

Chapter 1

Inching through First Class at the front of the airplane, Denny DeRisio nearly choked on her mouthful of Coke when she realized who she was passing. Almost thrown off by the baseball cap and dark glasses, she stole a second look. The silver watch clinched it. In every dust cover picture she'd ever seen of author Rachel Holt, the beautiful young blonde had been wearing it; and there it was, on her left wrist, glinting slightly in the sunlight shining in through the oval window. It didn't seem as if anyone else had made the connection yet, as no one was paying Holt any special attention. It helped that Denny had just been reading *People* magazine in the John F. Kennedy International airport terminal while waiting for her flight to board. There had been a small blurb in the Passages section, mentioning that the author's twenty-seventh birthday was coming up.

Hearing someone behind her clear their throat impatiently, Denny moved on to her own seat, 5C. "Happy birthday, Rachel," she murmured with a little chuckle, sighing as she buckled herself in. It would be a long flight, but she was looking forward to it, heading to Italy for two weeks to visit her father's family. She hadn't seen them in almost five years, and she missed her cousins.

Denny rested her head back against the seat, listening to the sounds around her — people softly murmuring "Excuse me" and "Sorry about that" as they, too, got settled. She looked forward to removing her contacts; her eyes felt dry and irritated. Her blue eyes opened as she heard a soft, "I need to get through."

"Oh, sorry." She sat up, tucking her long legs in as a young woman, about sixteen, carefully passed to the other aisle seat in the middle section of the 767. Denny smiled over at her then started to relax again.

"Oops, one more."

Looking to the aisle, Denny saw an older version of the teenager and once again tucked in her legs. The woman passed by and settled in the middle seat and Denny was finally able to get comfortable. She loved to fly, which was a good thing because this was going to be one long flight.

Her mind roaming to the successful author seated not twenty feet from her, Denny glanced up toward First Class. When Rachel Holt's first novel, *Conspiracy*, had hit the racks three years earlier, it had taken off like a rocket. The twenty-four year-old had been launched into the world spotlight, winning numerous awards and much acclaim. She was young, beautiful, and painfully elusive — an enticing mix for a knowledge hungry fan base. She had been hunted ruthlessly, her green eyes having graced just about every magazine cover, whether Rachel was aware of it or not. She had only agreed to sit for one interview, and that was with the daily talk show hostess, Maureen Conifer. Regardless of how private and shy the petite blonde was, her readers never seemed to get enough of her books. Sitting pretty with four novels on the shelves, Rachel Holt's place in contemporary author stardom was secure.

Denny grinned at her thoughts as she brought out the paperback she'd bought at Borders that very morning on the way to the airport. It was Rachel Holt's latest in trade paperback, *Willing To Conquer*. Typically not one for history, or thrillers, the coffee shop owner was drawn nonetheless. The books were extremely well written and enthralled her from the turn of the first page. The emotions ran deep and intense, and the detailed accounts of each time period were astounding. After finishing *Coattails and Pomp*, Denny's curiosity was aroused to the extent that she began researching the Victorian era.

Now that the author was present in person, even though she was behind dark glasses and her short, blonde hair was tucked under a baseball cap, Denny turned her novel over, opening the back cover to the black and white photo. Rachel Holt looked off into the distance, the light shining in her eyes, making them almost translucent. She wore a simple light-colored button-up, though it could only be seen from just under the collar and up. The sweater was open, probably unbuttoned two or three down, giving the author an air of casual ease. There was no information below the picture, other than: Rachel Holt lives in the northwestern United States.

"That's a good one."

Denny looked to her right at the woman beside her who was glancing at the book in her hands.

“Finished it two days ago.”

“I hope I like it. Picked it up on my way in today.” Denny turned the book back over and rested it in her lap.

“Have you read her others?”

“Sure have.” For a moment Denny considered whether she should tell the obvious Holt fan the author sat just on the other side of the First Class bathrooms. Deciding against it, she sighed deeply, content to be on her way as the plane slowly began to back away from the gate, ready to taxi.

From time to time Denny glanced up from her reading, half-heartedly listening to the instructions from the flight attendant: in case of an emergency, do this, don't do that; if you don't feel you can perform tasks at the emergency exits; so on and so forth. She turned her attention back to the novel in hand, losing herself in the life of a young slave during the time of Alexander the Great.

Mia Vinzetti and her mother, Gloria, were headed to Milan, where Gloria had grown up with her grandparents, Paolo and Lizbeth. Having smoked for fifty-six years, Paolo had recently been diagnosed with lung cancer. His prognosis was grim, and while Mia was out of school for the summer, Gloria wanted to go to Italy to be with him.

The sixteen-year-old glanced over at her mother briefly, noting she was already neck deep in one of her romance novels. Mia was excited about the trip, never having been to her mother's homeland before. Lately they had been fighting constantly, and Mia hoped the trip could help ease some of the tension between them. She was going to be graduating high school the following summer, and didn't want to go off to college in California, on the other side of the country, with them fighting. Mrs. Marcum, Mia's counselor at school, had assured her that the family bickering was typical of her age group, but Mia knew she harbored a lot of resentment toward her mother for often not being there: missing school performances or awards ceremonies. Mia knew it was childish clinging since her father had disappeared from her life before she was even born. Never marrying, Gloria had raised her alone, often working two, sometimes three, jobs just to keep them afloat in their small Brooklyn apartment. Gloria was doing the best she could but, still, things were difficult.

When Mia was able to push her anger aside, she greatly admired her mother, though she'd never told her so. Gloria's parents were killed when she was a girl, and so she'd been swept off to Milan, where she'd had a wonderful childhood courtesy of her grandparents. As a young woman, she'd been swept back to the United States by Mia's father, a Navy man.

Life had been tough for the two Vinzetti women, but all in all, they'd done pretty darn well together. Mia loved her mother deeply. She just wished Gloria had more time for her. Yet at the same time, she wished her mother would just leave her the hell alone. The girl pushed her long, dark hair back off her shoulder as she grinned at her own ambivalence.

As the pilot announced the plane had reached cruising altitude, Mia sat back and closed her eyes. She hated to fly.

Dean Ratliff hated to fly. He hated travel of any sort, mostly because he hated to do anything remotely new or different. Will, his partner of thirteen years, basically had told him if they didn't do something this summer, take some sort of a vacation, he was going by himself. Will tried to say Dean was controlling, but Dean felt Will was simply sick and tired of sitting home every year, surrounded by every electronic gadget known to man, expensive French furniture, and Dean's beloved dogs, but seeing nothing, doing nothing, going nowhere. Dean absolutely did *not* understand what was wrong with staying home, surrounded by every electronic gadget know to man, expensive French furniture, and his beloved dogs.

Dean had reluctantly agreed to this trip, and then Will had to work! They were to meet up in Milan. Dean sighed heavily, resting his head against the cool window.

Holding on tightly to the armrest on either side of his seat, Michael Dupree was not surprised to hear his wife chuckle. Glancing down at her, he just barely saw her shaking her head in mirth at his actions.

"Y'all think this is funny, don'cha?" he asked, halfway chuckling himself.

Melissa Dupree looked up at him. "Honestly? Why, yes. I do."

Michael grinned, leaning down to quickly press a kiss on the lips of his wife. "I love you, baby," he said softly, so glad he had been able to make this trip happen for her. They'd been married twenty years. Thursday was their anniversary. He knew Melissa had always wanted to see Italy and all its historic treasures. From their house in Beaumont, Texas, she'd only ever been able to see them on the History Channel or via books from the library. When he'd come home from work, having picked up their airline tickets and itinerary from his brother's house where he'd been hiding everything, he thought Melissa was going to break down and start crying right when he gave it all to her, along with a single red rose.

Michael was surprised when his little woman not only started crying, but nearly bowled over his 6'4", 235 pound frame. That night they'd made the sweetest love. Remembering that, he reluctantly let go of one of the armrests and put his arm around her slight shoulders.

Melissa laid her head against her husband's linebacker-like shoulder. "I love you, Mike. Thank you for this."

Michael Dupree considered himself the luckiest man in the Lone Star state. He'd been a young buck of eighteen, lost and doing nothing but causing trouble and raising hell when he met a lovely young redhead who put him in his place, throwing an entire mug of beer in his face when he got out of line. He'd never let her out of his sight since that night. Melissa had put up with a lot from him over the years; three kids and a mortgage later, the big mechanic couldn't be happier. He hoped he'd finally made his petite wife happy and proud, too.

Michael knew he should just sit back and relax. They'd be on the plane for a long, long time.

"Man, she looked a bit worried, didn't she?" Dr. Pam Sloan commented to her boyfriend, Austin. The veterinarian watched as the blonde flight attendant hurried through First Class and disappeared inside the cockpit, the narrow door closing after her with finality.

In the seat behind the vet, Rachel Holt also noted the flight attendant's harried behavior. She leaned into the aisle to see if she could discover any additional information, but the flight attendant was gone. Taking a deep breath, Rachel tried to return her thoughts to her laptop, her fingers tapping away on the keys. Her attention was captured once again when the cockpit door opened and the flight attendant made her way back down the aisle, her face *too* expressionless for Rachel's liking. She followed the woman's progress back into Coach, briefly meeting the bright blue eyes of another passenger before turning back to her writing.

Denny DeRisio caught Rachel Holt's gaze for just a moment, feeling a slight thrill a famous person knew she existed, if even just for a moment, then the blonde turned away. Denny's euphoria was short-lived as she felt a tap on her arm. She turned to the woman next to her, who'd introduced herself as Gloria Vinzetti.

"Do you think something's wrong?" Gloria asked, her short, dark hair falling into her eyes.

Denny shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know, but I doubt it."

"Well, that flight attendant sure acted like she had a fire lit under her butt."

Denny smiled. "I'm sure everything is fine." She went back to her book, vaguely aware of mother and daughter speaking quietly to each other. Hearing louder murmuring around her, Denny looked up from the book again to see whether her fellow passengers knew something she didn't. She caught the eye of others who were all doing the same.

"Miss?" An older man further back in the plane stopped the flight attendant as she made her way back up the aisle from where she'd been speaking with the gathered flight attendants. "Is there a problem, miss?"

The hostess smiled and patted the man's shoulder. "Everything's fine, sir." But she hurried on.

Michael Dupree snorted as he woke himself up, opening droopy eyes as something stirred him. Melissa was sound asleep, her head cradled on his shoulder. The big Texan looked around to figure out what had awakened him. Reaching to the window on his right, he pushed up the flimsy shade and saw glittering blue waves not very distant beneath him.

"Shouldn't we be flying a bit higher?" the man in the seat in front of him asked, looking at Michael from between the seat and the curved wall of the plane.

The Texan shook his head, still looking outside. "I don't know. Ya'd think."

Head tilted, Dean Ratliff perused the airline brochure, reading the small list of onboard alcohol that could be ordered for five dollars a drink. "Perfect," he muttered, stuffing the brochure back into the seat pocket in front of him. He craned his neck until he spotted a flight attendant talking to an older man, not seven rows behind him. He flagged her down as she headed back toward the front of the plane. "Excuse me, I'd like to order a drink. When are you going to be coming by with the refreshment cart? I mean, you guys still *do* that, right? Lord knows you've stopped most of the other services."

The blonde smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "We'll be getting to that shortly, sir. We ask for your patience."

"Hey! I want my drink, damn it!" Dean called out to her retreating back. He met the gaze of his seatmate. "I intend to write a letter to the airline when I get home. She was rude." Sighing unhappily, Dean crossed his arms over his chest, looking around to find another *helpful* flight attendant, maybe that little blonde cutie with the trimmed goatee he'd seen just before take off.

"All right, John, I've talked to all of the attendants. What do you want us to do now?" the flight attendant asked, wringing her hands. She felt sick.

The pilot sighed heavily, feeling sweat gathering under his armpits. "I've taken her as low as I dare," he explained. Everyone in the cockpit was well aware that individual waves were now visible in the ocean below. "We have no choice. Prepare the passengers. Don't tell them what's happened, just advise them to follow precautionary procedures."

Nervously pulling at the buttoned collar of her uniform shirt, the blonde nodded stoically, but tears were burning behind her eyes and her heart was pounding in her chest. She left the cockpit, walked over to the First Class cubby and picked up the onboard phone.

Denny heard three soft dings, then saw a redheaded flight attendant hurrying to the area in front of their seats. Denny, Gloria, and Mia sat in the emergency row, so they were near the wall with the flight attendant's jump seat, where she sat during take off, as well as her phone. The pretty young woman put the phone to her ear, turning away from the prying eyes of her passengers. She whispered into the mouthpiece, her body rigid.

Denny and Gloria shared a pointed look and a very bad feeling gripped Denny. Something was wrong. Images of 9/11 flashed through her mind, and she prayed it wasn't anything like that. She tried to console herself with the knowledge that they were over an ocean, which was of no use to a terrorist.

The flight attendant hung up the phone, took a deep breath then turned to face questioning blue eyes. She forced a faint smile.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" Denny asked, her voice quiet. The flight attendant mouthed the word *yes*, but her voice cracked so no sound came out. Denny swallowed hard, nodding in understanding. The public address system crackled to life and suddenly a tinny voice was announcing emergency procedures while the redhead helped passengers successfully don inflatable life vests and find pillows for possible impact.

Rachel Holt's fingers shook badly as she tried for the third time to get the rubber lift vest around her head, the orange/red plastic sliding into place. She noticed the woman across the aisle having trouble with hers, so she reached across as far as the seat belt would allow and helped as best she could. As she sat back, she met the gaze of the woman sitting in front of her, brow creased with terror, which Rachel had no doubt mirrored her own expression.

The plane lurched forward, and everyone screamed in surprise and fear. Pam Sloan watched as a small, rubber ball rolled down the center aisle toward the cockpit.

"Thomas!" Mandy Ryan grabbed her son by the arm. He was crying as his ball disappeared down the aisle.

Dean Ratliff rolled his eyes. *Stupid kid. Sit down!* He turned his attention from the young mother and the small boy still crying about his stupid ball, and instead focused on a large man sitting by the window, a small woman nearly sitting in his lap. He was apparently trying to whisper words of comfort into her ear, but they came out as some sort of macabre murmuring.

All around him, Dean heard snuffles and cries, and saw panicked faces on his fellow passengers. He himself was grabbing onto the armrest with claw-like fingers, his stomach lurching with every sporadic movement of the plane. He glanced up as the public address system squawked to life.

Denny listened as the captain almost shouted a slew of instructions to his captive passengers. He apparently no longer cared about trying to keep his charges calm; there was no time for that. Her intent blue eyes landed on the two women sitting in her row, mother and daughter crying and holding on to one another for dear life.

Denny closed her eyes. *What I wouldn't give to have Hannah here right now, holding me, telling me everything will be okay.* Suddenly remembering something from Flight 93, she snatched her cell phone and powered it on. The cheery chirp as it came to life seemed like a sick mockery. One signal bar.

"Fuck," she hissed, as she pressed the number one, then send. The phone's ring was sporadic.

"Den...ney?...ought you were...air?"

"Hannah! Hannah, oh God, thank God." Denny could feel her tears spring to life. "Honey, I love you! Something's gone wrong!"

"...at? I can't under...ou. Wha..."

"I love you! Always know that."

Dead. The connection went dead. She didn't have much time to think about it as her stomach fell about thirteen stories. She fought the urge to throw up as the plane lurched again, everyone screaming as the plane tilted dangerously, a man screaming as he flew out of his seat because he had unbuckled himself. His cries were cut short as he slammed into the wall mere feet from Denny's head. She yelped in surprise, unable to take her eyes off the fresh red splotch on the oatmeal colored plastic.

Rachel Holt heard an awful thud behind her, but didn't dare to look. She was too busy trying not to cry as the seatbelt dug into her midsection. She reached out desperately to the seat in front of her. *Damn First Class!* The seat ahead of hers was too far away to gain any real purchase. Just when she was about to unbuckle the belt in order to try and take a breath, the plane lurched back, slamming everyone back into their seats. From somewhere in front of her came the unmistakable sounds of someone vomiting, followed by the equally unmistakable smell, making everyone grimace.

Gloria Vinzetti clutched her rosary, eyes squeezed tightly shut as she chanted the Lord's Prayer over and over, her mouth moving soundlessly. She could feel her daughter's hold tighten on her arm as the plane righted itself. The hot, coppery smell of blood scented the air.

Mia clung to her mother, knowing Gloria was praying enough for both of them. She didn't dare look around, terrified of what she might see. She'd already heard frantic murmurings about fire erupting from one of the engines, and black smoke was following the plane's descent into the ocean.

I don't want to die like this! Mia's mind screamed over and over, thinking of the things she'd never done and never would do. Her quiet tears were overshadowed by those of the woman sitting with her husband, several seats back.

"I'm so sorry, Mel, so sorry," Michael Dupree whispered over and over to his wife as they clung to each other. "God, I'm so sorry." If only he hadn't surprised her with this damn trip, they'd be at home watching their new dish television.

Denny wished she could shut out the horrible screaming of the plane as it cut through the whipping air, the plane once more tilting nose-down. She could feel the plastic covering on the armrest beginning to give way beneath her iron grip. Regardless, there was no way she was releasing it. The plane righted itself again, then Denny was jostled like never before. There was a loud bang as something hit them from underneath, and the sound of screeching metal seemed to last forever. When it stopped, there was a horrible rushing sound.

Oh, Jesus...

There was a second jolt, with a louder bang coming from much closer beneath them. Suddenly there was an amazing amount of light bleeding through the cabin, followed by a deafening scream, like the day itself was wailing its anger, pain, and regret.

"They're gone!" came a yell close by, then Denny realized she'd said it. Fingers of ice clenched at her lungs, stealing the very air from them.

The scream was replaced by a whistle that made Rachel Holt's ears ring. Her eyes squeezed tightly shut as she opened her mouth in a soundless scream, her voice stolen along with her breath. Somehow, from the back of her mind, all the instructions she'd heard millions of times before during take off came back to her. Rachel reached under her seat and pulled the tabs she felt there. She was nearly knocked out of her seat as the plane skipped across the water for a third pass, a bit more of the tail section flying out into the water. Rachel was jerked to her left, smacking her head on something hard, her stomach flipping end over end along with the world, light shining in bright and intense, along with the pain.

Under other circumstances, Dean would have thought it amusing as he watched a pair of eyeglasses suspended in air, the hair of the lady across from him standing on end, like it had a life of its own, his own loose polo shirt ballooning up around his neck. Just for that one perfect instant, everything was weightless and at peace.

Pam Sloan screamed as Austin's seatbelt gave way and he slammed up against the ceiling of the plane, then flew out of sight. She did not see him get sucked out of the missing tail section.

Rachel Holt's eyes grew big as saucers as the cockpit door bulged then broke free in one terrifying second, the heavy, metal door flying through the cabin, taking the head of an unsuspecting flight attendant with it. Rachel had no time to process this before a flood of water followed, instantly filling the airplane, the immense pressure pinning the author in her seat.

Denny groped frantically for the seat release, her blue eyes squinting against the cold salt water, trying desperately not to take a much needed breath, her natural instincts shutting everything down, her fingers working spasmodically. She was thrown forward as the plane began to sink headfirst into the blackening depths. Panic filled her anew as she realized what was happening. Her fingers went back to her seat, working relentlessly to pull the floating device of the cushion free. *Damn it! Why the fuck didn't I pay attention to those instructions?*

Oh, God! Oh, Jesus! Hang on, baby! Hang on! Michael Dupree thrashed wildly as he unbuckled Melissa, her limp body beginning to float up from the seat. The Texan could see where she'd been hit in the head with something as the two halves of the plane had separated. His lungs burning for air, Michael knew he had to get them out of there, and he had to get them out now. With the superhuman strength of the desperate, Michael kicked with everything in him, trying to get them to the surface. He ignored the intense pain in his right arm and shoulder, barely even feeling it. He did feel himself kicking something hard, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered but getting Melissa to the surface.

Blinded by the sudden sunlight, attorney Dean Ratliff blinked several times, gasping and appreciating air like he never had before. In that single moment, pushing through the water's surface, he thought that just maybe everything would be okay. Then reality struck. He thrashed around in the water, nearly freaking out altogether when he came face to face with a woman who was very much dead, her big, brown eyes staring sightlessly at him. Shivering in disgust and fear, Dean turned away, only to be confronted by a bloody mass of flesh.

"Oh God," he whimpered, blindly pushing through the water, trying to get away from both of the dead, the memory of the woman's eyes boring into his very soul. Something else bumped him, but Dean couldn't look to see what it was. He didn't want to see that dead woman following him. Not even looking to see where he was swimming to, Dean muttered to himself, a slight scream escaping his lips now and then as he saw something that traumatized him further. Before he knew it, he was alone — no bodies, no plane parts, nothing.

Eyes huge, Dean swirled about to look all around him. He was completely alone.

"Aww, fuck."

With a sputter, Michael Dupree emerged from the cold depths, clutching Melissa to his chest, doing his damndest to hold her head above water. Her head wound began to bleed anew, the red turning pink as it mixed with the water in which they bobbed.

"Hold on, baby," he gasped, looking around them, trying to get his bearings. "Gonna be okay, Mel. Gonna be okay." Michael saw a piece of the wing floating not far away, the metal glinting in the harsh overhead sun. "Almost there, baby. Almost."

The mechanic tried his best to not let the gore around him distract him. He had a singular mission to get himself and Melissa out of the water. Growing up in the Gulf, Michael knew all too well the dangers they faced, like sitting ducks in a world foreign to them.

"Okay," he panted, the exertion and injuries he'd sustained sapping his energy. "Up ya go, baby doll." With a grunt, Michael heaved Melissa's form onto the makeshift raft, then levered his own body up to lie next to her, flopping down on his back, wincing as his arm and shoulder injuries made themselves known again.

Blinking slowly, then squinting against the harsh glare, the teen in the raft next to Dr. Pam Sloan groaned softly. As she opened her eyes, the girl lurched, throwing up into the water.

"Hold tight, honey. You took quite a hit to your head."

The girl groaned again.

"What happened?" She turned over onto her back. She sucked in a frantic breath, looking around. "My mom. Where's my mom?" She met concerned brown eyes.

"We'll deal with that later. Let me see your head." Pam pushed the girl's long, wet hair out of her face and focused on the deep gash above her left eyebrow. She looked around but found nothing useful. She looked down at herself, ripped off a long piece of her shirt and wadded it up. "Hold this to your head, honey. We need to get the bleeding stopped."

Pam leaned back, taking several breaths as she waited for the intense adrenaline rush to subside. She needed her wits about her to get her and the girl out of their situation. As it was, things didn't look too promising. Bits and pieces of luggage and debris floated around them, along with the bodies of those who had drowned or been thrown from the wreckage. In every direction, there was only water as far as the eye could see.

"I think there's someone over there," the teen said, her voice soft.

Pam's gaze followed where the girl was looking. In the water, barely hanging on to a large wooden suitcase, was a slumped figure appearing to be losing their grip.

"I'll be right back." Pam slid into the water and quickly swam over to the small blonde. "I've got you," she whispered, taking the woman into her arms. "Paddle with your feet," she instructed, feeling the woman's feeble attempts to help. At the raft, which was the emergency ramp that had inflated on impact, the teen helped both women out of the water.

Rachel coughed, her stomach hurting with each movement. Finally she was able to lay back in the raft and catch her breath. It took everything she had to pull in a full lungful of air without crying out. She could feel her heart pounding as her mind tried to reconcile where she should be with where she was. Finally her green eyes opened and took in her surroundings.

"Thank you," she managed, pushing herself up so she was sitting against the hard edge of the ramp. She looked at her fellow passengers, a terrified and bleeding teen girl, and an older woman, maybe in her fifties, contemplating the cut on the girl's head. That woman nodded, glancing briefly over to Rachel as she brushed wet hair out of her eyes.

"Crazy day, huh?"

"Yeah." Rachel ran her hands through her hair, pushing it out of her face and tucking it behind her ears. She prayed her stomach would hold out; the thought of throwing up made her stomach hurt more. She stared up at the sky, bright blue with a few floating bits of cotton. It was a beautiful day, and it felt as though they were being mocked. Only the lapping waves broke the silence.

"Where do you think we are?" the older woman asked, her voice almost shrill in the stillness of the day.

Rachel shook her head, her voice shaky as she responded. "I don't have any clue." Rachel could feel her shock slowly oozing into mortal fear. She curled up against the side of the ramp, her arms wrapping around her folded legs, forehead resting on her knees. *We're dead.*

A cheek twitched as a tiny sand crab scurried across the sand and then through wet strands of black hair. Long fingers clawed into the hard-packed shore, then released.

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