PROLOGUE

PART ONE



March 9, 2020 — Miami, Florida

The woman who coughed in my face was wearing a silk scarf the color of old champagne. I remember that detail more clearly than I remember her face, which seems unfair, considering how often I would think about her in the weeks that followed.

She was one of the last passengers to board, arriving with a leather handbag tucked beneath her arm and a telephone pressed against her ear. She was speaking French, or perhaps something close enough to French that I couldn't distinguish it over the noise coming from the aircraft's ventilation system. When she reached the top of the boarding stairs, she stopped in front of me, looked briefly past my shoulder into the cabin, and offered a distracted smile.

"Good morning. Welcome aboard," I said.

She lowered her phone. "Are we leaving on time?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"Wonderful. I've had quite enough of airports this week."

She gave a small laugh, then turned her head toward me to say something else. Before the words came, she coughed.

It wasn't the discreet sort of cough people hide behind a hand. It came suddenly, harshly, close enough that I felt the movement of air against my cheek. She brought her fingers to her mouth only after it was over.

"Oh, excuse me," she said, sounding more inconvenienced than embarrassed. "This weather has been dreadful."

I stepped aside to let her pass.

At the time, I was more concerned with the way she had spoken to me than with the cough itself. There was a particular kind of politeness I had begun to recognize among wealthy passengers, one that acknowledged your presence without quite acknowledging you as a person. I had encountered it before, although never from this side of an aircraft door.

That morning, I was wearing a uniform I had not expected to wear, working a flight I had not imagined accepting, for a man whose place in my life had become increasingly difficult to explain.

And none of those things had anything to do with the woman in the champagne-colored scarf.

At least, that was what I believed.

The aircraft was a Gulfstream G650, one of the long-range business jets operated by the charter company in which Jack Corven's family held a substantial interest. Its cabin was arranged in separate seating areas, with polished wood, pale leather, and the sort of quiet luxury that seemed designed to make distance irrelevant. A flight across the Atlantic could be discussed as casually as a drive to lunch.

I had been inside expensive aircraft before. I had even flown a few of them under supervision, though nothing remotely comparable to this one. What unsettled me wasn't the money invested in the cabin. It was the fact that I was standing in it as a flight attendant.

For most of my life, I had imagined myself on the other side of the cockpit door.

I checked the passenger list once more, although I already knew the names, and walked toward the rear of the cabin to make sure everything was ready for departure.

Outside, the Miami morning was bright and almost offensively beautiful. Sunlight spread across the ramp, catching the white fuselage of an aircraft parked beside us. Beyond the airport perimeter, palm trees moved lazily in the breeze.

It was difficult to reconcile such an ordinary morning with the conversations taking place everywhere else.

For several weeks, the news had been filled with reports of a new coronavirus spreading through different parts of the world. Italy was struggling with a growing outbreak. Financial markets were becoming nervous. Airlines were discussing cancellations, restrictions, and routes that might soon become impossible to operate.

I had followed some of it, though not as closely as I should have.

My attention had been divided between the final months of my aviation studies, a relationship that seemed to survive only through increasingly exhausting arguments, and Jack.

Especially Jack.

He had a way of entering a room without appearing to demand anyone's attention, then somehow becoming the person everyone watched. I had noticed that quality the first time I met him. It was still there that morning when he appeared at the cabin entrance, dressed in a white pilot's shirt with the sleeves neatly fastened at his wrists.

"Everyone aboard?" he asked.

"All accounted for."

"Good. We should be moving shortly."

He glanced toward the passengers, then lowered his voice.

"Have you been following what's happening in Europe?"

"A little. Why?"

"Things are changing quickly. We may have to rethink the return schedule."

"Because of the virus?"

"Among other things."

I looked at him, waiting for more, but he was studying something on the tablet in his hand.

"Is it really getting that serious?"

Jack raised his eyes.

"Serious enough that nobody seems to agree on what happens next."

There was no particular alarm in his voice. He spoke with the measured calm I had come to associate with him in the cockpit, where uncertainty was something to be assessed rather than feared.

He told me to make sure the passengers were comfortable before departure, then returned forward to continue his preparations with the other pilot.

I watched him go.

It bothered me that I could still feel relieved simply because he was nearby. There were reasons I should have been angry with him, questions I had postponed asking, and an entire conversation between us that remained unfinished. Yet the familiar sight of him moving toward the cockpit steadied something in me.

I wasn't proud of that.

A few minutes later, as I checked the cabin for departure, I passed the woman with the silk scarf. She had settled into a window seat and was looking at her phone, one hand resting loosely against her throat.

For a moment, she looked up.

Our eyes met, and I remembered the cough.

I considered asking whether she needed water, but she had already turned away.

I continued down the aisle.

There were eight passengers aboard, two pilots in the cockpit, and me. We were scheduled to cross the Atlantic and land in London later that evening, local time.

I knew the flight plan, the expected duration, and the procedures I was responsible for. I knew where the emergency equipment was stored and how the cabin had to be secured for takeoff.

What I didn't know was that the small discomfort I had been feeling since breakfast would soon become impossible to ignore.

For the moment, I attributed it to nerves.

I had every reason to be nervous.

I was leaving Florida with a man who had complicated nearly every part of my life, while another man waited for me to return wearing a ring I had not yet grown accustomed to seeing on my finger.

And somewhere between those two men, the career I had spent years building seemed to be slipping into a shape I no longer recognized.

I looked once more toward the cockpit door.

Then I fastened the last cabinet latch and prepared the cabin for departure.

PART TWO



The first thing I noticed after takeoff was how little I missed being afraid.

There had been a time when every departure filled me with a kind of restless excitement, even when I was only a passenger. I used to watch the wings from my window, waiting for that brief moment when the wheels left the ground and the familiar rules of the world seemed to loosen their grip. As a child, I had believed there was something almost miraculous about it. Years of studying aerodynamics had done very little to change my mind.

Now, as Miami disappeared beneath us, I was standing in a cabin where the passengers barely looked up from their phones.

I waited until we had reached a safe point in the climb and the cockpit gave me clearance to move around. Then I began preparing the first round of drinks.

The woman with the champagne-colored scarf asked for sparkling water with lemon. She had removed the scarf and folded it carefully beside her handbag, revealing a narrow gold necklace and the pale indentation of a ring that was no longer on her finger.

"Could you make sure it's cold?" she asked.

"Of course."

"And no ice."

I nodded, resisting the temptation to point out the contradiction.

She was not particularly unpleasant, only accustomed to having small preferences treated as matters of importance. I had met people like her before, and I suspected she had rarely needed to consider how her requests sounded to the person receiving them.