

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

Walking on Hidden Wings

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