

BOOTLEG SKIES

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Chapter I

1929

Jake Hollow woke without opening his eyes. Wherever he was, it was quiet, and Jake rarely stayed where it was quiet. He knew if he opened his eyes something would hurt, like waking after a night of drinking and realizing in that second before complete consciousness that a hangover was at hand.

This was no hangover. Fear, vague and cold, kept him from trying to push through the fog. To do so would mean confronting the source of the fear, and he didn't want to know what that was.

A storm.

He remembered a storm, and an airplane, his airplane, which meant he must have been a pilot. This was better, worth remembering, except the storm. Something about that, and the pain he knew awaited him the moment his eyes cracked. His thoughts were jumbled, and an eye tried to pry itself open, only to be stabbed by a bright light, and it closed.

An airplane, he thought. I have an airplane...and there was a storm...

The sky, no longer gray, was boiling itself into a sickly green. Jake Hollow was barely ahead of the cold front, and below, the fields of young corn were, as yet, still. Behind his biplane, however, he could see the trees beginning to nod in the wind, turning silver undersides of their leaves toward the vanishing sun. It wasn't the first time he'd ridden the crest of thunderstorm, but it didn't make it any easier. Jake had fueled his Standard J-1 biplane a filling station in western Iowa and was hoping to make it to Boone—about eighty miles northeast. He could have easily remained clear of the front had he been able to resist the station owner's offer to trade the gas for a ride over his brother's farm, "...just west of town."

"It'll have to be quick," Jake said. He spoke with the easy confidence of one in control of himself and the world around

him. "I don't like playing with thunderstorms, and that one's moving right along." He felt the last five dollars in his pocket, knowing he would be broke again after paying for the fuel. Twenty-two gallons at twenty cents per left little for room and board.

"Oh, it isn't far," the station owner, a short round man with a sweaty forehead and hairy ears, said. "Won't take but a minute."

"Okay. Help me push it away from the pumps. No, don't push there; push on the wing itself. That strut's been patched twice too often."

The twelve-foot tall biplane jerked awkwardly as the two men pushed it onto the dirt road in front of the station. The tail skid dug itself into the many ruts. The station owner, named David, was a blotter of sweat by the time the biplane was pointed down the highway.

Jake knew his next paycheck would come on Saturday night after he flew over the graduating class of Boone High School. With the fuel paid for in advance, from someone else's pocket, he could look forward to his first night in a dry bed since leaving Amarillo. He had left with enough money to reach Lincoln, Nebraska for an appointment at the Standard Aircraft Factory, but the urge to pick up extra change by hopping rides along the way had depleted his reserves. Business had been slower than anticipated. Barnstorming was, anymore, a poor way to earn a living. If a pilot could earn back his expenses he was making it. Jake was just shy of making it.

An offer of confirmed cash in Boone for the graduation airshow had set him on his present course.

"Hop in the front seat," Jake said. "Put your seat belt on and don't touch anything."

"Wait, I've got to tell Mother where I'm going..." David waddled off.

"No, there isn't time..."

"Don't be silly; just be a minute," the fat man called as he made for the house. "Mother? Where are you?"

A screen door slammed, and he disappeared inside. Jake kicked at the dusty road and watched the sky churning to the west. David's flat Midwestern voice carried through the open windows into the street.

"...Oh, sure it would be safe—government would never let planes fly around if they weren't safe. Anyhow, this fellow shot down twelve Germans in the war—he told me so... what's that? Yes, he does look a little young, but... No, he won't do any loop-de-loops... We're just going up over Eddie's farm. What's that? Of course you have to wear a parachute; that's the law."

"Where ready to go," David called from the porch. He led a gray woman, shorter than himself, down the steps. It was a painfully slow process with Mother stopping twice to whisper in her son's ear while pointing suspiciously at Jake.

"I don't think we can fit two of you in there." Jake's voice was politely strained. The sky to the west rumbled.

"Fine. Take me first, then come back and give Mother a ride. You got plenty of time before this rain hits."

"But..."

"You just sit here, Mother," David shouted. "And watch the gas pumps."

"You be careful," Mother called as any mother would.

Six landings later, with half the town's eighteen inhabitants looking on, Jake unloaded the Curry twins—Pat and Cathy. Jake worked his way up the side of the fuselage with the fuel hose to begin refueling. David's brother, Eddie, had seen the biplane circle his farm and, after the second pass, decided it was time to drive into town and see just what was going on. Eddie hated to drive alone, so Barbara and the girls had to come along, and, of course, they, too, wanted rides with the fellow who had shot down twenty Germans.

The glass dome atop the fuel pump drained, and David worked the long handle back and forth to refill it. Suddenly, the trees on the other side of the road shook from the storm's initial blast.

“Great,” Jake muttered. The first drops struck the hot engine with a frying pan hiss.

“Well, we’re getting’ home before this thing gets too bad,” Eddie announced, and he gathered stray daughters and a wife into the truck. “Thanks for the ride.” The truck bounced down the road, the girls knocking about loosely in the bed. The Curry twins ran home with the first serious clap of thunder. Lightning tracked spider-like across the approaching gray wall.

“Never mind the rest!” Jake hollered. “Help me push it back.”

Leaning against the wing, they rolled the flying machine onto the street. Jake ran around to the cockpit, reached inside and snapped on the magneto switch.

“Please start, please, please, please start,” he muttered and ran to the propeller, took hold of one tip and gave it a swing.

The OX-5 motor fired sending greasy smoke across the fuselage and into the summer air. Jake was around the wing and into the cockpit before David could speak. A quick wave, a glance around the nose, and the throttle came forward. A racket never heard before in the town echoed between the clapboard houses. The biplane rolled a short distance, its tail rose, and the whole plane lifted from the road sending a cloud of rain-pelted dust over David and the pumps. Mother, from her seat on the porch, waved vacantly at the noise.

Jake turned northeast toward Boone, keeping ahead of the squall line. The storm, however, refused to track straight west to east and, instead, moved from southwest to northeast. This put Jake’s course roughly parallel to the storm’s leading edge with the two lines slowly converging.

In the rough air two hundred feet above the ground, the biplane bounced and pitched. Jake fought to keep upright. “Can’t say I like this,” he said through clenched teeth.

He strained to see through the wall of rain where Boone should have been. The town’s airport was not scheduled for opening until August, and the school’s vice principal had told him over the phone, “...it would be best not to land at the airport until it’s officially dedicated.” He sug-

gested Jake use a gravel road beside the football field. The school had no football team, but it did have a football field.

The football field in Boone might as well have been in Burma for all Jake's chances of making it through the squall. It became apparent that the Boone High School class of 1929 was in serious jeopardy of losing its commencement aerial display when the Standard bored in the rear of the thunderstorm, and Jake stared at a dark mass of cumulous cloud spitting lightning.

The decision whether to press on and challenge the tempest or turn for safer air was made without the slightest hesitation. With a shuddering gasp and burp the OX-5 motor fell silent, its thick wooden propeller stuck helplessly in the wind.

"OH BEANS!" Jake mouthed the words while he quickly checked throttle, magneto, and fuel valve, finding all in proper order. A glance at the fuel gauge resolved all confusion—he was out of gas. He had never finished refueling at the last stop and had been too concerned with the storm to consider the consequences. He pushed the stick forward to hold airspeed and turned into the wind for the short glide onto a rough cornfield.

The biplane, with its dead propeller, slid across a row of hedge trees, rose abruptly on a vagabond updraft only to drop heavily onto both wheels when the air quit lifting. Jake's teeth snapped together with a sharp crack. He held the joystick against his stomach, keeping the nose high, but the impact was too much. The right wheel broke free of its axle, and the shock, not yet dissipated, continued up the landing gear, splintering the strut. What energy still remained from the impact then tore the strut from the fuselage.

Jake still held the joystick in his lap when the airplane, wounded but not dead, rose painfully into the air before it ran out of airspeed and crashed heavily onto the one remaining gear leg collapsing it with ease into the plane's belly. Jake's mouth slammed shut a second time, and he bit hard into his tongue. A warm salt taste flowed. The abrupt stop in the cornfield sent his forehead smashing into the instrument panel, shattering the altimeter's glass face.

Slowly, Jake leaned back in his seat and listened to the hiss of rain on the still hot engine. His mouth was thick with blood and a quickly swelling tongue, Blood ran into his left eye from the half-moon gash on his forehead where it had hit the altimeter. The joystick was still clasped tightly against his stomach, and he pushed it away. He released the seat belt.

The engine ticked and hissed. Jake slid from the open cockpit onto the lower wing and then to the muddy field. The broad wing looked out of place resting on the smashed cornstalks and mud. He spit blood, being careful not to hit the wing's fabric. The absurdity of the precaution made him laugh painfully. Red and white flashes of light swam across his blurred vision. At last, the sky opened up, dumping sheets of straight falling rain onto the wreckage. Tilting his face up, he let the warm water rinse the blood clear.

Across the field, a flimsy truck with a flat bed bounced wildly through the corn rows toward him. The driver clung tenaciously to the wheel that kicked with every rut, while a single windshield wiper slapped with ineffective vigor against the rain. The truck stopped several feet from the biplane's nose, and the driver stared through the rain-distorted glass. Jake leaned casually against the propeller, undamaged in the landing, and gave a nonchalant wave.

"Mind if I park here a while?" Red and white flashes crisscrossed his brain, his knees buckled, and his face hit the mud.

End Chapter One