



BROKEN WINGS

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

She was about to snap. Addison Lowe knew all the signs, for not so long ago he had been on the verge of a breakdown himself. From the descending stairwell that led to the rainy airport runway, Addison had watched her, the shadows rendering him inconspicuous. He'd seen it all: the plane taxiing into the hangar for an unnecessary inspection of its wing, the petite first officer debarking as fast as the crew would allow her to, the long wait until a replacement pilot could be found. And then he had followed her through the rain until she was back inside Shreveport Regional Airport, and observed her as she stood, wet and pensive, staring with haunted eyes out at the congested runway.

Flipping back the page on his clipboard, he jotted down a few notes about her behavior, shifted against the rail at his side, and focused on her again. A look of controlled misery settled over her features, but her posture straightened, as though she might allay that misery with sheer physical effort. Hugging her rain-damp arms, as if to comfort herself, she stepped closer to the rain-splattered window and followed the upward progress of a 747. She shivered noticeably as the plane became nothing more than a light against the opaque darkness, then turned from the window.

Across the corridor at the Southeast counter, a young ground clerk gave her a compassionate look. "It's okay, Erin."

Erin, he thought. That's what they call her. He took a few steps up the stairs and saw the expression of defeat flit away as if she had chased it. He could see that she didn't want pity or gentle pats on the back. And she didn't want to be afraid. He knew. He had been there.

Brushing her damp, ruffled bangs away from her forehead, she looked past the ground clerk to the door that led to the office of Frank Redlo, the assistant chief pilot. And with all the determination of a woman about to turn a major corner in her life, she started toward the door.

Addison waited a beat after she'd gone in before he followed her. He shouldn't trail her like some spy waiting for a glimpse of impropriety, he told himself, but some instinctual compulsion drove him on. Instincts were a major part of his job, after all, and if one of Southeast's pilots was showing symptoms of instability, he, above all people, had the right to know. It wasn't just idle curiosity or a need to follow the pull of whatever it was in her eyes that had moved him. He was simply doing his job.

Besides, he had an appointment with Redlo, anyway.

She was already in her boss's office when he stepped into the waiting area outside it. Through the open door he could hear the sound of Redlo's low, angry mumbling, and then her voice rising above his, her tone defensive, desperate.

"You don't have to give me the third degree, Frank, because it doesn't matter anymore."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter? You're one of our pilots! You're on our payroll, aren't you?"

"Not anymore," she said without hesitation. "I came in here to resign."

The words came too easily, shaking Erin up. Had she really said it? Had she meant it?

Bleakly, she realized she had.

Frank's face mottled into various unsettling shades of crimson. "Resign! Are you nuts? You can't resign!"

"Why not?" Erin argued. "I can't fly. You said yourself that a pilot who can't fly is of no use to an airline."

"Don't twist my words!" Frank said, one hand flailing in the air as he shook his index finger at her. "I said there's no room for a pilot who won't fly. You can and will!"

"No, I can't!" she shouted. "I froze, Frank. I was cleared for takeoff, and I froze!"

Frank clutched his head with both hands, as though to keep it from splitting right down the middle of his bald spot. "You can't do this," he said, lowering his voice to a reasonable level.

"You're tougher than this. You've flown dangerous missions for the FBI and the Justice Department, for heaven's sake. You've had bullets flying at you, and you didn't bat an eye."

Erin, you've got to get a grip. This is not the end of the world. You're just depressed, but you'll get over it." He slammed his elbows on the desk and raked back what remained of his hair. "You were up for a promotion soon. You were ready, Erin. I was gonna recommend you be moved up to captain." He dropped his hands and leaned across his desk, his silver eyes punctuating each word. "You're a good pilot, and I won't allow you to throw a career away because of a senseless crash that had nothing to do with you. For pete's sake, you weren't even on that plane."

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back, determined not to let this conversation turn into a wearisome summation of the crash. It was over, behind them, and she didn't want to talk about it. "You can't stop me, Frank. I quit. That's all there is to it." The words held only harsh finality. Stiffly, she stood before him, waiting for acceptance.

"Okay," Frank said. He slouched back in his chair and rubbed his forehead. His face looked as fatigued and wrinkled as old bedsheets. He swiveled to the window at his back and peered out of it, shaking his head. "Okay. Let's say that I accepted your resignation and you walked out of here, gave up everything, and did something else. What would that be?"

Erin laughed bitterly. "I'm not stupid, Frank. I can do a lot of things."

He swiveled around, his sagacious eyes assessing her. "But you're a pilot, Erin. Sure, you can do any number of things. But would you like doing them? Would you be able to do them for the rest of your life?"

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