somehow, up there in the sky Gary had deglamorized Russ. He was just another man among ten thousand. “I—I guess I’m not going your way,” she said. “I’m waiting for someone. Someone else.”

Russ’s hand dropped. “Okay,” he said, shrugging, “if that’s how it is. Only don’t let that someone else make a sap out of you. Tiger men are exciting to look at, but they might be hard to live with. Anyway, you’re just another blond to him.”

Lips trembling, tears blurring the blazing landscape, she still managed to say, “I can take care of myself, Russ. After all, I’ve been up to my eyes in men all my life!”

She stood still, shivering, in spite of the warm wind moving in off the desert, and watched Russ stride away. For a moment she almost ran after him. Not because she loved him. But because he was Russ and she was used to him. He was safe.

All day she drove dutifully, carrying out her job as a member of the Motor Transport, her eyes lifted to the sky and the streak that was Gary’s

Tomahawk.

At last, her day’s work done, she parked by the ramp, walked over to where the Tomahawk rested.

“**L**OOK who’s here!” Gary’s deep-timbered voice sent thrills chasing themselves up and down her spine. “Climb into the cockpit. That’s one place we can be alone.”

Before she could protest, he lifted her, his arms hard-muscled yet tender.

“Nice of you to warn me about the big freeze this morning,” he said, climbing into the cockpit beside her. “You ran off before I could thank you. So, I guess I’ll thank you now. Like this.”

His arms reached out, but she held him off. What was it Russ had said? “You’re just another blond.”

“I love you,” Gary said. “I’ve loved you since I first saw you back in Burma—in my dreams. Maybe this isn’t the time nor place for a proposal, but it’s the best I can do. Anyway, you’re the right girl, and I’m the right guy and that’s what matters.”

His voice deepened. “Y’know, it’s a funny feeling when life begins to stack it up on a fellow who figured he had lots of time to meet the right girl, and marry.

“Then all at once he’s up in the air with a few rounds of ammunition and a couple of minutes between him and eternity. Two minutes to go before he wins his last wings. The time he thought was ahead of him, waiting, is behind him, spent. The girl he should have met— Where is she? Will he be just a notice in the paper?”

He grinned a little wryly. “When that Jap squadron caught me alone up there and closed in on me, I said, ‘Gary, my boy, this is it!’ And I wondered what my girl looked like. The girl I’d never met.”

Suddenly Honey was in his arms, held close to his fast beating heart. “Look, you’re my girl, beautiful! I knew it the minute I flew in here and froze in my tracks in front of your little red buggy!”

Gosh! Honey thought, what I felt for Russ wasn’t love. It wasn’t even a reasonable facsimile. But this was different! This was real! In fact, as Gary would say, “The real McCoy.”

“I love you so much, darling,” she said.

“Sure,” he agreed, holding her off, little devils dancing in the deep blue of his eyes. “Sure! What’d I tell you? The A.V.G. always wins!”