

Crossing the horizon



The American Girl.

PROLOGUE

CHRISTMAS EVE 1927

After the final plane check before her aircraft would take off, Frances Wilson Grayson, the niece of President Woodrow Wilson, addressed the crowd of reporters before her.

“All my life, Christmas has been the same,” the stout and ruddy Grayson said. “The same friends, the same gifts that didn’t mean anything. Telling people things you didn’t mean. But this year will be different.

“All Lindbergh did was fly an airplane, and look at all the publicity he got,” she announced. “We’re finally going to fly the Atlantic. I’ll be famous!”

She was determined that nothing could stop her from charging into her place in history. Not the weather, not the crew, and certainly not the other women who pined for the title that would be hers in a matter of hours.

She would be the first woman to cross the Atlantic in an airplane. The first. The only.

It would not be the English heiress, Elsie Mackay; the idiotic Ruth Elder; or the taudry Mabel Boll. All of them wanted what she was just about to reach and take for herself. She was sure it would be hers.

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Then she pulled a pistol out of her pocket and waved it over her head.

Reporters and bystanders ducked and shielded themselves with their hands, not sure if it was a joke or if it was a real gun.

“This time”—she smiled—“there will be no turning back.”

CHAPTER ONE

SPRING 1924



Elsie Mackay, 1920.

Hang on, she told herself as she tightened her grip as much as she could, the wind screaming wildly in her ears. Her eyes were closed; she knew that she should not open them. She was a thousand feet in the air, but right now all she had to do was hang on. That's all, she said to herself again, this time her lips moving, her eyes squeezing tighter. Just hang on.

Twenty minutes before, the Honourable Elsie Mackay had sped up to the airfi parked her silver Rolls near the hangar, the dirt cloud of her arrival still lingering in the air. She opened the side door to let Chim, her aff tan and white Borzoi, out to run

Suited up and goggled for a run with Captain Herne, her flight instructor, she was anxious to get back up into the air. The splendor and alchemy was consuming, swallowing her whole every time she lifted off the ground, dashing through clouds and soaring far above the rest of those anchored below. She had been enchanted at the controls of an airplane, feeling charged and elated—something she had almost forgotten. It had been weeks since she'd been up.

Captain Herne, unflappable, rugged, and a veteran of the early days of aviation, emerged from the hangar with a smile and his leather flying helmet already on, the chin buckles swaying slightly as he walked toward her. He pointed upward. "She's ready if you're ready." He laughed, as if Elsie would have another answer.

She called Chim back, gave him a quick pet and a kiss, and followed Herne to the field where his biplane stood, ready for a jaunt down the runway, which was a short, clear path through a field of grass dotted with wildflowers. With the soles of her black leather spool-heeled oxfords on the wing, Elsie pulled herself up using the lift wires that crossed between the two wings and settled into the rear cockpit. They flew into the air within seconds, and Elsie breathed it in deeply and solidly. She smiled. She had an idea.

"Say, Hernie!" she shouted to him through the cockpit telephone when they had climbed to a distinguished altitude. "Loop her around the other way!"

The veteran flier knew that was a maneuver that meant bringing the plane to a loop with the wheels toward the inside, putting a terrific strain on the struts; the craft wasn't built to fly that way. But after a glance at his and her safety belts, Herne shook off his caution and shoved the nose of the machine down and turned her over.

Elsie laughed with delight; nearly upside down, she already knew

that she was the only woman who had looped with the wheels inside the circle.

“Attaboy, Hernie!” she shouted with a wide smile. “Attaboy!”

Herne laughed, too, then saw the wings fluttering under tremendous pressure like a flag in a windstorm. His smile quickly vanished; he tried to bring the plane back over.

“Turning over!” he shouted back to Elsie, but she did not hear him. The only sound was the howl as her safety belt ripped away from her shoulder and the screaming wind as it snatched her out of the plane. As she was pulled into the air, her hands clenched the bracing wires, clinging to them desperately. They were the only things keeping her from hurtling to the ground miles below.

Herne immediately turned around; he saw her twirling in the air like a stone tied at the end of a string. He lowered the nose, careful not to dive too fast. The wind pressure on her must be enormous, he thought. Good Christ, that girl is never going to make it to the ground. She’s not going to make it.

Elsie knew only that she needed to keep her grip strong and tight. She needed to hold that wire as fiercely as she could; she knew only not to let go. She was in a vacuum, the wind engulfing and beating against her at the same time.

Hold.

There was no other thought.

Hold.

Herne brought the plane down as gently as he could, the pressure of the wind easing a bit as they approached landing. Elsie swung her right leg into the cockpit and was able to pull herself back in, still holding on to the wire. The plane rolled to a stop and Herne reached back for her, scrambling out of his seat and helping her onto the wing.

“Let go,” he said, her hands still clenched around the wire. “Elsie, let go now.”

“Yes,” she agreed, her face red and chafed, but her eyes wide and bright. “Yes, I know, but I am not sure if I can.”

Herne lifted the fingers up one by one, uncurling them, releasing the lifeline of the wire, which he saw had cut through her gloves and straight to the bone.

She saw what he saw, and as he helped her to the hangar with only one of her oxfords missing, he patted her quickly on the shoulder and said, “I bet you’ll never ask me to do *that* again!”

Elsie looked at him, her hands held out, palms up and smeared with blood.

“I’ll loop her anytime,” she said, smiling. “Just get me a stronger safety belt.”

The third and favorite daughter of James Lyle Mackay—or, as of recently, Lord Inchcape, as he was pronounced by the king—Elsie Mackay reminded her father far too much of himself. At a glance, she was a lady, slight in stature, daughter of a peer, a privileged aristocrat wearing gowns of gold and beaded silk, a cohort of Princess Mary, the only daughter of George V. But under the surface of that thin veneer, Lord Inchcape had seen the will of his daughter evolve right before his eyes, her boldness take hold. She was not like her older sisters, Margaret and Janet, who knew and understood their duties. She was most unlike Effi his youngest daughter, who was kind to the point of meekness and rarely put herself ahead of anyone or anything.

Elsie had failed at nothing. Whatever she set her sights to, she was almost always a quick, blooming success. He was always proud of her for that, but it was also what terrified him the most. Whatever his

daughter desired, wanted, pined for, all she had to do was take a step toward it. It was delivered.

While Elsie was bold, her choices were even bolder. He had learned that lesson in the hardest way. As the chairman to Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company and the director of the National Provincial Bank, he recognized a tremendous and dangerous facet of his daughter; she was unafraid, a trait he nearly despised himself for giving her.

From the broad window in his study at Seamore Place, he saw her silver Rolls flash by, the tires crunching on the pea gravel of the drive, Chim's head out the window as the breeze blew his ears back. Oddly, she was steering the car with her palms, as her hands appeared to be half-gloved. He shook his head and laughed. She was always experimenting with some new fashion. He remembered when she sliced her hair from tresses into a bob; he never had the heart to tell her that from behind she resembled a boy. This one looked more senseless than the others. Half gloves!

It wasn't until they had seated for dinner that he saw the trend he had been laughing at was actually bandages that rendered his daughter's hands almost useless.

"Now, before you say anything, Father," she said the moment she saw his mouth drop as Effi and Mother braced themselves for the scolding, "it's not as bad as it seems. Just two cuts; they will heal quickly."

"Exactly how bad are they?" he demanded. "Your hands are entirely bandaged!"

"Not all useless." Elsie grinned slightly as she wiggled the tops of her fingers that were visible above the wrappings.

"Let me ask if this injury was a result of your reckless hobby. I warned you about propellers and hot parts of the engine," he said sternly. "Airplanes! Ridiculous! This is complete insanity. I don't know why . . . anyone—"

“You mean *a woman*, Father,” Elsie interrupted, mimicking his stern stare and furrowed brow.

Effie giggled as Lady Inchcape suddenly looked away and smiled.

“All of my daughters are capable of anything they set their mind to. But you have so much already on your schedule with the design of the new ship that learning to fly an airplane seems preposterous to me, and that is aside from the prevalent danger,” he insisted, then softened. “My darling girl, my thoughts are only for you.”

The women burst out laughing, and Inchcape grinned as he cut into his roast.

“It’s quite safe, I can assure you,” Elsie relayed. “As long as you have a reliable safety belt, it can be quite a delightful hobby.”

“At the very least, you’ll have Dr. Cunningham look at it,” he added after he had swallowed.

“I am a nurse, dear father,” she reminded him. “You do remember that.”

“Oh, indeed I do,” he volleyed. “And it is because of the result of your nursing that I am so concerned for you now. We nearly lost you once, Mousie Mine, with that marriage incident, and I am reluctant to lose you again. Your girlish charms have unbridled powers.”

Elsie smiled slightly as a response, but quickly withdrew it. She wasn’t hungry—the food on her plate actually repelled her—and her fingers were throbbing. After Herne had pried her sliced hands off the bracing wire, he wrapped one of them with her handkerchief and the other with her flying scarf, then drove her to Dr. Cunningham, who stitched ten loops in her right and twelve in her left, and gave her a small bottle of laudanum for the pain. Elsie would get the use of her hands back in several weeks, the doctor said, but until then, there was no flying. Herne looked on and agreed.

“I’m going upstairs,” Elsie said as she pushed back her chair. “I’m

in need of some rest. Sophie had said she might stop by; if she does, send her up, will you?”
