

# LACEY'S STAR

## Chapter One

### Taking Off

I do not like handsome men. Not that I have much experience with them, but in my opinion, they're self-absorbed and untrustworthy. Like the one sitting in the passenger seat of my Cessna 172 while I did the run-up prior to takeoff. Frank White.

Frank and I have shared only two experiences in the short time we've known each other. In the first one, I saved his life. In the second, he invited me to dinner and stood me up.

Now I'm not generally a person to hold a grudge, but being stood up is on my short list of unforgivable sins. So, when the company I worked for informed me I *had* to fly Frank to a meeting at my uncle's farm a couple of hundred miles away, I turned my face into stone and took the assignment.

If Frank noticed my icy silence as I did the pre-flight check, he didn't let on. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the little smirk on his face while he scrolled on his phone, his dark hair hanging down on his forehead. He needed a haircut.

The Newton Airport tower called down. "Cessna Three One Four Bravo Charlie, you're cleared for takeoff on runway three-six." After a brief pause, he added, "Have a nice flight, Cassie."

Frank adjusted his headset when he heard the call from the tower and winked at me. I gave him a look I reserve only for the lowest forms of human life and focused my attention back

on the flight panel.

“Roger that,” I said and repeated the instructions back to the air traffic controller. Then I added power and maneuvered Scout onto the end of the runway. Scout is the name I use for the little blue and white Cessna that’s been my best friend for most of my life.

My frustration evaporated as my aircraft responded to full power and accelerated down the runway. When we reached sixty knots, I gently pulled back the yoke, the nose lifted, and in one breathless moment, we were free from the earth.

This was a feeling I could never get enough of—the thrill of release as I watched the ground drop away. We climbed over the end of the runway, and meadows of goldenrod waved goodbye as we soared into blue heaven.

When we reached eight thousand feet, air traffic control directed me to change to compass heading two-seven-zero, so I made the turn and we were wings level, sailing west, with the early morning sun at our backs.

Frank shoved his phone in his pants pocket. “Can I talk now?” he said with a little smile that showed the dimple in his left cheek. He knew full well that we had reached our altitude, allowing him to talk.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” I huffed out. “I didn’t want to take this flight, but Michael insisted, and my contract with the corporation says I have to provide flying services when requested by the owner.” I gulped in a lungful of air and tried to sound more professional and less whiny. “This is the last place on earth I want to be.”

“Technically speaking,” he said and blinked at me, “we’re not on the earth right now.”

That's another thing I don't like about him. He makes me feel foolish. I pressed my lips together and bit back the retort that was trying to make its way out.

"I didn't want to contact you," he continued, "but Sheriff Buchanan specifically asked if you were interested."

I plastered a bored expression on my face and looked at him. "I don't care whose idea it was. There is nothing in the entire world that could convince me to join your law enforcement team." I yawned for effect. "I value my life."

"I know that, Cassie, and just for the record, I don't think you should join. I wouldn't want to put you in danger." His eyebrows wrinkled with concern, but then he gave that little grin. "You'd make a great team member, though. We need good pilots."

"Never." I said it with enough emphasis that he wouldn't ask again.

Frank leaned his head back on the headrest. "Okay, I get the message. Wake me when we get there."

I'd been hired to fly Frank to my Uncle Charlie's farm in Tabor County. Apparently, the sheriff there had some concerns about crime in the area, and Frank was tapped to interview my uncle about safety issues in the farming community.

I couldn't quite figure out Frank's job. When I first met him, he was a DEA agent, but today he told me he resigned that position to join the sheriff's department in Tabor County.

I glanced over at him. Why would he leave the DEA to become a deputy sheriff in northwest Nevada nowhereville? Seemed like a step down to me.

But that was none of my business. All I had to do was fly him to my uncle's farm and

wait around until he finished the interview. Besides, I didn't want to think about Frank White when I could soak up the joy of flying over the magnificent countryside that lay beneath us.

The western United States was born out of a tectonic shift that lifted the Rockies into existence and carved the farmlands, deserts, and canyons. The yin and yang of that geologic event produced a landscape so stunning that it never ceased to startle me with its raw, untamed beauty.

While Frank slept, we flew over the foothills and into the wide plain, past rock formations and gullies, over wadis and wastelands, toward western Nevada and the fertile spread of alfalfa fields dotted with herds of cattle.

We made good time with the wind at our back, and I started my descent when we got within ten miles of the farm.

Uncle Charlie and I have always been close. Good thing since he's my only living relative. Whenever I fly into his place, I drop down and circle the farmhouse a couple of times so he can hear the whine of Scout's engine. Wherever he is, Uncle Charlie leaves what he's doing, runs out, and stands by the old well in front of the house. The sight of big Uncle Charlie in his trademark dark blue flannel shirt and denim overalls waving like a crazy man always makes me happy.

I descended to a few hundred feet above ground level and did two circles around the farmhouse, but Uncle Charlie didn't appear. That was odd.

I dropped the flaps and slowed the airspeed for the final approach. It was another dry August day, and the recent drought had made the ground hard. When my little plane settled down onto the strip of parched yellow grass in front of the house, Frank opened his eyes. "Are we

here?" he asked, and I swallowed a sarcastic reply. I would not let him spoil the good vibes I always had when I visited my uncle.

By the time I shut the engine down, released my seat belt, and climbed out, Frank had come around to my side of the aircraft. He took my arm, but his face was crumpled into a strange frown. I tried to pull away, but his grip tightened.

"Hold it, Cassie," he said and pulled the Glock out from under his jacket.