



A stylized illustration of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a black mask and a blue leotard. She is upside down, with her head at the top and her legs at the bottom. The background is a solid orange color with a fine, dotted pattern.

A Novel

Flipping the Birdie

S.L. WOEPPEL

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by River Grove Books
Austin, TX
www.rivergrovebooks.com

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Distributed by River Grove Books

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group and Kimberly Lance
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group and Kimberly Lance

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 978-1-63299-877-4

eBook ISBN: 978-1-63299-878-1

First Edition

For Jeremy

1

“I’M GONNA WAIT FOR the fire department.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I replied, staring at the drunken baseball fan in front of me. He wore an imitation team jersey with the number sixty-nine, which maybe fit him last season, but not so much anymore. It was well shy of touching his belt, providing me an all-too-personal view of his beer-filled belly.

“You want the Chicago Fire Department to drive a truck out here, prop a ladder,” I said, looking around, “who knows where, and send firefighters up to *carry you down* on their backs? Rather than be saved by someone who is fully capable of doing it right now and in fact trained and employed to do so?”

He smiled, his body swaying after what was probably several hours of guzzling beer. “I don’t need no saving by a girl.” Then he belched. Loudly. In my face.

“Fucking typical,” I muttered as I turned away.

He belched a few more times. “Aftershocks,” he laughed, losing his balance only to catch himself against the stadium grandstand lights that rose high above Wrigley Field.

How the hell did this guy even get up here? I wondered, as he gazed out over the stadium of sports fans. He smiled like he had all the time in the world, like he wasn’t holding up a Major League Baseball game that was being televised live. Did he not hear that the fans, who had admittedly cheered him on at first, now were growing angry as an official game delay ensued well beyond the novelty of his stunt?

“Just let me get you out of here, yeah?” I asked in my nicest voice, the one that apparently didn’t sound as nice to everyone else.

“Hell no.” He patted his belly as though it contained something precious instead of High Life and stadium dogs. “I got the best seat in the house, right here.”

I swore under my breath. “Guess we’re waiting for the fire department. They have nothing better to do anyway.”

My sarcasm didn’t register.

Chicago Fire was going to love this. I pulled my phone out and hit my direct line to the fire chief. Superfan stared at me half-dazed, his eyes traveling up my jeans and pausing at my T-shirt. Reaching my face, the upper half of which was obscured by a simple black mask, he took in my death glare, cleared his throat, and looked away.

I willed my anger to settle as I waited for the chief to answer my call.

“Winston,” came a gruff voice over the line.

“Hey, I’m at the stadium. We’ve got a code asshole.” I raised my voice on the last word for the benefit of my companion. The “nice voice” wasn’t working anyway.

“Bullshit. It’s the first seventy-degree Saturday of the year—we’re spread thin.” Shuffling papers sounded in the background. “Just take care of it.”

“He’s refusing my assistance,” I argued, staring out at the crowd that was beginning to stand and stomp their feet. “You know my hands are tied. The new law states that if he’s not in immediate danger, I need his permission to—”

“I know what the law says,” Winston replied. I could hear his utter distaste for me, the echo of his words that this was no job for a woman. Today was another reason for him to push for replacing me. “You know how much manpower this is going to take? Isn’t this *your* job? Figure it out. I’m not wasting time on this.”

I winced because he was right. But I was stuck.

“My hands are tied,” I repeated, looking over at Superfan. “Shit, I’ll call you back.”

I hung up as Superfan staggered, the cardboard signs he had clasped under his arm slipping from his grasp and hitting the deck before sliding down the pitched rooftop.

“Oops,” he said as they sailed over the seats below in the early summer breeze, landing softly in midfield. *Hey Chicago* and *What do you say?* stared up at us. He looked down and grimaced, appearing to suddenly realize his potential fate from this height, and swayed again.

If he were to fall, even slip a little, I could legally intervene, catch him, get him down from there, and this would be over. If I intervened before that, no doubt my “bruised-ego complaint file” would grow, and I was on strict instruction to *be nice*.

I willed his feet to step closer to the edge.

But instead, he shakily lowered himself to the steel rooftop and took a seat.

With a huff, I sat down next to him. Groans and boos made their way up from the stands.

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumbled.

The faint chant of *Push them off, push them off* didn’t seem to reach his sloppy brain, as he held true to the belief that his masculinity could better withstand the negative press coverage—and the large fine that was likely to come—more than the idea of being rescued by me, a city-employed *female* superhero. Problem was, I wasn’t sure my already shaky reputation could handle another public fail.

So we waited. In the meantime, the press made their way closer, cameras and boom mics in hand, maneuvering to find a good angle from below us. The mood in the stadium was turning hostile.

“You know,” I said as I gazed into the stands, “for a minute, years ago, I naively thought being a ‘superhero’ would offer me some magical ego boost. That I’d be adored or even just appreciated by my city. That I’d be saving lives on a daily basis. But in reality, it’s a good job about three or four days out of the year, the days I can actually do some good, make a difference. The rest are increasingly like this—a shit show.” I turned

toward my half-passed-out rooftop companion. "I should thank you for your part in curing me of my childish delusions."

He had no reply.

If I were Chief Winston, I'd disregard the rules and take care of the situation. Ask for forgiveness instead of permission. But Winston had backup, people who would support his decision.

I didn't. Mine was more of a solo operation.

I decided to try another tactic.

"Should we go get some beer at Stinky's Bar?" I asked with all the pep I could muster. "They have the best pretzels in the city."

"Is it true what they say about you?" Superfan slurred as he tried to stand and failed, still oblivious to the jeers and profanity rising from the crowd.

If he asked what seemed to be the question of the year, I might pick him up and throw him off the roof myself, aiming him right where Sanchez had hit an epic double last week.

"Can you actually crush my penis with your vagina?"

I rolled my eyes so far back they almost hurt, but I didn't respond. This conversation was nothing new to me in recent months. Someone on TV had mentioned something about female supers and the strength of our vaginas. As the strongest female super on record, they specifically noted mine.

Funny that questioning a male super's ability to control their sex organs wasn't a topic of discussion. It was only powered women who couldn't wield the strength of their vaginas, apparently. Yeah, like that's ever been a thing.

"We don't have to worry about *you* finding out, do we? I can, however, crush your balls with my pinky toe, so I recommend you show a little respect."

He sneered.

"I have better things I could be doing, asshole."

"Wow." He whistled. "Is it that time of the month? Should you even be working right now?"

I got right in his face, immediately regretting my proximity to his breath. “You’ve got real shit for brains, don’t you? I recommend you keep your foul trap shut before I push you right off this little perch myself.”

I could see the wheels turning. Slowly, but turning nonetheless. He opened his mouth to speak.

I cut him off before he could even start. “You know what you are? You’re the embodiment of whisky dick. Your whole person right now screams flaccid, useless, tiny, fumbling pecker.”

Yeah, so maybe this wasn’t me being *nice*.

“You’re a crazy bitch. I don’t need you here. I’ve got it all under control.”

“I see that,” I said, getting to my feet and trying to ignore the frustration emanating from the stands. “You’re a real problem solver.” Why was I even engaging? This wasn’t part of my training. I was trained to take it silently and just do the job. But when my job turned into pecker-sitting . . .

And why were the chants directed toward me now? I’d heard this particular ditty a few times before and had chosen to ignore it. But it seemed to have legs today. *Fly away, Bird! There’s no trophy for third. Fly away, Bird. You’re as useless as a turd.*

See, I was known as the Chicago Bird, with powers of strength and speed and outfitted with a handy little jet pack developed at the Jet Propulsion Lab. I was technically the third most physically powered hero in the world, and the only woman in the top twenty. The rhyme was clever, no?

Though, let’s be honest—despite the value I brought to my city, be it saving lives or, on most days, just lifting heavy shit for other city departments, I’ve never been valuable to the people of my city. I was ignored or mocked by the press, unappreciated, underpaid, hamstrung by city council, and blamed for messes that were not my doing, like this one.

“So, Bird, could you crush a whole car with just your va . . . *burp* . . . gina?”

“You kiss your dog with that mouth?”

“Sure do.”

“Poor dog.”

“Whatever, you’re just pissed cause you can’t get no man to get you off.”

I exhaled slowly, working to keep my cool while letting the daydream play out in my mind. I grab Whisky-Dick by the balls and toss him, one-handed, far out into the middle of Wrigley Field. His toddler-like screams accompany him all the way down, as the eyes of everyone in the stadium follow, brows up and mouths agape. He lands like a water balloon, his beer belly bursting open on second base, the endless supply of beer rising like a glorious fountain, filling all the empty cups of the angry baseball fans. They’d rise up and cheer. Fists pumping. Awe on their faces. Chanting my name. “Bird. Bird. Bird.”

It was a good daydream.

“**YOU LEFT HIM THERE.**” Harold Thompson, mayor extraordinaire and my boss, chastised me while delivering a punitive glare . . . again. “You are paid to help people out of sticky situations, even if they get there of their own stupidity. You are not paid to berate them with what I can only call *highly* explicit profanity that is now all over social media and the news. Did you have any idea there was a boom mic right behind you?”

“No. But I can’t—”

“Wait,” he said, his hand flying up. “I’m not done. Are you aware that there’s a viral video of you flying off in your jet pack and leaving a helpless citizen to fend for himself? How does that make us look?”

“You’re kidding. Helpless citizen?” I shot back from my chair on the other side of his desk, my boot-clad feet resting atop the hundred-year-old oak surface.

“The truth is what the media prints, not what actually happened. Your actions reflect on all of us. Look, Bird, I’m constantly going to bat for you with this job. You know I value you, but you’ve got to meet me halfway.”

“He was sexually harassing me!” I raised my voice, staring down his warm brown eyes shining with equal parts pity and anger.

“He was a drunken idiot. He has no power.”

“Oh, I get it. I’m just supposed to deal, right? Take it with my mouth shut? I’m a joke, and I’m supposed to let it be that way, not defend myself? Besides, this guy didn’t even want to be saved. He demanded the fire department.”

“Birdie,” he sighed, using my actual name, indicating we were shifting from boss/employee into the zone of work friend. “You’re not a joke. You’ve always just heard the negative and chosen to ignore everything else.”

“Whatever. I should have shocked him with the news that today’s fire department is 35 percent female.”

Thompson dropped his head and shook it slowly, as if he didn’t know what to do with me. Welcome to the club. I didn’t know what to do with me either.

“Birdie, your role as our muni-hero—”

“Muni-hero?” I interrupted, raising my eyebrow.

“I’m testing it out.”

“Well, consider the test a fail.”

“Hmm.” He considered it. “Your role as our CityJack.”

“Nope,” I replied quickly.

“CityJack, like a jack of all trades—”

“Master of none—I get it. Still no.”

“Whatever. My point is your job includes gaining the trust of the people of this city. Things were fine enough for a while, but you’re slipping.”

I snapped my head up. “I have more saves than anyone in the union. I work twenty-four hours a day. I cover the city *by myself*, not to mention all my calls out of town—”

“And you’ve got the lawsuits to prove it.”

I sighed and took my feet to the floor, leaning in. “It’s all crap. None of it is valid.”

“Bird.” Back to boss. “Fifteen years ago, the world was still figuring out

what to do with people like you. Hundreds of supers were coming out of the woodwork—the rest of society panicked a bit. Evolution had somehow sped up overnight. The goal defaulted to getting control over the science of it all. Yes, mistakes were made. Then the goal shifted to finding gainful employment for supers, a purpose to utilize their talents quietly. But you know all this. And you know society's changing now; the fear is subsiding. Supers are being celebrated for their differences instead of living on the perimeter. And the aldermen of this city want a face, a representative of the city—like New York's got."

"I see. So after being told to be quiet, hide in the shadows for ten years, not draw attention, not talk to the press, I'm suddenly supposed to be the perfect mascot, because now it reflects well on you? I'm supposed to just change overnight? Forget the past?"

"Do you *like* your job, Birdie?"

I furrowed my brow. "What kind of question is that? Do *you* like your job?"

"I do," he responded without hesitation and then waited for my reply. "It's a serious question."

"It's a stupid question. Of course I like my job. I'm a superhero, for God's sake. Who wouldn't want this job? It's got shit hours, shit pay, a less-than-adoring fan base, and zero vacation time. What's not to love?"

The truth was, I had loved the job, once. But now I wasn't sure if I loved it, or if it was just all there was to me.

Thompson walked out from behind his desk, looking very mayorly in his fitted light-blue suit that complemented his dark skin and bald head. "Do you even like people?"

In the moment, I couldn't think of a single person I liked. Maybe RuPaul, because he'd always been as unapologetic about his identity as I wanted to be.

"Thompson, I love this city. I grew up here. Haven't I proved that every day for the last ten years? I'm out there getting people out of sticky situations, as you say. What are you getting at?"

“Are you seeing anyone, Birdie? Dating?”

I laughed. “Yeah, the entire city of Chicago. When would I have time to date?”

“The job requires that you be on call twenty-four seven, not that you need to go out and find work to do twenty-four seven. A lot of the calls you respond to could be left to the police and fire.”

“That’s a waste of resources.”

“That’s government.”

I might have laughed if I wasn’t so pissed off.

“You throw yourself into this work at the exclusion of everything else.”

He met my eyes and didn’t look away.

“I don’t need anything else. There’s nothing else out there for me. Whatever chances I once had at a normal life were snuffed out when I became a super.”

He smiled kindly. “It doesn’t have to be that way. Maybe if you change your outlook . . .”

I sat up straight again. “Since when do mayoral duties include psychiatry?”

“Well, it’s just that this last lawsuit flagged our insurance.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means your litigation load is too high. It’s been steadily rising, having very much to do with your off-color commentary during jobs. And you’ve been flagged.”

“The lawsuits are proportional to my saves,” I stated confidently, not sure if that was true or not.

“They’re not, Bird. Our insurance premium on you is more than your salary and mine combined. You are now considered,” he paused to give air quotes, “an elevated risk.”

This was bad, very bad. Anytime they wanted to get rid of a super, they began quoting insurance rates and property damage. The truth was, I prevented damage more than I ever caused it, but that wasn’t a factor in the models. If we were liked, no one cared about the insurance. They just

paid. If we were less than popular, as I seemed to be more and more, it suddenly became a topic of concern and grounds for release.

The last thing I needed was to get sent back to the “minors,” which was how we supers referred to small-town heroing, where the jobs were about finding lost farm animals and hanging bunting from the courthouse for the Fourth of July.

“And you told them to shove their risk profile, right, Mayor? I have a perfect record in people safety—nothing beyond a few bumps and scratches.”

He frowned. “Your record on customer dissatisfaction is off the charts. Their models have you at exceptional risk.”

“What happened to elevated?”

“I was being nice.”

“What the hell is customer satisfaction? They’re alive, aren’t they? What does my personality have to do with anything?”

“Look, I don’t completely disagree with you, but your attitude doesn’t scream hero, and city council is breathing down my neck to get a more people-pleasing face on the operation. Someone who kisses babies and waves from a Corvette during parades.”

“No one’s ever asked me to be in a parade,” I argued.

“And why do you think that is?”

He had to be kidding with this. I stood. “From day one, you have told me to hide in the shadows. City fucking council told me I’m no different than any other city worker. Don’t talk to press; don’t get friendly with citizens. So I did it, and earned myself a reputation as a bitch when I was just following orders.” I shrugged. “You reap what you sow, Mayor.”

“Well, now we need our female hero to be out there more, in a better light. And you need to be visible. Happier.”

“I am happy.”

“Come on, Bird. You know you’ve got a bad attitude.”

I opened my mouth to argue but didn’t, because I did have a bad attitude, particularly the last few years. But what did they expect? The job

was not all that exciting most days, but the saves I made were quickly pushed aside to focus on a “brush-off” or off-color comment I gave. I was deemed a bitch by the press because I didn’t talk to them; I didn’t talk to anyone. Lately, a bitch was all I was. Now too many people in the city wanted me gone—replaced by a “friendly super.”

“Fine. I’ll be better. Is that all?” I grabbed my black mask off his desk, securing it over my eyes as I made my way to the door.

“Not so fast.”

Dammit. So close.

“You’re going to use some of that vacation time you’ve accrued. All of it, in fact. Take some time to get happy.”

I spun around. “That’s like ten weeks!”

“Eleven.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to do for eleven weeks?”

“Therapy,” he said, stone-faced.

I tipped my head slightly, waiting for the punch line. “Wait, seriously?”

“It’s the only option if you want to keep the job. I pulled some strings and got you set up with someone I know outside the city, someone who may actually help you, instead of some government shrink.”

“What about the city? My job?”

“We’re bringing in James from his Indianapolis internship, and we still have our police and fire. If anything big happens, I’ve got Milwaukee and Des Moines on call.”

“Sounds like everything is arranged, then,” I said sarcastically.

“Bird, this is for your own good.”

I huffed. I couldn’t recall a time when anyone did something for my own good. I wasn’t even sure what my own good was anymore.

“Take this time,” his voice softened again. “Get yourself a life outside of the job. When you come back—”

“If I come back, you mean.”

“*When* you come back, your job will be waiting. And James will be here for a while, to help ease you back in.”

James the Juggernaut? Jimmy the Jughead was more like it. He was a kid, and his powers were big but not honed. He was a calamity waiting to happen. And I was the one with exceptional risk?

“This is a suspension, then?”

“I don’t think of it that way. But things have to change. We need you to be mentally healthy. This job isn’t suited to someone who is miserable. It just isn’t. You’re a public figure. You’ve got to learn to let these comments roll off your back. Remember,” he said, pointing at me, “with great po—”

“Don’t! Please don’t say it.” I turned and walked out, mumbling along with his booming voice behind me. “With great power comes great fucking responsibility. Got it.”

2

DOCTOR MARLY EVANS LIVED in a town called Grove, a little beach community north of Chicago. According to Thompson, she was the best psychiatrist in the state, her alternative methods highly effective. I'd make the forty-five-mile trip twice a week to see her. Which was fine; I had nothing else to fill my time. Plus, I could run the forty-five miles in about ninety seconds easy.

I'd been there once before, on a call—a couple of dogs trapped on the ice a few hundred yards into Lake Michigan. When flying out there on my jet pack proved to panic the dogs too much to catch, I resorted to swimming out to them. I was a powerful swimmer, and I could break through the ice well enough to get to the dogs quickly, but I'd caught a nasty case of hypothermia in the process. I'm resilient, but still very much human.

Grove was a far cry from the city, the energy slower and more relaxed. Moving through the streets, I thought it kind of resembled an old Ray-Ban ad, teeming with beachcombers when the weather was warm, while only locals remained during the winter months.

I stood out in my jeans, road boots, and baseball cap. Most people didn't recognize me without my mask, and even more wouldn't care much if they did, but I hated getting stopped, so I did my best to not draw attention.

I walked through a group of twentysomethings drinking on a restaurant patio, the men in linen shirts and shades, the women in summer dresses and strappy sandals. The stores spilled out to the sidewalks, and I

glanced at the swimsuits, dresses, and colorful trinkets as I walked past. But I didn't stop; I had no use for such things.

Walking through the restaurant's sidewalk seating, I was surrounded by groups of laughing friends and families taking a break from the beach to fill their bellies. My brain wandered, and I imagined that, in another life, I'd have lived here. Maybe I would have had a handsome husband who worked in one of these shops. He'd be kind and funny—not a super, just tan and fit. And I'd be polite and less foul-mouthed. Well, a bit anyway.

We'd walk through the streets together and sip wine at a cafe while picking actors to play the tourists who walked past. We'd people-watch from under a sun umbrella, like the couple currently across the street deep in conversation at their café table. He wouldn't even realize when his hand rested on my bare leg, his thumb absently caressing the skin.

"You all right?"

A woman's voice broke me out of my trance. I'd stalled in the middle of the sidewalk and zoned out.

Shit. I glanced at the woman before I gathered myself and started to walk away.

"You look familiar. Do we know each other?" she called after me.

"Nope," I said without turning back, making my way to the address in my email.



DOCTOR EVANS'S OFFICE was located off the main street of Grove's downtown in an old Victorian home painted the same color as the yellow daffodils that grew in the front yard, with bright white trim that made the house hard to miss. Her name was displayed on a sign out front, along with an optometrist, a chiropractor, a massage therapist, and an accountant. I opened the white picket gate into a vast, immaculately maintained yard with summer buds starting to push past the maturing spring growth. It looked the same now as I imagined it had

one hundred years ago, with a massive porch, shutters, and ornamentation at the peaks. A small group of women were drinking wine off in the corner of the wraparound porch, each dressed in shorts or dresses with pastel sweaters to protect them from the early June breeze. They looked like a bunch of fucking ice-cream cones.

One of the women smiled as I took the stairs to the porch. I flattened my lips and tipped my head in response but didn't stop. The scene was a little unnerving, a little too familiar. Because this could have been my mother's house. Her yard. Her life. She was so meticulous about presentation, the flowers in the windowsills, the perfectly mowed grass thick and satiated.

I stared at myself in the mirror. "This is my favorite," I said to my mother as she eyed the purple dress, a knee-length halter with a small flair at the waist.

Mother shook her head, her perfectly curled hair swaying gracefully with the movement. She caressed my shoulder in examination.

"Too much swimming, dear," she said. "The boys prefer a lithe girl."

She held up a sparkly silver dress with capped sleeves and low back.

"You'll look more feminine in this one," she said. "A lady only ever displays one feature. Arms, legs, cleavage, or back. You have a lovely back. But you really should pick more feminine hobbies."

I smiled. I liked the dress. I liked my arms. And I liked my hobbies. But I didn't tell Mother any of that.

These women could have been part of her social circle, all sitting cross-legged and sipping from their wine glasses. The youngest woman, maybe seventeen, looked about as bored as I remembered feeling when surrounded by a group of my mother's friends.

It felt good to clash with the scene of it now—it felt appropriate. Because I wasn't one of these women, not anymore. I never really had been.

I looked for a doorbell but found nothing.

"You can go in. They only lock it after hours," one of the women called