

Chapter One

Moral dilemma number one – Is it ever okay to want to boink your best friend?

“See? She’s just like you.” Jack Grayson pointed to the image of the *Runaway Bride* on the TV screen. “The Queen of Disposable Men.”

“Will you stop calling me that?” Kira Allen shot back.

“You throw men away.” He snapped his fingers. “Like that.”

“I do not.” At least not most of the time. Or some of the time. Except for maybe once. Okay, twice – that she recalled.

And with good reason. Kira had recently raised her standards. While she’d built her career as an airline copilot, she hadn’t minded dating men who were out for a good time. Now, she wanted more. At twenty-eight, she was ready to begin the search for a mate.

“Most of them deserve to be tossed. But still,” Jack continued.

Seated next to him on an orange sofa in her condo, Kira stared straight ahead, and wondered why they always ended up bickering, just like they had as kids. She could blame Jack, but truth be told, she enjoyed the one-upmanship that had colored their relationship forever. “And you’re better?”

According to Pan Air legend, Jack had a revolving door policy when it came to women in general, flight attendants in particular. He never talked about his love life, but Kira’d never seen him hang with anyone for long, except her, and as his best friend, she didn’t count.

Jack shrugged. “We’re not talking about me.”

“Same old, same old,” she muttered. He took the liberty of dissecting her love life at every opportunity. But let her mention his and he clammed up. “Are you afraid for Arlo?” she asked. “Is that it?”

Arlo Jacobs, Quality Assurance Officer and Regular Joe, held current boyfriend status in Kira’s life. She had high hopes for this relationship. Arlo seemed settled, serious and *quiet*. He’d shown no signs of wanting to control Kira’s world. A far cry from Jack, who was currently making such a pest of himself she wanted to toss him out a window – at thirty-thousand feet.

Except he had his uses.

She hadn’t met any decent men during her tenure as copilot for Seaboard Express – a tiny, commuter airline that made daily ‘milk runs’ up and down the east coast. Except for the rare single businessman and even rarer single pilot, the pickings had been slim enough for her to start to worry. It wasn’t as if she was a party gal with weekly opportunities to date. She preferred the solitude of the beach at night to the thrum of a

singles bar or comedy club. Despite her quieter nature, however, she *had* managed to snag several dates over the years by reluctantly attending Jack's infamous Pan Air bashes. For a multitude of reasons—namely Jack threatening to peel their dicks like a banana if they misbehaved—those romances never quite worked out.

She sighed.

At least things were looking up. Now she flew for Pan Air International thanks to him. Using his clout as a respected captain, he'd pulled strings, put in a good word. She'd completed the interminable company training course that Arlo helped develop and teach, passed with flying colors and here she was. "You're the one that enabled me and Arlo. You have only yourself to blame."

"Don't remind me." Jack leaned back on the sofa, scraping his face and running strong fingers through wavy dark hair. "I hate him."

"No surprises there." He hated all her boyfriends and didn't seem to notice the role he played in their departure. What would he care if she disposed of them properly when the time came?

"He's a dipshit," Jack said.

Kira rolled her eyes. "He's nice enough."

"For what?"

"My purpose."

"And that would be?"

She couldn't say for certain. Far too early to tell. Arlo didn't make her pulse jump like flying did. Or stimulate her mind the way Jack did. But bodies weren't built to endure that kind of relentless excitement forever. Neither were emotions. Kira had an exciting job so what she needed at home was peace and quiet. At least she thought that's what she needed. "Marriage," she taunted.

As expected, Jack displayed the strangulated symptoms of a man having a coronary. "You can't marry that jerk. He's a wingless nerd who makes life miserable for pilots—you included."

"He's making sure you're fit to fly," she countered mildly. "Keeping the passengers safe."

"You bought that corporate crap?" Jack spewed. "Pan Air has enough quality control built into the system without wasting profits on dickless wonders with wing envy."

He had a point but no way would she admit it. To do so would make Arlo seem redundant. Since she was investigating the possibility of a future with him, she didn't want to go there.

"He sits in the cockpit, clicking his frickin' mechanical pencil and pushing paper up his corporate ass."

Kira placed a hand over her mouth to keep from smiling. If she didn't react, he'd eventually shut up.

Not this time.

He must've sensed he wasn't getting anywhere because he changed tactics. She had to hand it to him. He was quick on his feet.

"Besides the asshole factor, Jacobs puts his life on the line every time he goes to work—flying in problem aircraft with problem pilots. He'd leave my nieces and nephews without a father."

"They wouldn't be your nieces and nephews."

"You always say that. It's your way of disconnecting." Jack punched his thigh. "You want Arlo to be the father of your children?"

Kira tuned him out while he raged. She could marry Arlo and she would, if he met her stringent criteria. After several dates, it looked somewhat promising, but you never knew. She currently harbored considerable doubt in the sex department. So far, Arlo seemed challenged that way—basically because there hadn't been any. Kira had no clue what that was all about. And now more than ever she didn't want to ask Jack for advice. It was way too much fun to sit here and piss him off. "You or I could die too, Jack. One hydraulic failure and it's over, baby." She lifted the lid on the pizza box, considered a fourth slice, and took a swig of warm beer instead.

"But I wouldn't be leaving a family behind."

"Eventually."

"Not getting married." Jack picked the pepperoni off his slice with a disgusted look and threw it onto her empty paper plate. "How can you eat that shit? I want to come and go when I please, no responsibilities, no complications."

Yeah. And most of the time he came and went between her condo and his. "That's such a crock. You spend every free second with me. You hate your so-called freedom." She flicked the pepperoni into her mouth and savored the salty, fatty texture. In the world according to Jack, she'd be in a coffin by forty if she continued eating so haphazardly. She'd done everything right so far. Why not live a little now?

"That's because I haven't had any yet," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

An accusatory look entered his eyes and pinned itself to her forehead. "With Mike in Colorado and your dad—" he cleared his throat, "dead, who else is going to look after you?"

"*Look after me?*" A slurry of love mixed with irritation sloshed around in her stomach. Tom Allen, her father, had guided his children and Jack on one principle and one principle only—if you screwed up, you died.

A war veteran and bomber pilot, he knew what could happen if you lost control of a situation. This battlefield philosophy had invaded every fissure of his being, and though he'd lovingly and patiently gifted Kira with the drive to succeed, he'd also instilled the fear that she would never be quite good enough to survive into adulthood.

Well, she had. On her own steam, too. Joining the Air Force and learning to fly had been the toughest thing she'd ever accomplished. At heart she wasn't military material—was too independent, too stubborn and free-spirited. But she'd sucked it up and completed her tour to achieve her goals. She'd done what she had to do and was damn proud of herself for getting through it.

Exasperation boiled into her throat and thinned her voice. "Of all the... I'm a big girl Jack. In case you hadn't noticed. I fly jumbo jets." What would it take for him to respect her capabilities?

"You change boyfriends like underwear."

Could she kill him and make it look like an accident? "You're the one who encourages me to do that. No one I choose can meet your standards."

"So it's wrong to have high standards?"

"You're not the only person who has them! I can judge for myself, you know."

"And look who you pick. I can't leave you alone for a second."

Kira took a few calming breaths. This conversation was utterly irrational, yet so typical of Jack. As her dad's star pupil, he'd always been overly protective of her. Had, in fact, enlisted her brother Mike to keep boys away from her in high school. It'd been ridiculous, the way they'd howled at the pimply boys who rang the doorbell. Whenever they got started, her only defense was to laugh, or turn the tables. "Would you rather me date bimbos, like you do?"

"It would be an improvement. Every time Arlo sees me at the airport he says *HiJack*."

A chill ran down her spine. Everyone was entitled to a momentary lapse in good taste, but few in the industry went *that* far.

"The bastard has no class."

She shrugged and swallowed her distaste. The jury was still out on Arlo, but she wasn't about to inform Jack of that fact. "At least he can remember your name."

"Wish I could forget his." Jack muttered quietly and crossed long, leanly muscled legs. "What kind of a name is *Arlo*, anyway?"

"Don't start."

"Doesn't sound good in a clench. Arlo," he trilled. "Oh, Arlooooooooooooo."

"Stop it." Kira giggled. She'd been practicing moaning Arlo's name in bed. The snickers still bubbled up, but things had improved to where she thought she could manage when and if the time came. God, she hated it when Jack hit the mark.

"There hasn't been a clench, right?"

Kira poked his thigh. "Mind your own beeswax. I'm twenty-eight years old."

Jack groaned, leaning forward to rip off another wedge of pizza and prep his mouth for stuffing. "Now you got me all worked up."

Kira stared at him. "You do this to yourself. Every time. Just forget about who I date and what I do on those dates. It's none of your business."

He swallowed the pizza. "It haunts me. At night. I can't sleep." He folded his arms and pouted.

Kira shook her head, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He looked cute that way, square bottom lip pressed tight over a dimpled chin. So unlike the Jack he presented to the world. As far as she knew, she was the only one who ever saw him like this—big hunk-o-man in a sulk.

It reminded her of how he'd looked when his mother threw him out as a teen. How he'd slumped into Kira's household and under her parents' watch—a shattered spirit lacquered in a fine sheen of bravado.

That was her Jack. Juvenile delinquent-turned Naval aviator-turned commercial pilot. Faithful friend.

They'd always been close. They'd shared a lust for adrenaline-pumping speed and the thrill of flight, which had, at Jack's urging, manifested itself into this new partnership at Pan Air. Tomorrow night, she'd make her maiden voyage. With Jack at the helm.

"There goes Julia running away again." Jack broke into Kira's thoughts and she focused glazed eyes on the TV. "The director must've been a fly on your bedroom wall."

"And if he was, he'd have seen you buzzing in to swat anything interesting that might've happened there."

Especially since her father had died. Right when she'd decided to fill the hole he'd left with a husband and maybe get started on a family of her own, Jack was always around, always pestering her, always popping in with a pizza—particularly when Arlo was here.

"He modeled Julia after you," Jack said.

"It's a movie, Jack. A movie." Kira clicked off the *Runaway Bride* before the DVD was half through. "I'm not watching this with you and your commentary."

"I don't make commentary."

"You just said she was like me."

Jack picked up the remote control and flicked it back on. "She is. Only not as pretty."

That shouldn't have pleased her but it did. Jack liked blondes. Kira was a blonde. It was a no-brainer he'd think her prettier than Julia Roberts, but she pumped a mental fist anyway.

"Turn it off. We're out of time." She still held a glimmer of hope Arlo would materialize this evening. Jack had to make himself scarce.

"I want to see how it ends."

"She gets married."

“Ruin my Friday night.” Jack sprang off the couch, sauntered to the TV and popped the DVD out of the player. Turning in the blue light from the vacant screen, his plaid flannel shirttails wafted in the cool ocean breeze from the open window in her condo. Her gaze followed the movement and she looked out over Atlantic Beach. Surf pounded ominously, the wind picking up. A tropical storm was moving in and she and Jack with a flight tomorrow night. Not good.

Jack strode to the patio doors, leaned on the frame and let his gaze stray out into the sunset. “Might swing into Atlantic Beach,” he mused. “I hate you living here.”

Kira knew where this was going.

“You’re on the first floor. When you went to buy this place, I told you—”

“Not the first floor,” Kira said in tandem with Jack.

“And look. A hurricane,” he said after a brief silence.

“You don’t know that yet,” she said.

“It’s happened before.”

If living with her father had taught her one thing, it was that pilots always had a contingency plan. There wasn’t one emergency life had to offer that a pilot wouldn’t think up plan B for. And Jack was a perfect example.

Kira hadn’t realized until her father died that she didn’t quite fit the mold. She was a fatalist, of sorts. Her attitude drove Jack up a wall. But what could she do? She wasn’t going to live in fear of what might happen. When your time was up, it was up. “Jack. People’s houses get destroyed. It’s nature.”

“Not when you live where nature wants you to live.”

“And a high-rise in Manhattan is one of those places?” Okay, that was evil, but she made her point. Jack was devoted to his fortieth-floor view.

“That was an anomaly. People don’t normally crash airplanes into skyscrapers, but hurricanes often blow condos apart.”

“Okay. You’re right. Someday the floods will come and wash away my condo. So what?”

“You’ll be homeless.”

Kira smiled sweetly. “I have you.”

Jack rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

She got busy picking up the pizza box, paper plates and dirty napkins and carrying them to the kitchen trash. Jack followed with the empty beer bottles, tossing them into the recycling bin and grabbing two fresh, cold bottles from the fridge. He cracked one for her and handed it over, leaning back to lounge against the counter. “Where’s Dicky Dweeb tonight?”

Kira took a sip and sat down at the table. A furtive glance at the clock told her Arlo should’ve called by now. He probably had a sensible excuse but her hopes sank. A

continually silent phone never boded well for a relationship. She wasn't about to enlighten Jack, though. "I told you. He had a flight."

"Oh." Jack smirked. "Guess he's too tired."

"Will you can it?" Bad enough that Arlo'd stood her up without Jack gloating in her face. She sighed and rested chin in hand, wondering if she'd ever "get laid but good" as her friend Lea suggested. Not with Jack around. That's for sure. She looked at him. "You can go now."

His grin deepened, showcasing killer dimples and a flash of pearly whites. He really did have star quality, not that it did Kira any good, or that she cared. But she could appreciate his physical beauty objectively, in a platonic way. Nothing wrong with that.

Tall and leanly athletic, his graceful bod boasted broad shoulders and well-defined pecs. A classically handsome face contained watchful blue-raspberry colored eyes. Sometimes, she had to admit, she got a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach when he smiled. Like now. But she always shrugged it off. As her brother Mike once said, Jack could make any woman's stomach do the cha-cha.

Technically, he was Mike's best friend, and had been since high school. When Mike had slung a backpack over his shoulders and departed on the first of many personal sojourns to the mystical places of the world, common interests and mutual loneliness for his calm, insightful companionship had drawn Jack and Kira closer together. Though they both maintained a strong relationship with her brother – visiting him often at his sculpting studio in Colorado – it was Kira who bore the burden of Jack's considerable angst. And she wasn't as well-equipped to deal with it.

He had the energy equivalent of a stick of dynamite. His mother, unable to handle what would probably be diagnosed as OCD today, had simply given up and walked away. Good thing Kira's father had seen it coming. He'd invited Jack to live with them for the last two years of school, encouraged Jack to join the Navy and go to college. And look at him now.

Kira felt a burst of pride.

"I'll wait," Jack said, scraping out a chair and sitting on it backwards. He rested elbows on the table and stared at her – an unsettling habit he'd fallen into lately.

"Don't you have a home?"

"A real man wouldn't be too tired to see his woman."

"Maybe he was delayed."

"Let's find out." Jack flipped his cell phone open. "What's the flight number?"

Great. Calling her bluff. "I don't know."

He closed the phone and slipped it back into his breast pocket, piercing gaze still resting on her face. "What do you want with a quality assurance officer, anyway?"

"What do you want with a flight attendant?" Why were they having this conversation? Sure, Jack always poked his nose into her bedroom. Par for the course.

But Arlo had somehow kicked his usual interest up a notch. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought he was jealous.

"Why don't you date pilots, like normal people?" he said.

Because between Jack and her father, she'd had it with the control freaks. "The last thing I need is another *you* in my life."

Jack rubbed his nose and sniffed. "I'm not so bad."

"Says who?"

Jack scratched at his beer label, loosening a corner and easing the paper skin off the moist surface in one deft sweep. "Bet Arlo can't do that." He grinned.

Kira laughed. "You're a man of many talents. Now go." If she didn't kick him out, he'd stay all night, monitoring her life, screening her calls, rooting through her medicine cabinet and critiquing her choice of pharmaceuticals.

"You have no idea," he said softly, and his bright gaze lifted from the crumpled label and thumbtacked her to her seat.

She swallowed hard as a little poof of breath dried her throat. Stay calm. Nothing to get alarmed about. Just Jack's eyes. "Arlo'll be here any minute. You have to go."

"I want to ask him something."

"I'll ask for you."

Jack's eyes narrowed and Kira felt a flash of triumph. Long fingers drummed the metal tabletop and Kira saw restlessness bunching in his muscles. Something was up. She could smell it. "What's with you tonight?"

He scraped back the chair so suddenly she jumped. "I wonder what he wants with you." He hopped up and started pacing, massaging the back of his neck.

"Thanks a lot."

"That's not what I meant." Jack stopped and pointed at her. "He's not a safe bet."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"If Pan Air's budget goes south, so will his job."

"Okay, Mr. Bulletproof."

"Kira." He came around the table and spun her chair so she faced him. "This isn't a joke."

The fervid concern on his face did her in and she slumped, antagonism seeping away on the fresh ocean breeze. Jack might be a PITA, but he did have her best interests at heart. More importantly, he'd never leave her in peace if she didn't smooth his feathers somehow. "Arlo's not coming," she admitted. "He would've called first."

Jack continued inspecting her face for a moment before cursing low in his throat and turning away. "I'll rip him a new one."

"I thought you'd be glad."

"No. You stand the asshole up, not the other way around. I'll kill him."

“One minute you’re accusing me of being the Queen of Disposable Men, the next minute you want me to dump another one. You’re insane.”

“You made me that way.”

Kira stood up and stretched, moving behind Jack where he stood at the window. Her eyes fell even with his shoulders and she could see the smooth flannel hugging every muscle. She inhaled and euphoria exploded in her brain. He smelled like pressurized air, nighttime and the sky. Most pilots smelled the same way, only with aftershave undertones. Jack just smelled of the elements. “Go get some sleep. See you at the airport?”

He reached back and hooked an arm over her shoulders, tugging her next to him in a warm embrace. “I’ll pick you up.”

“Sounds good.”

“Scared?”

“About flying with you? God yes.”

He guffawed and dropped a firm kiss on her forehead. “I’ll go easy on you.”

“Right.”

“I will.” His voice had grown deeper and held a hint of a tease. She looked up, meaning to razz him back, and caught him on the downswing as his lips pressed hers in their signature goodnight smooch. Teeth collided. Eyes flew open and lips curled against each other in a smile.

Kira meant to blink and pull away, but his pupils—big as the night sky—wrapped around her. Suddenly, she wasn’t gazing into Jack’s blue-raspberry eyes anymore. Instead, she was falling into swirling, blue-black holes. Tiny sparklers backlit them—like twinkling stars outside an inky cockpit. The galaxy of emotion she glimpsed galvanized her, shooting an afterburn down her thighs.

His lips softened ever so slightly, and the afterburn spread like wildfire into her arms, her chest and heart. Against her wishes, her lips parted in response.

With a faint, vibrating groan, he tightened his grip on her shoulder, stiffly pulling her closer as if fighting an unseen and opposing force.

“Jack?” she murmured.

He released her.

Succulent lips unlatched and they pulled away as slowly and reluctantly as two magnets.

An odd look flinched across his features. Kira stepped back and automatically sent a hand to straighten her long, blonde hair.

“Be ready at seven,” he said thickly. He turned toward the front door, yanked it open and hesitated for a microsecond on the threshold. Kira swore his hand trembled on the doorknob. His head swiveled slightly. She glimpsed a tight profile. His lips parted. Then he left.

She felt like she'd been stuffed with wet wool.

In a locked closet in her mind, she screamed this couldn't be happening again. Flashback twelve years ago, to Jack's goodbye kiss as he left for Naval training, and how it had somehow spun out of control there in the garage, him pinning her against the car door, the welcome relief of his hands finally on her...

He'd written her a jokey, flirtatious letter afterwards leaving no doubt in her mind that the kiss held no importance to him whatsoever. She'd joked about it right back, to cover her wounded pride. So they'd gone along, being the same as always—except in those occasional glances he sent her, and how he wedged himself between her and all her boyfriends.

If she was the Queen of Disposable Men, Jack was the court executioner.

So what now?

Call Lea. She would know what to do. Kira crossed to the lemon-yellow wall phone and dialed her friend's number.

"Emergency pig-out," she announced into the answering machine, hanging up in frustration and feeling hollow. Lea must be out on a date. It was the one constant in the universe.

Somehow, the thought of running out for her own chocolate binge—alone—didn't have the same allure. Too bad her mother, Maggie, lived on the opposite end of Long Island. One hundred miles never seemed so far away. Then again, this wasn't exactly something she could talk to her mother about.

Yeah, Mom, I just realized I want to boink Jack. Can I? Huh? Can I?

Flinging herself to the fridge in frustration, Kira rooted through the freezer section and unearthed a one-pound brick of Cadbury. Great. Jack had gotten it for her on his last flight to London. She couldn't eat it without thinking of him, and right now, he was the last person she wanted to think about.

Arlo. Dream of Arlo. Right. Hard to fantasize about a man who only thought of Trojans as computer viruses. At least Jack had testosterone.

Crap.

The phone rang.

"Got your message but I'm...tied up right now," Lea's voice came through the line.

"Literally, I'm sure."

Lea snickered and a muffled noise in the background made Kira wonder.

"Give me a quick rundown."

"I had a *moment* with Jack." Kira twirled the phone cord between damp fingers.

The line sizzled. "A sexual moment?"

Kira nodded before realizing Lea couldn't see her. It didn't matter, Lea could sense sex a world away.

"This is so wrong on so many levels," Lea said. "I mean, he's like your brother—"

"He's *not* my brother," Kira wailed. "That's just it. Even though sometimes it feels like he is."

"If it smells like a brother and feels like a brother, it is a brother. I can't listen to this."

"Will you stop joking and cut me a break? I feel awful. I mean it was there. A spark. Something. This can't be happening."

"Put it out of your mind."

Kira rested a hot forehead against the cool plastic phone. A quick glance around the airy condo assured her of familiar surroundings, lending a comfort to the tumultuous emotions roiling in her brain. There was the orange, nubby thrift shop sofa. Beside it sat a turquoise fiberglass chair – complete with purple seat cushion.

"Don't panic. Okay?"

Kira heard deep, raspy laughter, a giggle and the sounds of flesh slapping flesh. "Lea, what are you doing?"

Did she really want to know?

Bright yellow walls enveloped her with warmth, and on sunny afternoons, with the misty light streaming in, she could almost glimpse Nirvana. Right here on a New York beach.

Jack had helped her decorate, complaining vigorously at each junk store stop, every curbside find. But he'd dutifully loaded her treasures in his BMW, carried them inside, and now, seemed to prefer her condo to his own glossy, Upper East Side bachelor pad.

Funny how it worked out that way.

Lea's strident, feminine voice pulled her back to reality. "Look. I can't talk right now –"

The connection crackled, gasped and died. Kira started to slam the receiver down, but stopped herself in time. Wonderful. Just wonderful. Cast adrift in the Sea of Jack with no rudder, not even an anchor.

A gust of wind blew hair into her face and she went to close the window. Staring through her reflection, she caught the first trailings of Mare's Tails in the sky. Cirrus clouds. The precursors of a storm.

At least Jack would have something besides Arlo to gripe about tomorrow night, she thought. Tropical storms were nothing to sneeze at when it came to flying.

Kira moved around the condo, switched off the lights, washed her face and snuggled beneath a summer-weight comforter with the window next to her bed cracked. Exhaustion glued her limbs to the sheets and her eyelids fluttered shut. Only then did she remember it was not only a seven-hour flight, alone with Jack, but a thirty-six-hour layover as well.

Alone. With Jack.