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She was a beautiful airplane, perfectly streamlined and already pointing skyward in repose. The first DC-3 in the fleet rolled triumphantly out of the paint shop hangar in the fall of 1938. Shinier and sleeker than anything Marty Willman had ever seen, the aircraft made the other planes he owned seem like Stone Age relics.

This was a plane that brought the very essence of flight into tangible existence, as if all the other rickety fabric-covered monstrosities were impostors that happened to be able to fly. Two massive 1200 horsepower engines propelled the gleaming silver bird into the air; everything about it put everything before it to shame. She had power, beauty and undeniable prestige. The DC-3 didn't just fly; it was flight itself.

The inside of the aircraft was as compelling as the exterior. While the rest of Marty's fleet had one row of wicker seats on each side of a drafty cabin, the DC-3 had luxurious fabric seats, three across and 21 in all. She could fly 1500 miles at 10,000 feet! Marty knew immediately that the DC-3 would change everything about the modest little mail and passenger service he had nurtured. Even the language of it all; it was no longer "air service." In fact, it was an "Air Line," with routes and mail and passengers and cargo. He had his line and others had their lines, and all they could do now was spread their wings. The country was suddenly one vast expanse of opportunity to grow into, in which airlines would run in every direction to and from every city. But with the coming arrival of the DC-3, it was the "from" part that triggered Marty's acumen and foresight. He could not stay in Monroe and expect to capture his promising share of air travelers.

There was only one place to go in the South: Atlanta.

Terminus, as it was once called, had been a transportation capital from its earliest days. This is where the railway ended and then later began again. Portrayed as a Phoenix rising from the flames, Atlanta was a city with strong memories of a terrible war several decades old, a consequence that had generated its rise with a vengeance. As a Southerner, Marty was well aware of the magnetic appeal of the new south capital, the gravitation of industry, the strength and pride and growth of this city in this country. Atlanta, by its very nature—by the essential connotation of its name even—was a city that "radiated." And inevitably, the magnetic force of progress and prosperity captured Marty's imagination. He knew it was a

perfect fit for Alta. Within its realm, this city had a network of investors, an abundance of space and a metropolis of people to carry back and forth across the South. There was no doubt in Martin Willman's mind.

"We're moving, Candace!"

"Congratulations, Mr. Willman," she said, but not with her usual warmth. She had heard the rumors and knew this moment would come. And despite her affection for her boss, she had grown impatient with him now. Many times she had felt he was on the verge of bridging the professional gap between them and looking at her as something more than his secretary and business confidant. But his work was his life, an ever-convenient distraction.

"Aren't you excited, Candace?"

"I'm excited for you, Martin." Though she could call him by his first name whenever she wanted to, she did so only as a signal that the conversation would be of a serious nature.

"Aren't you excited for us?"

"Us? Martin, what is 'us'?"

"We're a team, Candace. It won't work without you."

"I'm not moving to Atlanta, Martin. I'm a single girl, and until I get married, I'm not leaving my home and my parents." This was the sacred and undeniable custom of the time, and Marty could not argue against it. He had not courted Candace. She was already a part of his life as it was, and except for his repressed desire for children some day, there was nothing pushing him forward. Business was the ultimate obligation, until now.

"Candace, I can't...we can't make it without you."

"Oh stop it, Martin. You'll be fine."

There was an edge of resentment to her proclamation. He was trying to charm her the way he charmed his employees and investors. She had a seemingly endless reserve of patience for Marty when it came to her job, but it did not extend to her personal life.

Marty confronted the potential finality of losing Candace, who up to now, he had only thought of as his secretary. That night he dreamed about her and imagined what his life would be like without her. It was too much for him to bear. He woke up in a state of powerlessness that was like nothing he'd ever felt before. How could he go to work without seeing her there each morning?

It was certainly the most unconventional courtship that anyone had ever known, but Marty approached the situation in the only way he knew how. There was a business decision to be made, and since there was no distinction between

his personal and his business life, there was no uncertainty about what he needed to do. At noon the next day he called his secretary into his office.

“Candace, I’m afraid we’re going to have to let you go.”

“Mr. Willman?”

“You heard me, Candace. You’re fired.”

“Martin? I told you I would be resigning when the company moves to Atlanta. Why are you doing this?” She was beginning to cry.

“Because I…” She could see he was struggling and her instinct was to be patient with him.

“Go ahead, Martin. Because?”

“Because I love you, Candace.” She was silent. She regained her breath and gathered her thoughts.

“You love me?”

“Yes, Candace. I love you.”

“Then…then why are you firing me?”

“Because I want to marry you.”

She skipped a breath. Her hand came to her heart, her jaw dropped, and then she really did cry. Marty came out from behind his desk and dropped to his knees in front of her.

“Candace, I know I haven’t paid much attention to you. I know this is…strange. But I can’t live without you. I need you in my life.”

“Yes,” she said.

“We’re a team, and I want you to come to Atlanta with me.”

“I said yes, Martin.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. I’ll marry you.”

And then he kissed her stiffly, because it was their first kiss, and because Martin Willman was far from practiced in this behavior.

The strangeness of it all seemed to hover over them in the day or two after the proposal, but then just as quickly, there was a sense of inevitability and excitement that made it all seem right.

Candace and Marty had a quiet family ceremony in the Baptist church in Oak Ridge. Though Marty was joyful, he was aware of the appearance of impropriety this marriage to his secretary could generate, and the tenuous economics of his enterprise could not afford any whiff of scandal. But his concerns were unfounded, and his extended family of employees was as happy as any family would be at the marriage of one of theirs. Now it was on to Atlanta.



The move of assets and offices took place throughout the summer of 1939. At first Marty's parents were deeply troubled by their son's plans to move the business hundreds of miles away. Would they ever see him again? And if so, how often? Once a year maybe?

Their fears were soon put to rest. Marty visited them every few weeks after the move, flying in on the "Cross Southern Route" as it was marketed. The DC-3 went from Atlanta to Birmingham to Meridian to Jackson to Monroe. From there it was on to Shreveport before heading into Tyler, Texas, and finally on to Fort Worth and Dallas. Tyler wasn't an especially lucrative stop on the route, but it was the home of Marty's original benefactor, and so every few weeks he would take the flight a little further to Tyler and pay a cordial visit to Simon Piersall.

"What are yew doin here, boy? Get out of here—you got an airline to run!"

They both would laugh as Simon would recount the same story of the original crash each time he visited, always over the bottle of scotch that Marty brought along as a gift.

"I could see the whites of your eyes; you were so scared, boy!"

"Oh go on, Mr. Piersall. I wasn't scared."

"Luckily, I brought that bird down just in time to save your life."

"And I am forever thankful, Mr. Piersall."

Aside from the important visits to friends and family, Simon was right; Marty did have an airline to run, and run it he did. Though he had long ago proven his ability to deal with the unknown, Atlanta was a big town for Marty and his wife, well beyond the familiar environs of Monroe and Oak Ridge. Their arrival into this daunting and bustling city only served to strengthen their marriage. Together they would survive.

Marty purchased a small plot of land up on a hill, just north of Atlanta city proper. With the help of his new friends in the local banking community, he located a contractor and built a house. It was Candace's vision come to life, a two-story Victorian home with a wraparound porch, maple floors and heart-of-pine beams from the northern woods of Georgia. A large deck extended outward into the small backyard and from there they could see the blossoming skyline of downtown Atlanta. A narrow walkway led up to the front porch from the street below, giving it a sense of quiet majesty. Though it was not a big house, Marty and Candace felt a great sense of pride in their home. The pieces of their new life had settled nicely into place.



From 1938 to 1940, the airline took delivery of eight DC-3s. By the end of the decade, over 200 people worked for Marty. He had successfully built relationships with two of Atlanta's largest banks, securing capital for the construction of two large airplane hangars and maintenance facilities. The fleet numbered 32 aircraft, with new ones arriving every other month. His route system spread; in fact it radiated like the railways that preceded him, outward from Atlanta. Northward toward Cincinnati by way of Knoxville and Lexington, east to Charleston, South Carolina via Augusta and Columbia, and west, all the way to Dallas on the Cross Southern Route. But gaining access to a new destination was never an easy task, and the lucky airline that was privileged to serve a city was often selected based on the whims of the federal regulators. For this reason, each of Alta's new destinations was preceded by a personal visit to the city by the general manager of the airline.

"A Mr. Martin Willman to see you, Mr. Mayor."

Well-dressed as always, Marty would be led into the inner sanctum of city leadership and given the few minutes he would need to make his case.

"Mr. Mayor, we're just a small operation right now, and like this great city of yours, we're like a family. But we're growing like a little boy who's constantly busting out of his britches. You know how it is. Soon as you get 'em a new pair, it's like you gotta buy him another one," and they'd laugh about it because they both knew exactly what that was all about.

"So Mr. Mayor, I have come here to tell you that we want to serve your city. If we can fly to (Lexington, Charleston, Knoxville, etc.), I guarantee you that you'll see people coming and going like you've never seen before. Business trade will take off, and we'll make sure you get the credit for it come re-election time. And unlike those other airlines that are in Washington right now demanding the chance to send one flight here a week, we'll fly here every day. We'll stick with you too, that's my word to you, sir."

Mayors didn't necessarily have any official clout when it came to the federal government deciding which airline got which route, but Marty was clever enough to know that having them in his corner would certainly have some influence, especially in the home of the Confederacy. He knew how and when to pull the Dixie card from his hand.

"You don't want no Yankee bureaucrats telling you who's gonna fly here and who isn't, do you, Mr. Mayor?" More often than not, there Marty would be a month later at any given city, standing proudly next to the mayor, cutting a ribbon at the local municipal airfield for the airline's inaugural flight.

The interdependency between the airlines and government grew stronger as the United States entered the Second World War. Air travel had evolved into a fundamental mode of transportation and commerce through the 1930s, and a small but thriving contingent of airlines entered the 1940s with little threat from anyone but each other. Still, even that threat was muted by government regulation.

There would be enough of a market to go around for all of the established carriers, and Alta was one of them. As long as they managed their operation with reasonable financial foresight and safety, they were essentially guaranteed a profit. When war struck, the government deployed passenger aircraft as troop carriers to the European and Asian theaters. Alta Airlines, with its close personal associations so ably fostered by its leader, was a willing contributor to the war effort. Patriotism aside, this was a political investment that could only pay off down the road.

Christmas 1941 was a dark and anxious time for the country, but on Christmas Day, Martin and Candace Willman received their greatest gift ever: A baby girl. Her first name honored the distant American harbor that had been attacked just a few weeks earlier, while her middle name memorialized the land they had left behind.

They named her Pearl Louise Willman.