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“Rachel Scott McDaniel brilliantly transports her readers to the 1920s in this novel full of secrets, faith, and romance. Twists and turns abound throughout this intriguing mystery as the heroine leaves her glittering life behind, disguises herself as an aviatrix, and searches for clues about her husband’s murder. Impossible to put down, this book left me in awe, inspired, and wanting to read the story again.”

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“A tangled web, a sleuthing adventure, a rekindled romance . . . *Walking on Hidden Wings* has it all. Grab a copy and get cozy because you’re going to want to read one more chapter.”

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“*Walking on Hidden Wings* swept me up in the 1920s world of glitter and intrigue. With mystery, betrayal, and forgiveness, Rachel Scott McDaniel takes readers on a beautiful journey of learning what it means to love, and of the sacrifices we make for those we hold dear. This is a book I’ll be thinking about for a long time to come.”

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“Compulsively readable, *Walking on Hidden Wings* has all the twists and turns of an aviation act, with all the intrigue too. Rachel Scott McDaniel proves herself once again as a master of her genre in this story that’s filled with romance, history, and dangerous secrets. The witty banter between characters is guaranteed to make you swoon. I couldn’t put it down!”

—Ashley Clark, acclaimed author of the
Heirloom Secrets series

RACHEL SCOTT McDANIEL

WALKING ON
HIDDEN
WINGS

*A NOVEL of the
ROARING TWENTIES*



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Dear reader, this one's for you.

PART 1

Chapter 1

September 1, 1922

Stella

MY GLOVED HAND STRETCHED HIGH as if to skim my fingers along the fringe of heaven, but one wrong move would send me careening eight hundred feet to unforgiving earth. Spectators huddled below on a broad field, their necks craning, eyes no doubt squinting against the fiery afternoon sun. All to glimpse the crazy dame who batted her lashes at danger and wooed risk atop the wing of a Curtiss Jenny biplane.

The custom Hisso engine roared its powerful song and muted the crowd's gasps and hollers, but even from this height I sensed the thrum of their excitement. I was no fool. They'd come to see if my blood would stain the sun-bleached grass. Sensation seekers. Every one of them. From farmer to mayor, the citizens of Columbia County, New York, had paid hard-earned cash to watch me challenge death.

With my boots planted on the wing, I leaned and swayed with the plane's movement, becoming one with the machine as it inclined.

We cut through the sky at sixty-five miles per hour, a dizzying speed on solid ground, let alone at this altitude.

Stella! You're crazy! Tex mouthed from the safety of the open cockpit.

While the mustached pilot was probably miffed that I'd climbed out of my seat before reaching peak elevation, he hadn't known me long enough to make such an assessment. He didn't even know my true name. The lanky man had approached me after this morning's flight

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show, tugging his worn suspenders and claiming he was the best aviator to ever sit behind the controls.

He'd lied.

Because I'd married the best flier. Only to become a widow before my wedding gown could fade. I pushed past the stab of grief and forced myself to focus. Thankfully, Tex *did* seem to have a good handle on the Jenny, or else I wouldn't have ventured onto the wing. Or maybe I would've anyway.

If things got shaky, all I had to do was drop to my knees and cling to the spar bar within my reach. The plane climbed higher, nearing fifteen hundred feet.

My heartbeat drummed at the base of my throat. I pried my resolve from the murky depths of my mind and took a step forward. Then another. A tremor rocked the plane. I defied the instinct to stoop and brace myself. Instead I stilled, adjusting to the new angle as if the wing were an extension of my feet. Good thing Tex hadn't jerked the controls. One panicked jolt could've knocked me off-balance and into the slicing blades of the propeller.

I strode two remaining paces, positioning close to the wing's edge, and my gaze swept over the crowd.

Those below had no idea whom they stared at. My stunt in the air wasn't my only performance. Nor my most dangerous one. *That* particular act had begun the moment I'd run away from the glitter. For I'd shed the vulnerable identity of golden-haired Geneva Ashcroft Hayes, society's angel, to become raven-haired Stella Starling, showman of the skies.

I glanced at Tex. He signaled to pull the rip cord, then pointed at my vacated cockpit. Basically he wanted me to either open the chute or climb back into my seat. As if those were my only options.

I stretched out my arms and flared my fingers. The wind pulsed against me like fevered breath. My eyes slid closed. Darkness invaded, but I wasn't terrified of it. Not anymore. I'd been wrestling the shadows ever since darkness had the nerve to snatch Warren from my arms.

Being this close to the clouds meant being closer to him. If only I could reach up and draw back the velvety blue curtain of sky to see my husband's face, the tease of his smirk when he called me Eva. The hints of amber in his dark eyes when the light hit just right. The thrill that rumbled through me at his touch.

And there it was.

The familiar pang. It tore into me, and I clung with a desperate grip, allowing the scoring force to numb me to the rest of the world. This was the precise amount of dulling needed for me to pursue a third option. One Tex hadn't considered.

My temples throbbed against my leather helmet.

A prayer left my lips.

I fell back, giving myself to the sky.



A man slumped against my door.

I froze at the top of the stairs leading to my rented room. My accommodations weren't wired for electric lamps, inside or out. The waning moon and the dim lantern in my right hand were my only light sources.

The man sat motionless, his folded arms stacked atop drawn knees. A hat slung low on his face, but the straw boater didn't muffle the gruff snores ripping from his lips.

Of all the places for this fellow to fall asleep.

I hated the idea of disturbing the landlords below, but I wasn't about to wake a male stranger at night. The alternative would be returning to Mr. Ewing's farm and bunking with livestock. Not only had the generous farmer given me use of his field for the flight shows, but he'd also stowed my plane behind his barn, all for no fee.

My aching muscles protested the mile trek to the Ewing property when a comfortable bed stood only yards away. A bed in a room I'd paid two dollars to call mine for the next twelve hours.

Unlike Mr. Ewing, the middle-aged couple who leased the room

above their own humble lodgings had inflated the going rate by a dollar and fifty cents upon my arrival—if the rumor was to be believed.

Once upon a time, all I had to do was tug a braided bellpull, and attendants would flock to do my bidding. But like all memorable stories, a severe plot twist had changed the course of my fairy tale. I hadn't even reached the coveted "The End" and had already amassed complaints—I never encountered talking woodland creatures and most definitely had been robbed of my happily ever after.

So now I flipped the figurative page, turned to fetch the landlord, and nearly tripped on the uneven planks. I grasped the railing, which was wobbly at best, and prayed it didn't crumble into splinters beneath my weight.

"Huh? What?" The dozer startled upright, then skittered to his feet, his hat tumbling to the floorboards.

Oh for the love . . . "Tex? What are you doing here?" From the dark-blond hair and copper-hued mustache to the spindly arms capped with stubby hands, his entire person consisted of mismatched parts strung together on a gangly frame.

He wiped the slobber from his mouth with the frayed cuff of his sleeve. "Waiting for you. Must've fallen asleep." He yawned. "What time is it?"

I remained a safe distance from him and strengthened my grip on the lantern. Not the best choice of weapon, but it was something. Tex didn't seem the kind who'd force himself on a woman. Then again, I'd known him for less than a day. "Around ten."

"And you just now arrived? What were you doing?"

"Nothing of your concern." There was no way I'd confide in Tex the true reason behind my not-so-casual interest in this town. Or the reason why I'd selected this dot on the map for a flight show.

Notes hidden in a cigarette case had dictated each stop on my itinerary. The silver-plated container would appear rather plain to any onlooker, but stashed within were scribbled secrets by a private investigator. The detective had been my husband's best friend. He had also disappeared a few weeks after Warren's death. Coincidence? I didn't

believe in those anymore. Which was why I'd taken the case from Brisbane's deserted apartment.

His notes were the only clues I had. But like the past spots I'd visited in search of truth, this town hadn't coughed up any answers—and neither had the resident gossip, Mrs. Felicia Turnbull, proprietor of the busy drugstore. I'd emptied my pockets on chocolate sodas, lingering past closing time and encouraging Mrs. Turnbull to divulge any and all gossip. Apparently the town committee was at odds about the possibility of some kind of factory opening the following year. The schoolteacher was getting married next month, and the board still hadn't hired a replacement for the fall. Oh, and the doctor's elderly mother had a habit of switching price tags at the church rummage sale.

Nothing that involved the murder of my husband. Or his missing friend.

Exhaustion seeped into my bones. "C'mon, Tex. What are you doing here? I already paid you a swell sum for your flying services."

"I came to see if you're okay."

From my parachute jump? "I landed perfectly." Free-falling a hundred feet before opening my chute wasn't my finest decision. All to silence, if only for a second, the tug of grief and the push of guilt, the tormenting twins of my existence since the day Warren was killed. "I'll be sore tomorrow, but the crowd loved it."

"That's not what I meant." He scooped his hat from the dusty floor and brushed it off. "Remember I served in the war. I recognize a pair of haunted eyes when I see them, Stella."

Shame poked my conscience for lying about my identity. But if this man knew who I was—or rather, who my family was—his concern for my haunted eyes would shift to padding his pockets.

A five-thousand-dollar reward belonged to the person who safely returned me to Ashcroft grounds. "I'm fine. Just tired. Now if you don't mind stepping aside from my door—"

"I wanna work for you." He held his hat over his heart and fidgeted with the brim. "With me as your flier, you can expand your show. Do that whole wingwalking bit." There were traces of something in his

voice. Something that'd blazed in me the moment I'd first set eyes on a flying machine—desperation. That jolt of longing to climb into the cockpit and escape into the heavens.

How much more difficult was it for aviators to be sentenced to land? Flying coursed through their blood. Even with two feet planted on the ground, their sights were forever on the sky. Today I'd mistakenly given Tex a drop of adventure's milk, but not enough to nourish his starved soul. In my efforts to be gracious, I'd been cruel. "I'm sorry. I work alone."

"Why? I can help—"

"I have an appointment at noon tomorrow, then I'm leaving the area after that." That was the plan, anyway. I had no idea who Kent Brisbane had made this meeting with before he'd gone missing. Attending in his place could get me answers . . . or get me killed.

Tex's arms wilted to his sides. "I understand."

"Several families have been asking for rides in the Jenny. My engagement is in the next township over, but if you want, you can fly folks around. Just charge two bucks a passenger and limit their jaunts to fifteen minutes. Keep all the profits minus what's needed for fuel."

His head jerked up. "Really?"

"Be sure to finish up by three and tack her to the fence post. I need to head out as soon as I return."

"Thank you, Stella." He slapped his hat on his head.

I offered a friendly smile. "Don't do anything stupid with my plane."

"Like allowing 'em to parachute off the wings at low altitude?" he teased with a grin.

"Off with you now." I set down the lantern, which had burned out during our conversation, and fished the door key from my purse. "You've kept me from sleep long enough."

"Yes, ma'am." He gave a two-fingered salute, then his face sobered. "If you . . . uh . . . change your mind down the road, I hope you'll consider me for a partner."

I nodded but kept my lips pinched. I'd no intention of joining forces with anyone.

Tex bounded down the steps with the grace of a hundred elephants as I unlocked my door. The room smelled like stale cigar smoke and unwashed feet. A newspaper had been slid beneath my door. Probably yesterday's edition from another town, considering this rural community had no local press.

Moonlight shone through the gap of the tattered curtains, running a silvery finger on the front page, highlighting a familiar face. Mine. Since my disappearance, my family had plastered my likeness on every times and gazette from Philadelphia to Seattle. Hardly surprising, considering my marriage to Warren had shoved a dozen of the nation's leading newspapers under my father's powerful thumb. I'd inherited Warren's publishing empire after his declared death, and now with my absence, I could almost guarantee Father had pushed his way into command.

This picture was the one taken from my debutante season. My smile was so prim and innocent, my light hair in a perfect coiffure. How different I looked now. No one would place Stella Starling as Geneva Ashcroft Hayes. But still, I should move with caution. The more flamboyant I acted, the less likely the connection to the reserved socialite.

I snatched the offending paper from the floor so I wouldn't trip over it come morning.

I relit the lantern, and my gaze drifted to the paper's headline. I froze. My shaky fingers crinkled the edges as I reread those bold words, hoping—no, praying—my exhausted mind had tricked me. No. The words were there in stark contrast of black on white.

Missing Socialite Confesses to Husband's Murder

Chapter 2

I LOST COUNT OF HOW many times I'd read over the headline and the subsequent article, each condemning phrase leaping out and twisting into me like fiery thorns.

"The police department has a letter by Mrs. Hayes."

"In her own words, she confesses her guilt."

"Takes blame for her husband's murder."

"Wanted for questioning."

Yes, I'd written to Kent Brisbane, but my words had been utterly misinterpreted. And how had my letter slipped into the hands of the authorities when I couldn't recall ever sending it?

I remembered addressing the envelope and placing it in my desk drawer, but . . . then what? I squeezed my eyes shut, willing those faded moments to return. Had I mailed it? I must have, and in my muddled emotional state, not realized what I'd done.

How foolish. Also, how trusting. I had penned my fears and shame for Brisbane's eyes only. Him being a private detective, I'd thought he could help. That was why I'd visited him, only to find he'd disappeared. So I'd taken the cigarette case and decided to conduct my own investigation.

Hair rising on my neck, I scanned the article again. Not one mention of Brisbane. But how else would anyone have possession of my letter if not from him? Maybe he'd turned it in anonymously. Maybe Brisbane's vanishing had nothing to do with the danger I'd left home to escape,

but for another reason altogether. What if he was purposely hiding? Did he have something to do with Warren's death? What if he had set me up?

So many questions piled on my soul without any hope of being answered.

A sigh pushed past my lips. I was wanted for murder. The fairy tale shifted yet again—the princess had become the villain.

I glanced at my New Testament propped against my bag on the bed. God had never promised a life of fabled bliss. The Scriptures warned of tests and trials, but this? It was more than I could bear.

Nausea flooded my gut, crashing against the stony edges of my heart. Should I continue my hunt for the elusive private detective even while the world hunted me? What other choice did I have?

Ignoring my pounding temples, I dug out Brisbane's cigarette case from my bag. With a soft click, I opened the rectangular trinket and withdrew the small notepad. My heart raced as I set the opened pad beside the glaring article.

I'd studied Brisbane's choppy scrawl a thousand times, but at this moment I hoped something new would emerge from the uneven ink strokes. I knew this was foolish, was like staring at splattered paint on a canvas for days and expecting the mess to blend to create a clear picture. All I had were disordered snatches of clues with no assurance of them leading to anything.

Brisbane had jotted down ten towns—all rural communities, all threaded throughout New York State. Why were these locations important enough to be in his treasured notepad? Why had he left said notepad behind when he'd never gone anywhere without it? When I'd gone to his studio apartment, utilizing Warren's key, it was obvious the man had left in a hurried state, his wardrobe left open, drawers askew—though the cigarette case had remained on his nightstand. Had he left it on purpose? Or had he been in such a rush he'd forgotten it?

I asked myself these questions over and over. Whether the idea was

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irrational or remarkable, I had used the information within the case as a map of sorts. Under the guise of barnstorming, I had visited the first four towns on Brisbane's list. I intended to go through with this charade until I visited every location.

Something else was within his notes, an inscription that didn't gel with the other entries—a date and an address. An appointment that happened to be tomorrow in the next township. I was determined to investigate. Heaven only knew if it would direct me to Brisbane or something more sinister.



I hadn't prepared for this.

When I'd given the cabbie the address, he'd flashed a smile with a hearty "Sure thing, dollface." But I never imagined the appointment Brisbane had made months ago was at a gin joint in the middle of nowhere.

I'd never stepped a T-strap shoe into a speakeasy before. Of course, I'd inclined my ear to the gossip about these establishments. How they brimmed with all sorts of glitz and glamour. How gorgeous flappers danced the foxtrot with men styled in the finest garb.

This, however, was not that kind of place.

The structure—if it even deserved that title—seemed nothing but warped boards and rotted beams melded together by the putrid, hot breath of drunks. Cigarette smoke clogged the air, adding a haze to the already shadowed space.

Judging by the number of fedora-capped heads, it was evident I was the only female in the room.

Swell.

My hot plan of remaining unobserved fizzled like a wet firecracker. Maybe I should've worn my trousers and flight jacket. But that would have made me stand out more—if that were possible. I ran a damp palm down the skirt of my dress. When packing for this trip, I'd only had time to shove a few frocks into my traveling bag. This one was dark

blue with ivory trim. Hardly remarkable. But it appeared as though I were competing for the popular Most Beautiful Bathing Girl in America for all the stares I garnered. But I wasn't pageant material, and this joint wasn't the Atlantic City Boardwalk.

"Hiya, baby." That slurred voice did not belong to Kent Brisbane. Nor did the weathered face stretched into a large smile with an even larger knot on the nose. The man staggered toward me, his eyes glossed over.

I gave him a wide berth only to collide into a billiard table. The impact disrupted the game in progress, sending a striped ball into the side pocket.

"Why, thank you." A shorter gentleman removed his hat and bent forward in a sweeping bow. "You just earned me a buck."

His opponent yelled an unsavory term and commenced to argue.

This wasn't going as I'd imagined. The only thing keeping me within these seedy walls was the hope of meeting Kent Brisbane. My eyes swept the space in search of his tall, sturdy frame. It was early yet. The time on the paper said noon. It was ten till the hour.

He wasn't lingering by the pool tables. Nor seated at the smattering of tables. That left the bar. Several men had their backs toward me, heads bowed over, no doubt nursing drinks. My heels clicked loud and choppy—just like my heartbeat—as I approached the long stretch of counter, stained with who knew what.

The men at the billiards table continued their shouting match. To add more chaos, the bartender dropped a tray of dirty glasses. Amber liquid splashed on a boot belonging to a man who possessed keg-sized arms. Those massive limbs shoved the bartender, flinging him into a group of rummed-up patrons.

Cackles and curses erupted. Some jumped from their seats, while others pounded meaty fists on the tables. My lands. A brawl was sure to erupt.

Panic punched my heart. I needed out of here.

Masculine hands slid over my waist from behind. Possessive and way too intimate.

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No way I was getting assaulted in a speakeasy. I jerked my elbow back and connected with a muscled abdomen. The man's hold didn't lessen, but his fingers tightened in almost . . . a protective gesture?

"Easy now, Geneva."

That voice. Deep and soulful.

Again, not Brisbane's.

I braved a look over my shoulder and peered into the eyes of my dead husband.

Only he was very much alive.

Chapter 3

Approximately five months earlier—April 7, 1922

Geneva

“YOU’RE SACRIFICING ME ON THE matrimonial altar.” All for the sake of politics and power. I tugged the silver-plated brush through my long golden hair, wincing when it tugged a snarl.

“What a notion, Geneva.” Mother’s laugh was forced, her mouth pinching at the edges. “You always have a flair for the dramatic, my love.”

Love.

Even though that particular topic terrified me, it’d be nice to be given a choice. But that sort of pettiness appeared to be last on my parents’ list of requirements in pawning off their child. Only it wasn’t to the highest bidder. No, my family didn’t need to fatten their already gorged bank accounts. They craved influence. And apparently Warren Hayes, with his newspaper empire, held the golden key to Father’s political hopes.

Mother’s pale features seemed almost ghostly in the mirror’s reflection. She stood like a porcelain sentinel beside my open oak bookcase. I never knew what version of Mother to expect. Sometimes she assumed the role of dutiful parent, instructing me in long-winded monologues of the unbending ways of society. Other days she remained tight-lipped and begrudging, as if she felt obligated to visit me. Another task on

her lengthy list. The only other time Mother approached, and my least favorite, was on assignment from Father.

I presumed today would be a blend of all three.

She touched the Bible my grandmother had gifted me years ago, the slow creep of her bony finger along the spine almost mocking. Helena Ashcroft quoted society pages more readily than Scripture, but she knew enough verses to wield them to her advantage. And to Father's control. As in the Scripture about children obeying their parents. Years of such forced guidance had left me questioning if Mother was friend or foe. Same went for God.

She padded across the carpet to where I sat on the plush vanity stool. "You don't have to encourage a proposal tonight. There's plenty of time to get to know each other."

Not according to Father. He needed this union between Mr. Hayes and me last year. I had dug in my heels, claiming I needed to see Lilith through her debut season. My parents had relented but only because Lilith was shy and needed a buffer from society's wolves. But now I must align myself with a *worthy* spouse because that was what one did when situated on the highest rung of the social ladder.

I wanted nothing more than to kick the infernal ladder over. "If Father wasn't running for the senate"—with his hungry eyes on the presidency—"I wouldn't have to be the bait to lure in a man I've never met." And knew nothing about. The gentleman could have a secret life as a bootlegger for all I knew.

"Another ill-placed analogy." The hollowness in Mother's brown eyes wasn't comforting. "You're simply helping advance your family."

From what I could assume, the Hayes Publishing Company sought financial backing to keep their newspapers rolling, and the Ashcroft family sought favorable publicity for Father's senatorial campaign. Everyone benefited.

Except me.

"It's just for a little while." Mother placed her hand on my shoulder, and I recoiled as if her slender fingers were snakes. A little while? Last time I checked, marriage was a forever thing.

How could Mother say the situation would only be temporary? Unless . . . “Are the rumors true?”

“Narrow it down, dear.” Her voice struggled for lightness. “There are, indeed, several.”

Yes, which was why Father needed the papers to soften his tycoon image. To use the power of the Hayes family’s ink on paper to paint him a hero. My future husband had his work cut out for him. “The rumors about Howard Yater’s passing.” The unfortunate fellow had betrayed Father in some business dealings. Father had invited him to dinner to discuss the issue, and not two days later Mr. Yater was dead.

“You think your father had a role in that cruel man’s death?” She shook her head, as if I were an ignorant child. “Mr. Yater succumbed to a stomach illness. Your Father had nothing to do with it.” Her cold fingers squeezed my shoulder, not in affection but to emphasize her words. “I meant only that you need to entertain Mr. Hayes for a little while. He’ll certainly fall for your charms. And Father will be pleased.”

And not punish Lilith. I could almost hear those words drip from her thin mouth. No, Father wouldn’t ruin my sister’s life if I allowed him to rule mine.

“Now, no more talk of this, Geneva.” Mother tucked a loose hairpin back into place. “We have the ball to get ready for. Cecily will be up shortly to start your beauty treatments.”

Mother inspected my gown hanging on the dressing screen, then exited in a flourish of lavender and grace.

The ball began at eight. I had six more hours of freedom. And I wouldn’t squander them. After hastily arranging my hair in a low chignon, I bounded out the door, not half as elegant as Mother but wholly more determined.

Quick glances ensured all was clear in the hall. I fled down the staff stairway and exited the back door.

I usually favored our country manor over our town house in Manhattan, but not today. The walls seemed to close in. I needed away. My feet carried me swiftly through the garden and out of sight of the opulent estate. The familiar dusty lane stretched before me, and I paused to

catch my breath. In my haste, I hadn't changed from my satin slippers, which by now were ruined. But I couldn't bring myself to care. I pushed on, putting more and more distance between myself and the manor.

My parents regarded me like I viewed my slippers. I used these shoes to get me where I needed but didn't care about their well-being—only placing all my weight on them, forcing them to move where I pleased. I'd use them until they broke. Such was my existence as an Ashcroft—used until broken.

I would marry a man I'd never seen to save a sister I did see. And adored more than anything. A fact Father often used to his twisted advantage.

Starlings winged overhead, their sable bodies warping the steady rays of sun. What I wouldn't give to join their ranks. I envied their freedom. Oh, to be able to fly far away from scheming parents and an inevitable wedding to a stranger.

Lilith.

My spine straightened. I would do this for Lilith. I passed a derelict barn, my usual marker for returning home.

“All better, darling. Now you'll sing pretty for me.” A masculine voice floated on the breeze, drawing my attention to the nearby field on the other side of the paint-stripped structure.

A man stood in front of a . . . flying machine?

My mouth hung open. I'd seen photos of airplanes, heard tales of their brilliancy, but never actually glimpsed one. Mother labeled them death traps. Father declared them a foolish means of transportation. I called them fascinating.

I gravitated toward the small fence separating me from the field. In a move that would send Mother to the fainting couch, I climbed over the wooden barrier, careful not to snag my stockings. I dodged shallow ditches and piles of cow manure. My poor slippers. What was I doing? I didn't know this stranger, but the airplane tugged me unshakably toward it. Oh, to rest my eyes upon something that tasted the sky.

“Hello.” My tentative voice made the man flinch.

“Afternoon, miss.” He lifted his hand to tip his hat, only to realize

he had no hat. What he *did* have was a fascinating display of artfully mussed brown curls that the rays of afternoon sun took as their personal playground. Being accustomed to seeing men's hair waxed stiff from tubs of pomade, I was enamored how the tips of his masculine locks lifted in the gentle breeze. How the—

A throat cleared.

I jolted. What was I doing staring at a complete stranger? I took a step away from him and toward the airplane. "Is that your flying machine?"

He nodded, still not pulling his gaze from me.

"It's magnificent." The propeller was wooden. The body was a curious blend of painted fabric and thin metal. "I've never been this close. Honestly, I've never seen one."

"She had a bit of a fit during the barrel rolls. But there was some debris in her fuselage. Her engine should purr pretty now." He spoke aloud, as if I understood what in the world he was talking about. He took in my face, which must've betrayed my confusion, for the corner of his mouth lifted along with a casual shrug. "Sorry. Mechanic's jargon."

"Oh." I lowered my brows. "I assumed you were the pilot."

"I'm that too." His grin broke free. "Jenny can be temperamental. You have to understand how she moves so you can keep her gliding."

I allowed a small smile. "You call your plane Jenny?"

His curious gaze squinted against the sunlight. "If you want to go by the model name, she's a Curtiss JN-4. But us fliers just say Jenny."

I stepped forward and ran my hand along the Jenny's silver body. The frame was warm, but my palm seemed to sizzle, as if it could absorb the adventures this plane had encountered. Meanwhile, I had been confined to this soiled earth. "What escapades you've known."

"You sound jealous." The man came up beside me.

"I am." My confession was more to myself than to this stranger. "It's only metal and wood and fuel. It has no heart or soul, but it's traveled places I've never been." With all the wealth in my life, I could never buy that experience. Or could I? I faced him, raising my chin with fresh purpose. "How much?"

His brows spiked. "For the plane? Sorry. She's not for sale."

Walking on Hidden Wings

“No, I noticed there are two seats. Take me on your next run?” It was my last window of freedom before stepping into the bleak plans everyone so effortlessly set for me. I needed this more than anything. “I can pay you any amount. Name the price.” I pulled my attention from the enormous contraption and focused on its owner.

I had a lot of practice observing gentlemen while not exuding any interest. I’d survived my debut season, accumulating several marriage proposals, none of which my family approved of. But with all that came an ability to quickly assess people, take in their measure in the span of a few heartbeats.

With a swift glance at the man, I noted the confident slash of his dark brows. He’d had some sort of schooling—higher education if I were to guess. Intelligence marked his dark-brown eyes. But what impacted me the most was the strong line of his jaw. There was a hardness to it, as if naturally locked in determination. In his open-collared shirt and dusty trousers, he embodied ruggedness, something unsuited for the ballroom but far more intriguing.

The mystery pilot was quiet for a moment, studying me in return. His mouth pressed together, then relaxed into an easy smile. “Sorry, miss. I can’t do that.”

I blinked at his casual dismissal. He couldn’t give me one lousy jaunt through the sky? Couldn’t the man see how much it meant to me? Defeat taunted. So much was being stripped from my hands. My choice of husband. My last name. My future. Something snapped in me, and I clutched his arm. “Please? I’ll make it worth your while.”

As soon as the words were out, I wished them back. I didn’t know this man. Sure, the way he carried himself spoke of assurance and smarts, but he could be low principled. And here I was, in an abandoned field, far from civilization, uttering words that could be taken in the worst possible way. I straightened and adopted a cool tone. “Let me repeat my offer. I can pay any monetary fee.”

His arms crossed in a tight fold over his chest. With his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows, it made for an impressive display of brawn and strength. “You make it sound as if anything can be bought.”

“In my world, that’s the way of life.”

His head tilted, and something marked his eyes. It looked suspiciously like compassion. He braved a step toward me, caution saturating his movements, as if approaching a delicate creature. “In *my* world, all you have to do is ask.”

“But you told me a second ago you couldn’t.”

“As in, I couldn’t accept anything from you. But I’ll freely take you up there.” He nodded toward the sky. “If that’s what you want.”

What a refreshing—and scarce!—thought. Someone existed who didn’t want to take from me, but to give. Emotion clogged my throat at this stranger’s kindness. “Well then.” I couldn’t help the smile breaking loose. “Would you be so kind as to give me a turn in your flying machine?”

He snatched a leather jacket from the ground and slipped it on. “It would be my honor.” He paused. “Miss?”

Oh. *Oh*. I hadn’t introduced myself. My manners were abominable, but I was glad of it. Because at the moment, I didn’t want to be Geneva Ashcroft, heiress to countless lumber mills and paper factories. I longed to be like the starling.

“Pardon?”

I blinked. Had I just said that aloud? Gracious, I was a million miles out of my mind. “I said St- . . . Stella. You may call me Stella.”

If I expected the man to scowl at my informal prattling of my fake name, I’d been wrong.

A reckless grin split his tan face. “Nice to meet you, Stella.”

“Likewise.” I dipped my chin. “And you are?”

“Your pilot for this afternoon.”



I had almost died. Well, it had felt that way. Several times. But it’d been nothing like I’d ever experienced. The thrashing of the propeller, the growl of the engine, the way my stomach had rolled into my throat when the wheels had lifted from the ground. The journey into the skies

had made it difficult to draw a patchy breath into my squeezing lungs. My skin had prickled beneath the battering of the air current. Good thing my maid, Cecily, hadn't already arranged my hair for the evening's event, or else I would've been in deep trouble. For my golden locks were stuffed beneath a helmet, but some tendrils had broken free, whipping wildly about my face, even as my heart soared beyond the gilded earthly cage.

The goggles secured over my eyes hadn't limited my vision of the glories around me. My pilot had proven skilled in handling the airplane and had given me an exciting jaunt as near to heaven as one could possibly get.

All thrilling. All over way too soon.

The field, pitted with ruts and ditches, seemed the worst place for a smooth landing, but the experienced flier set the wheels on what had to be the only stretch of even ground.

Knowing Cecily had probably sent out search parties by now, I thanked the handsome aviator, patted the plane one last time, and scurried home.

A few hours later I found myself in the boring ballroom. Glittering dresses donned by those with sparkling smiles surrounded me, pressing in on every side. Yet everything was insipid compared to my memorable flight. Sighing, I took a sip of lemonade. It was bland.

My parents had organized this country house party, tonight being the first evening of a two-week-long event to celebrate spring. Though truly this had been planned to schmooze political powerhouses for their support this fall. Since Father had announced his senatorial run last November, it'd been nothing but a string of societal gatherings to boost my parents' image. And this one had the markings of being the dullest one yet.

I wanted nothing more than to be back with my mystery pilot. I'd never gotten his true name in fear he'd call me out on my own lie. But it was better that way. For I'd always remember him for his scent of leather, flash of smile, and air of secrets.

"Geneva." Father's voice carried over my shoulder.

Perhaps I should pretend I hadn't heard him and walk away in search of a darkened alcove to disappear in. I knew the reason Father sought me out. The only reason he *ever* sought me out in a ballroom—to make an introduction. And tonight the impending new acquaintance lying in wait could only be Mr. Hayes. My future husband.

For Lilith.

My jaw tightened. My sister was in her room tonight, recovering from a spring cold. Last month the youngest Ashcroft had turned twenty, three years younger than me and far more fragile. Which was why my parents had delayed her society debut, thinking an extra couple of years would see her through her shyness stage. Though it hadn't been a phase. Lilith was more comfortable away from crowds and strangers. And yet Father had a worse alliance arranged for Lilith if I refused to marry Mr. Hayes. With a calming breath, I inclined my chin and pivoted on my heel toward the men who'd agreed to make my life miserable. "Yes, Father?"

I almost dropped my lemonade.

For standing beside Father was my mystery pilot. The man who'd escorted me into the skies. The man who currently had a knowing smirk lining his handsome mouth.

"Mr. Hayes, may I present my daughter."

Warren Hayes, newspaper king, pilot extraordinaire, stepped forward. His appearance was so different from hours earlier. His curls had been tamed into submission. He no longer filled out a crisp leather flight jacket but a tailored tuxedo. His eyes fixed on me with exhilarating intensity. "Miss Ashcroft." He bowed over my gloved hand. "I'm charmed."

He straightened to full height with a lithe movement, reminding me of a panther. Powerful and dangerous. And yet I wasn't intimidated in the least but rather jolted with thrilling energy.

His lips tilted into an amused smile. "You put me in mind of another local beauty I've had the pleasure of meeting. Perhaps you're acquainted with Stella Fibberstale?"

I'd never given him a fake surname. And if I had, it certainly wouldn't

have been Fibberstale. No, he was calling me out for my earlier deception, my telling of a fib. A smile tickled my lips, but I wouldn't succumb. Not while Father watched on. "I've heard wonderful things about that elegant young lady." Hiding any hint of mirth lent a throatiness to my voice. Not exactly the tone I intended. "I'm honored to be likened to her."

"And I'd be honored if you'd dance with me." His request was so smoothly placed, it'd taken a second to gather my wits. He outstretched his gloved hand, beckoning mine. "That is, if you're not already engaged."

I swallowed so hard I almost choked. *Engaged*. Of all the things to say. But the twinkle in his eyes betrayed his deliberate word choice. As if we shared a secret joke. Which . . . we did. But now was a test to see where his allegiance lay. Would he reveal to Father our afternoon escapade? Though it seemed Mr. Hayes had forgotten about the Ashcroft patriarch. The newspaper mogul looked at me as if whatever rolled off my lips next was of the utmost importance to him.

Too bad my mouth couldn't move. Nor the rest of me. If John Ashcroft was anywhere in the vicinity, all attention fixed on him. Not so now. I glanced at Father. Not that I expected any reaction from him. There was a reason why people cowered in his presence. And a fiery temper couldn't be blamed.

If he had one, he'd never shown it. No shaking fists. No vein-bulged forehead over bent brows. Never a sharp tone. In all my twenty-three years, he'd never adopted a severe expression.

Or any other expression. His countenance was one of perpetual emptiness. As if there'd been a leak in his emotion tank, draining the ability to express any kind of feeling from his system.

Such a coolness terrified those around him, me included. Father's frosty blond hair and glacial blue eyes, along with his regal bearing, made him appear less like a lumber mill tycoon and more like some mythical ice king ripped from the pages of a storybook.

But now the left corner of Father's mouth curled even as he divested me of the lemonade glass. Someone could pluck that ridiculous plume

from Mother's gaudy headpiece and knock me over with it. Maybe I'd imagined Father's smile. Or a bored guest had laced the beverage bowl.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hayes awaited my answer.

With a single nod, I slid my fingers into Mr. Hayes's, and he led me onto the dance floor. My stomach roiled as it had hours ago, but this time I couldn't fault the turbulent air rocking the flying machine.

His hand settled on my waist, and I inhaled a sharp breath at the fire leaping inside me.

My previous ball gowns had been heavily beaded in the torso, but tonight's chiffon dress was most assuredly lacking in studded ornamentation. With the thick barrier removed and my secret rebellion to forego wearing a corset, the flowy layers of cloth were thin beneath his hand, making his touch intimate.

"Did you know who I was the entire time?" All the blinding shimmer of the chandeliers, the soft chatter of the surrounding couples, and the floral-scented air in the room narrowed until there was nothing but him and me.

His lips twitched. "I thought you were familiar, but I couldn't place you. Not until you refused to tell me your full name." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "How about you? Did you purposefully seek me out this afternoon?"

I scoffed. "Hardly. Until today I hadn't a clue as to what you even looked like. Now I see I misjudged you."

His eyes gleamed with mischief. "In a good way or bad?"

"I can see you're far too amused by this. Perhaps I'll withhold my answer and leave you captive by suspense."

His scorching gaze stretched into me, melting the frosty spots of my defenses. "I'm held captive. But suspense has nothing to do with it."

Oh, I'd been wrong earlier. The man *was* ballroom handsome. If I was mistaken in my assessment of Warren Hayes, I could also have been in error about our future. Perhaps this thing between us . . . could work.