~ ESCAPE WITH ~

JENNY COLGAN



Praise for

JENNY COLGAN



'I loved this novel and every single one of its characters. Supremely heartfelt, hilarious and heartrending – it's an absolute triumph'
Sophie Kinsella

'This funny, sweet story is Jenny Colgan at her absolute best'
Heat

'Fast-paced, funny, poignant and well observed'
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'She is very, very funny'
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'A Colgan novel is like listening to your best pal,
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entertaining, dramatic and frequently hilarious'
Daily Record

'An entertaining read'
Sunday Express



By Jenny Colgan

Mure

The Summer Seaside Kitchen

A Very Distant Shore *(novella)*

The Endless Beach

An Island Christmas

Christmas at the Island Hotel

An Island Wedding

Kirrinfief

The Little Shop of Happy Ever After

The Bookshop on the Shore

Five Hundred Miles from You

Little Beach Street Bakery

Little Beach Street Bakery

Summer at Little Beach Street Bakery

Christmas at Little Beach Street Bakery

Sunrise by the Sea

Cupcake Café

Meet Me at the Cupcake Café

Christmas at the Cupcake Café

Sweetshop of Dreams

Welcome to Rosie Hopkins' Sweetshop of Dreams

Christmas at Rosie Hopkins' Sweetshop

The Christmas Surprise

The Little School by the Sea

Class

Rules

Lessons

West End Girls

Operation Sunshine

Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend

The Good, the Bad and the Dumped

The Loveliest Chocolate Shop in Paris

Amanda's Wedding

Talking to Addison

Looking for Andrew McCarthy

Working Wonders

Do You Remember the First Time?

Where Have All the Boys Gone?

The Christmas Bookshop

The Summer Skies

By Jenny T. Colgan

Resistance Is Futile

Spandex and the City

Jenny Colgan is the author of numerous bestselling novels, including *The Little Shop of Happy Ever After* and *Summer at Little Beach Street Bakery*, which are also published by Sphere. *Meet Me at the Cupcake Café* won the 2012 Melissa Nathan Award for Comedy Romance and was a *Sunday Times* top ten bestseller, as was *Welcome to Rosie Hopkins' Sweetshop of Dreams*, which won the RNA Romantic Novel of the Year Award 2013. Jenny lives in Scotland. She can be found on Twitter at @jennycolgan and on Instagram at @jennycolganbooks.

The *Sunday Times* bestseller



JENNY COLGAN

The Summer Skies

[a/w to come]



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For Leonid, who has travelled so far and who is so very brave. We are so proud of you.

'The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease for ever to be able to do it.'

Peter Pan, J. M. BARRIE

Foreword

This is not a book about a pilot.

I know that seems ridiculous, seeing as somewhere on the jacket it probably says, 'Morag is a pilot', and it's definitely a book about a woman called Morag.

In fact, it's so not a book about a pilot, one of the lovely pilots who helped me out with the technical stuff (what pilots do is amazing, I have learned), very sweetly, while gently correcting me yet again one day ('Jen, pilots don't reverse planes. We don't have, like, wing mirrors.'), said, 'You know, it is totally fine if you don't put my name in the acknowledgements.'

And I was like, 'Oh, but you've helped me so much!' and he basically implied that I am *so* bad at flying it would be a stain on his professional reputation 😂. But I am greatly indebted to him nonetheless, and to Captain Colin Rutter of British Airways, who doesn't mind being publicly thanked but also would like it pointed out that there is quite a lot of wrong piloting stuff in

here and it totally isn't his fault that I don't properly understand gyroscopes.

This book started last summer. One son took me to the Museum of Aviation in Scotland, which he adores, while my other son was all dragging his heels and like, 'This is fun how?', which if you will have more than one child is a scenario you will probably recognise.

I got so caught up in the romance of it – they have a Concorde! And a sea plane! – and what I hadn't realised before was just how much pilots love to fly. That when they're in the air, they are a hundred per cent focused on what they are doing, and any other issues in life seem very distant. So I was interested in that; these days we are so distracted all the time by terrifying news and the internet squawking at us continuously that I wanted to feel that sensation of being deeply engrossed in something cool.

The second thing was the first time I flew after lockdown I realised I had forgotten how, well, basically how amazing it is. That feel of acceleration in your stomach; the astonishing way a heavy metal box full of people simply lifts off the ground; that moment when you burst through the grey old clouds into dazzling sunlight; the excitement of passing another plane. Even when there's lots of queueing and expense and people and fuss, it's still extraordinary, and I had forgotten that.

And finally I wanted to write a little about what flying really represents: the ability to pause and change your life, whether it's temporarily, like going holiday, or for ever, like moving away. To set foot on a new voyage to strange lands. I wanted to dream above the clouds about what your life could be, with the freedom that comes with it; an idea that, if we're brave enough, the world can still be our oyster; that it is never too late; that there are always new horizons ahead.

So this is a brand-new story. And it is not about being a pilot. But I hope you love it nonetheless. (Unless you are already a pilot, in which case, please don't write in. I think you're amazing.)

Jenny

xxxx

Part One

Prologue

Alarm sounding

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL:	*Sunbird 247*, you have traffic in your ten o'clock climbing no height; read-out showing range of about ten miles.
PILOT:	Looking on TCAS.
FIRST OFFICER:	Not showing on TCAS.
PILOT:	Little out of his way.

'Do you still relive the incident in your head?'

The man from HR was so nice, so desperate to make everything all right. I nodded.

'No, not at all. Everything's fine.'

'And you did everything correctly.'

'I know.'

'The flight landed safely.'

'Just doing my job.'

We got the bird down, I knew. And I don't know if that made it better or worse. The passengers wouldn't even have realised. It wasn't what you think. There weren't stomachs lurching at that hard lift into the air; nobody screamed. Well. Not on our bird. No trolleys thundered down the aisle. We killed two people, and the passengers barely glanced up from their phones.

It had started out as such a normal day, such a normal run to Alicante with a plane full of cheerful holiday-makers: hen and stag parties who'd been at the airport bar since 6 a.m., drinking holiday pints; families with young children fussing for the beach they'd been promised and furious instead at being strapped into a small seat for four hours; honeymooners, giggling and buying Prosecco from the smiling stews. Normal. Completely and absolutely normal.

ATC:	Do you have visual, *Sunbird 247*?
PILOT:	Stand by.
FIRST OFFICER:	No visual.
ATC:	Stand by. Climb to twelve thousand feet, *Sunbird 247.*
PILOT:	Say again.
ATC:	One-two-thousand-feet, *Sunbird 247*

I was in the right seat, first officer, expecting another routine day. Bob Brechin was captain. Good solid pilot too. Clear skies all the way down. Nothing unusual.

You couldn't even hear their screams as the little plane spiralled down, down . . .

'And are you sleeping okay?'

ATC: Rescind th—

FIRST OFFICER: WE'RE VISUAL! WE'RE VISUAL! *(Cockpit noise.)* CLIMB! CLIMB! CLIMB! CLIMB!

Roaring noise.

A month's debriefing for a category two mishap seemed reasonable. And it was fine. I had done four simulator training sessions since then, all perfect, had another medical, no problems.

I wasn't going to be a casualty, I wasn't. I was going to get back in the air, calmly and professionally, and do my job.

CLIMB! CLIMB!

'So you feel you're ready to go back?'

I put on my bravest face.

'Of course! Can't wait! Looking forward to making left seat on the big birds.'

The HR man smiled. 'I see there's no holding you back, Morag.'

I gave what I hoped was an encouraging smile. I saw the whites of the eyes of the pilot of the tiny osprey, which had broken through a cloud into that vast menacing shadow of an A320. Every time I closed my own eyes.

A crop sprayer, we learned. A sweet young farmer boy. Luis. Showing off to his girlfriend.

We rose. They dived. We slowed to climb. It didn't feel like much from inside. From their perspective, I cannot imagine.

They panicked and went into a tailspin. Luis and his girlfriend. Serenata was her name. Such a beautiful name. Into a field, thank God, outside Yecla.

I had done everything right. I had kept my cool. Bob and I had worked well together. We glanced at each other.

Once we were level again, we sat, holding our breath, waiting for the confirmation of the awful news we knew was coming from the moment the little plane had spiralled out of our field of vision.

These days, on our safe, computerised planes, the joke is that pilots are only paid for two minutes a year. But there is some truth in it, and those were ours.

Chapter One

My great-grandfather, Captain Ranald Murdo MacIntyre of the RAF City of Aberdeen Auxiliary Squadron 612, was not a tall man. That was possibly, most people agreed, what made him so damn feisty in the first place.

He was stocky, though, with a bullet head and an expression that almost dared you to tell him not to defy him and then face the consequences. He was one of those for whom the war was a great time; a huge adventure that broke open his small view of the world from a small town on the north coast of Scotland.

He joined up right away – RAF, back when the life expectancy of those boys was about six months. From the second he took off in a spitfire, he loved it. He flew fearlessly and into anything, defending the Firth of Forth, and almost entirely buzzing their arch enemies –not the Luftwaffe, as it happened, but 602, the Glasgow Auxiliary Squadron, their west-coast rivals – more than was strictly necessary.

Finally, before his six months were up and the law of averages took him – not that Ranald MacIntyre had any truck with those – the RAF grounded him at Leuchars, and got him to train the next cohort, and the next, which he did with the same exuberant vehemence with which he had tackled the skies. And when the war was over, the chances of him going back to tend the family croft had dwindled to nothing.

He found a little plane, a Cessna from somewhere – it was entirely possible, word went, that the RAF had given it to him simply to make him go away, as teaching pilots suicidal combat bravery wasn't quite as popular a requirement in the post-war period as it had been before – and immediately started a service flying the archipelago, the majestic chain of islands that run off the north coast of Scotland , which up until then had been connected with only intermittent ferries or, just as often, sail- and rowboats.

The islands thought they had been doing fine on their own, thank you very much, and didn't need this ungodly noisy oily interference in the rhythms of their year, until they started to find it more and more useful to get hold of a paper that was only a day old, or being able to visit a doctor or even spend a day visiting the huge big tempting cities and bright lights of Oban and Inverness. The kirk wasn't pleased, but not much pleased them anyway.

And the tiny air taxi service, which would stop and pick up more or less anyone anywhere, thrived. First for the novelty value, secondly for the convenience of the thing and thirdly for Ranald's complete inability to be put off or phased by all but the very worst of the weather, and if you are familiar with the north coast of Scotland at all, you will know that that is a formidable talent.

Everyone thought Ranald MacIntyre was married to that plane, so almost everyone was as surprised as he was when at the age of fifty he married pretty Margaret Wise from Thurso and had baby Murdo the next year.

Young Murdo soon became a regular sight sitting up in the cockpit with his dad, and Ranald's old mate Jimmy Convery, who was from the slums of Glasgow, so rough you could barely understand a word he said, and the best and most faithful co-pilot Ranald ever had. Ranald knew that Jimmy had never had a home to go back to after the war, and only the barest bones of one afore it, so when they were demobbed, Ranald brought Jimmy back and they rented the old draughty house not even the curate wanted, and Jimmy never left.

Murdo grew up and went to flying school at sixteen, which you could in those days. Very little can unsettle the pilot who has grown up landing in Scottish weather conditions: frequent fog, sideways rain, snow, hail, all on tiny runways. Inchborn, an island in the archipelago chain without a runway at all, simply had a long beach, so Ranald landed on that at low tide.

At twenty-one, Murdo borrowed the money to buy a new plane – *Dolly*, a brand-new Twin Otter which was his pride and joy – and tried to professionalise the operation a little with schedules, regular deliveries and touring schedules for people's new disposable incomes. But they were never above taking an extra parcel as a favour if they had the weight allowance, or picking up mums and babbies for a very small charge if they needed to get to the mainland for their check-ups, or helping out the air ambulance if need be.

Murdo married young, anxious to get raising the next generations of MacIntyre Air, and young Iain was just as devoted to flying as his dad and his granddad had been.

He was the light and joy of their days, as like Murdo as Murdo had been like Ranald, and excited plans were made to expand the fleet one day – until Iain, told to bring a punnet of red apples from the market, returned with a punnet of green, and the terrible truth emerged: not only was he severely colour-blind but his eyesight in general was also shocking, and the optician in Wick had quite a lot to say about why they hadn't brought the lad in earlier.

For Iain, it was a blow akin to being an injured professional footballer. A maudlin teenager, he took his new, huge NHS glasses off to accountancy school, studied hard and got a job in the finance department of a large commercial airline company based out of Aberdeen, where he got to spend his days in the company of pilots, dealing with the finances of aeroplanes, handling invoices and billing for planes and fuel and cargo, but never ever flying one. It was hard to tell if it were more consolation or torture for the boy who only ever dreamed of being able to fly.

But there was always the next generation. It's not that Iain MacIntyre asked very pointed questions about the eyesight of every woman he dated, but when he met Katherine Trawley, bonny, red-haired and better than twenty-twenty, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion, and when Jamie came along, the scene was set.

Whereupon Jamie cried and wailed whenever he was put to the skies on those long summer days up in Wick, and couldn't understand why people were constantly trying to strap him into a terrifying and noisy metal tin can when there was an entire beach outside with sand and sea and crabs and birds and shrimping nets and wildlife and all the beauties of nature that happen at the glorious top end of Scotland. He made such

an infernal fuss that eventually the family gave up and turned reluctantly to their next best hope, babby Morag.

And, well, that was me.

My great-grandfather Ranald's medals lined the shelf of the big old draughty house in Carso, the northernmost town in Sutherland at the very top of the Scottish Highlands, with its tiny airfield and old grey stone houses, the wind blowing all the time, where the North and the Irish Seas met. I remembered him, just, as a crusty presence, firm in demeanour, given to occasional bursts of hearty laughter at jokes I didn't get and a fondness for launching into very long stories that most people had heard before.

Margaret died young of breast cancer, when Murdo was twenty – one of the reasons he wanted to get married so young, my mother thought – and Ranald had carried on, living with his best mate Jimmy Convery all his life. Jimmy didn't say much, but punctuated the anecdotes with throaty laughter fuelled by Woodbines. I remembered him dimly as a whiskery, slightly unnerving presence, but Murdo – Gramps – worshipped him, and I worshipped Gramps, so I figured he must have been okay.

The joy in that house – we lived outside Aberdeen but spent many weekends and all our summers up in Carso – when I showed an interest in flying was extraordinary to me. Ranald passed away the same year, Jimmy not long after, and there was a family superstition that he was somehow reincarnated in me.

I was used to Jamie being the centre of attention as he was an unusually pretty child, red-haired and grey-eyed. I had wild

curly black hair that apparently Margaret had shared, but gave me, personally, nothing but grief, as I grew up at the height of GHDs and pencil-thin brows. At school, they called me Morag Grobag, because it looked like I'd been planted in one.

Jamie was clever, sensitive and a wonderful artist. I was quiet, terribly shy and, as the first girl in three generations, felt more or less inadequate. Until I clambered up in the cockpit of the Twin Otter.

It was immediate: the entire family's pride, and what felt suspiciously like relief. Everywhere we went, every summer, I was their little lady pilot, Morag, saviour of McIntyre Air. People would stop us on the street, talk about flying to me, while Jamie stood sullenly to the side, clutching the sketch pad that was never far out of reach, waiting to vanish at the first opportunity to the nearest burn or tree.

I remember taking my options at school but not as if I had much choice in the matter – maths for reckoning; physics, geography, obviously. Raising money for flight school felt like a full family operation – it's *really*, really expensive, even if you do have a guaranteed job at the end of it. So expensive. Everyone made sacrifices, and I felt that, very much. But I did learn to fly, and there was no stopping me. This sounds terrible, but as soon as I realised it got me more attention than my lovely, popular brother, I was in absolutely full bore.

I was such a shy, nervous child. My mother had to peel me off her when I went to nursery or primary school. I had precisely one friend, Nalitha Khan, who was the opposite of shy, and let me scurry along in her wake. But then, when the family hit upon me following into the family business – well, then everything changed. The chatty gossipy town where my grandfather lived – which normally intimidated me as the old ladies

chivvied me to 'speak up then, yon wee Morag, och, you're so peely-wally; it's a shame, with Jamie so bonny' – became somewhat easier to handle.

I kind of thought that it would all get even easier when I started flight school. In fact, the first thing ninety per cent of people said to me was 'oooh, you're surrounded by those handsome pilots all the time, lucky you' which is obviously, you know, durr, very, very sexist and also rather disappointingly not at all the case. It was mostly men, but they saw me and the other couple of women in the class as mates, honorary lads practically. They were all off chasing the beautiful blonde drama students next door just like everyone else. Which is good, you know. I like being treated as a professional. Of course I did. They were just very, very, possibly too professional.

It was fine, being one of the guys. I was a good student, and good at what I did, and I was never excluded from anything. And I did like discussing engines and windspeed over a couple of pints of lager, of course I did. And talking about cars.

Then Jai and Abdul and Connor would all get into their very fancy cars and drive off and pick up other less technical girls for nights out, and I would just go home to the little newbuild flat I had rented because it was near the airport and not too expensive, no other reason. It was just a place to lay my head between shifts.

I dated a couple of engineers and that was fine, but once I graduated from flight school and moved into a proper job, well, I was just away all the time. So basically, I was a bit too square for the people who were used to people being away all the time, but a bit too exotic for people who weren't. For example, with men, either they were a bit intimidated by my job and never mentioned it ever, but talked a lot about how good they were

at fixing cars, or they would ask me loads about crashes and terrifying things which, up until extremely recently, had never happened to me or anyone I know – it's really, *really* rare. Or they'd kind of pretend to feel sorry for me, asking me if it wasn't incredibly boring, mixing the reality of their bad travelling experiences with my wonderful job.

And I didn't know how to explain, not exactly, the feeling when you are just, *just* on the very tip of lifting a huge bird off the face of the earth; the exact second when you go from trundling along the ground, earthbound, to lifting up, up, then suddenly bursting free the chains of gravity; soaring up through the clouds, bursting through, even on the greyed and dullest of days, the poor commuters left far below, endlessly beetling through traffic in the rain while you join the great route of kings, the blue sky stretching ahead of you, the darker curve beyond all yours, laid out in front of you, the clouds soft cushions you wave past and even the snow-topped mountains cowering beneath your dominion.

Which is my way of saying that normally I really, really love my job. Or at least I used to.

But when it comes to dating, I won't lie, it's a conundrum. For me, anyway. Some pilots solve it by having women or men dotted about in busy airline hubs all over the world, but I found to my horror that despite being a millennial I am just not cut out for that kind of thing, although in theory it's cool obviously. Not many people that did as much maths and engineering as I did at school are cool. My mum says it was because I was a very busy career girl. But she is my mum, and actually uses phrases like 'career girl'.

Anyway. My phone rang the second I left the HR debrief room, when I was queueing at the coffee stall. I definitely

needed coffee. Or maybe just something warming and comforting to hold in my hands.

'How did the meeting go?'

'Gramps! It was fine!'

'Course it was,' he said with satisfaction. 'That's my girl.'

'I just need to wait for them to shut the incident log, then onwards and upwards . . . '

'But you're cleared to fly?'

'There's a few hoops to jump through yet, but . . . I think it will be all right.'

My voice was not wavering. Absolutely not at all.

'So,' he said with relish, 'you'll have a bit of time off.'

'Gramps,' I said in a warning voice.

He had never given up hope that I'd come back north. It didn't matter how much I told him about the fact that I was not a bad person for giving up the freezing cold for flying all over Europe, for somewhere where a clothes shop wasn't Mrs-now-Ms Haglye's divorce project, which she proudly called a boutique and had the very latest in matching beige twinsets on very generously proportioned dummies and still did early closing on Wednesdays. That a life of bottomless brunches and sunny trips overseas were what I felt I should probably be aiming for (it certainly was high on the list for all my pilot mates), and wouldn't he want a swimming pool if he had the chance?

'Why would I need a swimming pool?' he said, genuinely mystified. 'The sea is *right here*, bairn. I mean, right here.'

'You should come to civilisation more often,' I said. 'Honestly. You might like it.'

'I've been to civilisation,' he said. 'It smells terrible.'

'People like toilets on their planes, Gramps, it's perfectly normal.'

There wasn't a toilet on the Twin Otter. None of the flights were further than an hour, so you pretty much just had to hold on.

'It's disgusting.'

I couldn't argue with that, especially some of the stag parties we brought home, bleary and extravagantly unpleasant on Sunday mornings.

'Come on up,' he said. 'Come on. The daffs are flowering.'

'They're over here.'

'And everyone's asking after you.'

'Yes, that's exactly the problem! "Oooh, wee Morag wouldn't say boo to a goose!" "Ooh, wee Morag and that frightful hair!" "Ooh, Morag remember that time you peed your knickers at the Mercat Cross?" '

'That was funny though.'

'It was not funny! Jamie had a pet grass snake and put it down my neck.'

I shivered.

'Aye well, it's no' his fault you don't like animals.'

'I don't *not* like animals; I just prefer useful things. Like aeroplanes. And restaurants and civilisation and roads that go places and don't just peter out in a field.'

'Aye, it's the big shiny life you have now, Morag.'

'Don't pull that one on me.'

'You've forgotten your roots.'

'I haven't!' I said, not for the first time nor, I knew, the last. 'I just found . . . a bigger world out there.'

'That smells.'

'*Gramps!*'

His voice lowered.

'But, Morag, you're absolutely sure . . . you're sure you're over your near-miss?'

I looked up just then, in the sterile aircraft building. The HR manager who'd taken our session had just joined the coffee queue. Huh, that was a bit weird, I couldn't really imagine what these people did when you weren't in those little rooms with them, painted in soothing colours. A bit like when you're a kid and you see a teacher out of school. Just having lunch seemed a bit normal, like choosing a chicken sandwich or a salad. I noticed he chose a salad.

I thought he wouldn't recognise me, but he glanced up and clearly did. I found myself rethinking the muffin I'd been planning on. Maybe a muffin, instead of a nice sensible salad, would make me look needy and sugar-addicted and emotionally unstable. Perhaps I should order decaf. Or maybe that would make me look neurotic.

Gramp's voice was still booming out of the phone.

'Because when it happened to me, I was a wreck!'

'That was a stealth bomber cutting you up though,' I pointed out, knowing the oft-told story back to front. 'You were the wee guy. We were the big guys.'

I was trying to keep my voice quiet, but the HR man had moved up the queue and could hardly avoid hearing.

'Nobody's a big guy at thirty thousand feet,' Gramps said. 'We're all tiny in God's eyes up there.'

'I'm totally and completely fine,' I said in a voice that suddenly sounded to my own ears entirely unconvincing. 'All my loads of friends and happy and well-balanced social life think I am completely fine . . . uh, fresh juice please.'

'That'll be four forty-nine.'

'*Four forty-nine? For juice?!*'

My grandfather was still astounded as we said our goodbyes.

I put my phone away and suddenly realised that whoever else

had been waiting for coffee had stepped away and there was only the HR man and me left.

'Uh, go ahead,' I said awkwardly, trying to get my phone back in my bag.

'CARROT AND GINGER JUICE!' yelled the girl

'No, please,' he said, gesturing. I smiled, feeling uncommonly flustered. Flying a five-hundred-tonne ramp weight A380 does not fluster me. HR kind of does.

'Just getting my, uh, juice. Totally normal juice,' I said, as if testifying my movements in a court of law. I vowed never ever to use the coffee stand in the HR department ever again.

He smiled as if he didn't know what to do with that. He had sandy hair and a blue shirt and tie; he looked like a quite cool teacher. Probably had a nice wife and 2.4 kids at home and coached the kids' football team and had basically a perfectly organised life. I remembered how kind his voice had sounded, actually kind of attractive. Get a grip, Morag, I said to myself. Things were already quite complicated enough.

'Hi there!' said the voice behind the till to the HR man. 'No bacon sandwich today then?'

I glanced at him in some surprise. He went rather pink.

'Uh, no, thanks.'

'What about your Twix?'

'I . . . uh, don't want a Twix.'

'But you always have your Twix!'

'I . . .Just the salad please.'

He pinged his card as I scuttled off with my juice, feeling oddly cheered.

It was a tick-box process you had to go through – the captain I'd been co-piloting with was going through it too – and two days later I found myself back in the little bland room with the pot plant, steeling myself. I understood the process: they more or less asked you the same questions to check for veracity while they checked the plane logs and the aircraft while checking on you.

The sandy-haired man smiled as I walked in. He was sitting behind his desk; I had to perch on a chair.

'Hello, First Officer MacIntyre.'

'Uh, hello . . . '

He'd told me his name before; it was something weird, but I'd forgotten it.

'It's Hayden. Hayden Telford.'

That was it. It was kind of like a girl's name but also kind of pretty.

'Sorry,' I said, realising I had gone a little pink. 'I normally have a good memory for small details! Part of my job!'

He wasn't, I'd noticed, wearing a wedding ring. Maybe he took it off for work. Morag, I told myself sternly. Stop being stupid.

'It's okay,' he said in that nice voice of his. It had a faint trace of an accent I couldn't place. I gave myself a shake. Being here – it was so important. Whatever box he had to tick on his computer, he had to tick it today.

'So have been a psychologist for long?' I found myself babbling regardless.

He glanced up, smiling pleasantly.

'Oh no, I'm an HR specialist,' he said.

'Oh, so you're not, like, a doctor or anything?'

He looked at me. 'No, I'm not a doctor.' He smiled reassuringly.

'Not that it would matter,' I said quickly.

This was getting worse and worse.

'Well, no, why would it?'

'It wouldn't,' I said. He looked at me curiously and I couldn't read it at all. Oh God, maybe he just thought I was crackers.

I fell silent.

'Okay!' he said. Then he skidded his chair a bit closer to me.

'Uh, Morag, it's okay to be nervous,' he said. 'I understand. I deal with pilots and first officers in your situation a lot. If you feel you do need to see a therapist, I'm here to refer you, that's all.'

'No, I'm fine,' I said quickly.

'I'm just doing my job. It's just so we're all safe up there. Okay?'

There was something really reassuring about his voice. I couldn't help it. I liked him.

He paused for a second.

'I quite like you thinking I'm a doctor though. Maybe I should put that on my door. Bit more interesting than being an HR suit.'

'I think your job must be very interesting,' I said.

'Well, it's no flying a plane,' he said. He returned to his desk and pulled up something on his computer.

'Okay. Sorry to do this, but – can you tell me about it again?'

I had hoped that it would help, running through it the second time. But it didn't. It was the awful loss. The shock of seeing it right in front of your eyes.

'Did you have any hesitation in telling the captain what was happening?'

'No.'

CLIMB! CLIMB! CLIMB! CLIMB!

'No concerns that he wouldn't listen to you? Would you have done anything differently?'

'No.'

The dot on the radar. Gone.

Hold it together, Morag. He's not a doctor but he's probably even more powerful. One click on the mouse and this whole thing could just go . . .

'We followed procedure,' I said, making my voice robotically dull. I spoke more slowly. I had learned from bitter experience that it made people – and when I said people, I really meant male passengers who thought having a female pilot was hilarious – calmer. 'The outcome for the small plane was very disappointing. I wish they'd filed their flight plan. I wish things had been different.'

I wish I could sleep at night.

Hayden was nodding.

'Okay. Thanks, First Officer . . . '

'Morag is fine,' I said, trying to sound confident.

He put the mouse down and smiled encouragingly. He had a nice smile; his incisors were slightly wonky, which gave him a kind of schoolboyish charm.

'Okay,' he said. 'Honestly, I don't think you have anything to worry about.'

'I'm not worried' I lied.

'And what are you thinking about next? Are you wanting to move to left seat?'

That was the standard career path: co-pilot, then captain on short haul, then co-pilot on long haul. That was what was considered to be the goal, at any rate. Some pilots couldn't bear it – like Gramps, for example. He loved taking off and landing(the most exciting parts of any flight) and sleeping in his

own bed at night. He had no interest, he often said, in spending years of his life flying over Siberia, or the Sahara.

But I had been thinking about it. And it had been a bad, an insidious thought. Something I couldn't tell anyone about.

If I went to long haul – well, I could co-pilot for ever. Buy a little time. Or at least for however long it took me. I could even take third chair long haul. I would barely have to fly except in a simulator. I would be safe. And the flaming, glorious sunsets on the Sahara were something to see too. Nobody could possibly accuse me of being scared if I was ascending the ladder, moving on with my job. Just until I got better. Because I would get better, wouldn't I?

It was a terrible plan. But it was, at this moment, the best I had.

I tried to make my voice light.

'Actually, I fancy getting some time in on long haul. Some big shifts on some lovely new birds.'

'Ah, off to Dubai are you?'

It was a joke how many pilots moved there. Tax-free, sunshine and right in the centre of the world. It was a different airline, obviously, but I could work my way up. I shrugged. 'Maybe,' I said.

'You're going to move up,' he said admiringly, and I was amazed with myself, that my ruse had worked. That what was so transparent to me: my fear and my pain could be so easily covered up, even from a professional.

I tried not to feel guilty. I failed.

'That's the plan,' I said boldly. 'Put it behind me.'

'Or beneath you,' he said, then winced. 'Sorry. That was a terrible dad joke.'

'Ha, you look like a dad,' I said.

He frowned.'Do I really? I'm not one . . . '

We were both suddenly conscious that the conversation had strayed into the personal. He glanced swiftly at the clock.

'Well, thanks again for . . . '

I jumped up and he stood up too, which I wasn't expecting. He reached over and shook my hand. He held on to it for just a second, I thought. No. I was in an emotionally wrought stage. For sure.

'Well, this is probably the last time I'll see you,' he said.

'Hopefully!' I said stupidly.

'Well, yes, hopefully, yes, I suppose.'

He took his hand back. I felt my cheeks go pink again.

'I wish you all the best, Morag,' he said, and I thought, Well, goodness.

'Bye then,' was all I managed.

'Happy flying!' he said, then visibly winced at himself again, as if he'd said something very dumb. If only he knew in my situation how dumb it was.

Chapter Two

Over the next couple of weeks there were more simulations, as well as a joint debrief with the top brass and engineering staff which I thought Hayden was at – I might, in fact, have packed a Twix in my bag that I thought I might give him just as a farewell joke or something, no biggie. Anyway, he wasn't.

But Bob and I were more or less on our way to getting back in the air. Every day felt more frightening, but I had put my application in for first officer on the long-haul route. I had done it. I would get over it in time, I would.

And then it would be more money – and who knows? Maybe I would fall in love with the sunshine and the 'good life' my fellow pilots went on about, out in places where the sun shone all the time and you had a swimming pool as opposed to where my flat was on a tiny estate of identical boxes near the airport under a grey cloud. I hadn't really been attracted to that lifestyle; was slightly intimidated, to be honest, by the girls in bikinis with amazing nails and big lips. But everyone

(except Gramps) was so excited I was applying for it; it seemed so obvious to them. All my pilot mates were excited about huge airbuses, and new massive fuel economy and the future of aviation and just wanted to get in the air, and I tried to join in, and I tried to feel the same, and I almost convinced myself, sometimes.

There is a secret bar round the back of the airport – every airport, actually – where pilots drink. There is a direct line to a cab company that doesn't charge you airport collection fees, and a free car park where you can leave your nice car overnight for free, so for obvious reasons I can't possibly tell you where it is. It's also very good at accepting that sometimes if a pilot has come off a ten-hour shift and feels like it's 8 p.m. and they would like a pint with a friend, it may not technically be 8 p.m. by official GMT, but they can have their pint anyway.

Bob Brechin and I headed there to debrief on the last simulation. It was weird, coming in to work to do various bits and bobs but then not actually taking off anywhere. The bar was half-full of foreign pilots on their layovers as well as ground crew and staff. There were some women but not loads, but if I were to get intimidated by large groups of men, working in aviation would have seen me off a while ago.

He ordered a pint; I went for coffee. Really, I wanted to drive home.

'So, what next for you then?'

I told him about my long-haul co-chair plans and he frowned.

'Neh,' he said. 'You don't want to do that. You should take on a short haul as captain. Obvious, innit? And don't you have an airline sitting right there?'

'You make it sound like a family firm!' I said. 'It's one creaking Twin Otter landing on sand and a prayer!'

He grinned.

'I met the old man once, did I tell you?'

'Murdo?'

'Heck of a pilot. I was just a rube, running up to Glasgow. He told me some stories.'

I smiled.

'I bet he did.'

'You don't want to take over that route? That's real flying, that is'

'You sound like my grandfather.'

'Ouch,' said Bob. 'Well,, I didn't really have you down as a Dubai type. Don't all you Scots burst into flames in the sun anyway?'

'Shut up please.'

I glanced around the room. Standing in the corner talking to a couple of people from the HR department was Hayden Telford.

'Oh look,' I said to Bob, indicating Hayden. Bob looked over and waved, completely unconcerned.

'Oh yeah, the HR consultant. He seemed all right, didn't you think?'

'He's a consultant?' I said, suddenly interested. 'You mean, he doesn't work for the airline'

'Why?' said Bob, grinning avuncularly and taking a long pull of his pint.

'No reason,' I said as Bob gave me a suspicious glance. I never ever talked about my personal life at work. Partly to keep

professional, partly so it gave me an air of mystery and partly because I didn't really have one.

Hayden saw me and, to my surprise and delight, smiled broadly and motioned me over. Bob had tuned into a conversation about football with a group from KLM at the bar, so I wandered over.

'Hello,' I said shyly.

'Hey,' he said. He grinned again showing his incisors. Normally I am terrible at signals but I did think it: this man is pleased to see me.

'Hayden's leaving!' said one of the other HR people, a bubbly young woman who looked to be quite drunk.

'I was only here for a couple of months,' protested Hayden. 'I'm just a consultant.'

'But we liked having you here! We liked having him here,' she said to me, grasping me on the sleeve to make her point. She had a glass of Prosecco that seemed to be at risk.

'He's leeeavvving uss,' she protested, running her free hand up his sleeve and, to my absolute surprise, towards the buttons of his shirt. I had always considered that this kind of thing was exactly what HR was meant to prevent.

Hayden was obviously thinking the same thing as he caught my eye for a moment, winked imperceptibly, then said loudly, 'Ah, First Officer MacIntyre, I'm so glad I caught you . . . Can I have a second of your time? Excuse me, Rosie.'

He disengaged Rosie's hand quite gently. The girl pouted.

'Don't be long!' she said.

Hayden followed me to the other side of the bar.

'Excellent HR behaviour, I see,' I couldn't help remarking.

'Oh, they work hard,' he said, glancing back. 'Everyone has to decompress sometimes. Don't report me to HR for saying that.'

He looked pointedly at my coffee.

'Not you, though.'

'I just don't fancy getting a cab. Also, I don't really like getting tipsy with people I work with.'

He lifted his beer bottle.

'Ah,' he said awkwardly, but he didn't seem in the least drunk.

'So you're leaving?' I said. He nodded.

'Where are you headed?'

'Actually, there's a few possibilities on the table . . . waiting to see. Life of a consultant.'

'Is that what they call gardening leave?' I said suddenly.

'Uh, no, just a job finishing. You're not on gardening leave either.'

'No, I know; I just like the phrase.'

'You like gardening?'

'Ha! No, I never go outside.'

He looked at me curiously, and I found myself blushing again. This is ridiculous, Morag, I told myself. He just has such a kind smile.

And he wasn't my doctor, I reminded myself.

'So you have, like, technically nothing to do with my case now?' I said quietly. I wasn't quite sure where I got the confidence to say that. Maybe because I was moving on soon too. If this went horribly wrong, well, we would never see each other again.

'Done and dusted,' he said. He glanced down at his beer.

'I can't garden either,'he said suddenly.

'Uh-huh' I said, staring at my fingers.

'I mean, if you wanted to give it a shot sometime . . . '

'Won't . . . ?' I swallowed. At least I should find out now. 'Won't your girlfriend or . . . whatever . . . mind?'

'Well, in complete contrast to what I just told Rosie, I don't have a girlfriend just now. Or a whatever.'

It felt like the rest of the bar had suddenly gone quiet. He couldn't have been more upfront.

'Well,' I said. 'That . . . that might be nice.'