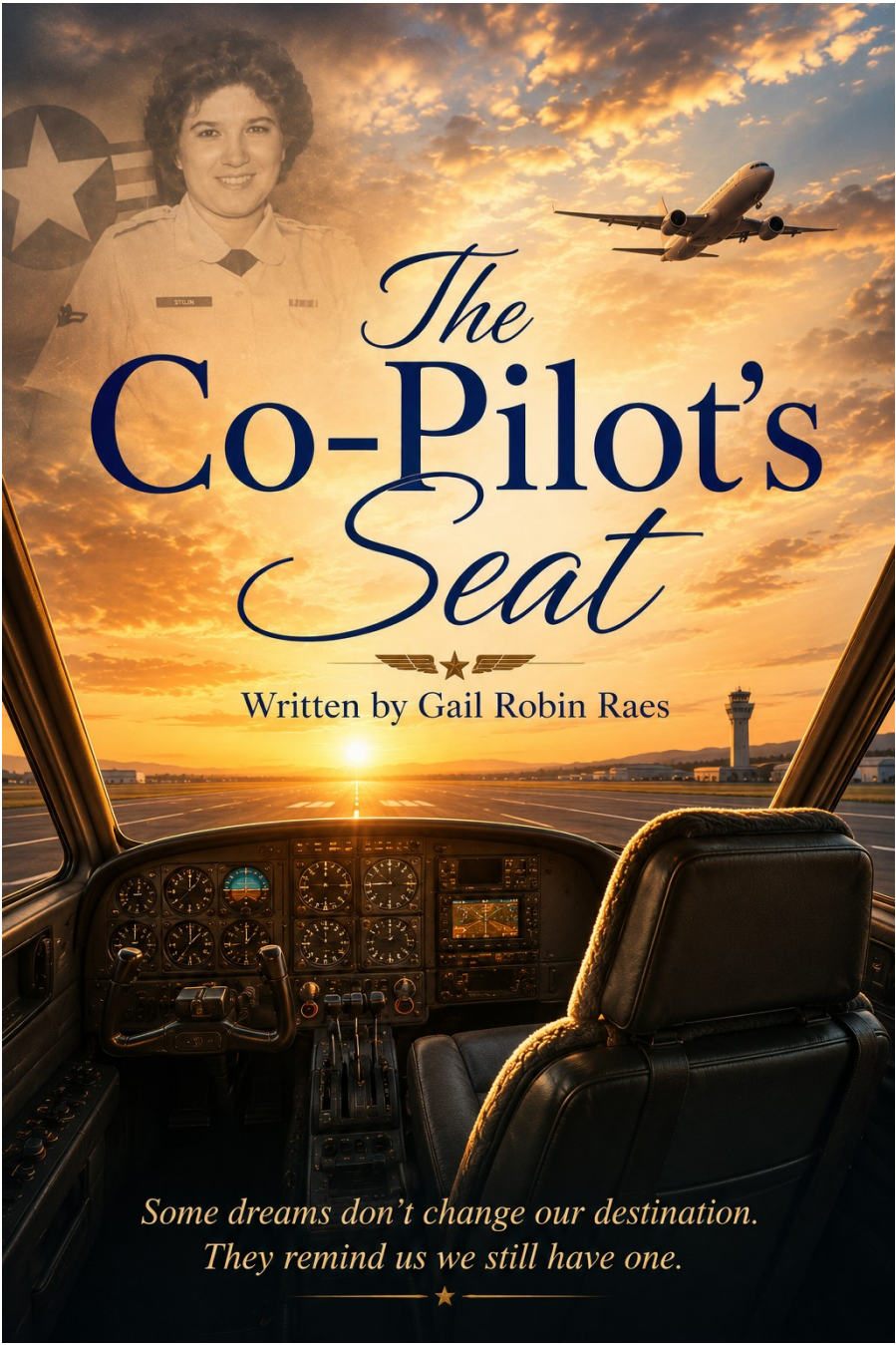




The Co-Pilot's Seat

✶
Written by Gail Robin Raes

*Some dreams don't change our destination.
They remind us we still have one.*

✶

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They remind us we still have one.

Written by Gail Robin Raes

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This story is based on a dream generously shared by Maria Stilling and is published with her permission. Certain conversations and descriptive details have been adapted to create a cohesive narrative while remaining faithful to the spirit and meaning of her experience.

Scripture references and spiritual reflections are shared for inspirational purposes.

Cover design by Gail Robin Raes

Written by Gail Robin Raes

www.GailRaes.com

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Introduction

The Story Behind the Dream

Hello, and welcome.

Before you begin reading or listening to *The Co-Pilot's Seat*, I'd like to share the story behind the story.

I met Maria Stilling about a year ago after she moved from Chicago to Arizona to help care for her parents. Leaving behind the life she had built wasn't an easy decision, but family came first. Since then, her father has passed away after a long battle with Alzheimer's disease, and Maria continues to lovingly care for and support her mother during this difficult chapter of their lives.

One day, Maria and I were talking about my first dream book, *Dream On*. I mentioned that someone we both knew was featured in one of the dream chapters, so I sent it to her to read.

The very next morning, while attending church, Maria was surprised to discover that the sermon was about dreams.

She couldn't wait to tell me.

After the service, she texted to say how remarkable it felt to read one of my dream stories one day and then hear an entire sermon about dreams the next. I replied with three simple words:

"Tell me more."

Maria later sent me an email describing the sermon, what it meant to her, and how deeply it touched her heart.

As I read her words, I realized there was another story waiting to be told.

At the time, I was putting the finishing touches on my newest book, *Dream On and On*, the sequel to *Dream On*. I thought I had finished writing, but there was just enough room for one more chapter.

I asked Maria if I could share her story.

She graciously said yes.

Because Maria proudly served in the United States Air Force, I found myself thinking about flight, trust, guidance, and the unexpected journeys life sometimes asks us to take. Those thoughts became the inspiration for this chapter, *The Co-Pilot's Seat*.

I hope you'll enjoy Maria's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. More than anything, I hope it reminds you that sometimes the most meaningful stories begin with a simple conversation... and three little words:

"Tell me more."

Thank you for listening.

— Gail Robin Raes

A Gift for My Readers



Thank you for reading *The Co-Pilot's Seat*.

Stories have always been meant to be shared—not only through the written word, but also through the spoken voice. As a special gift, I've included a complimentary audio edition of this story so you can experience it in another way.

Whether you're relaxing at home, taking a walk, or simply closing your eyes for a few quiet moments, I hope you'll enjoy listening to Maria's journey.

Visit: www.GailRaes.com/copilot

Thank you for reading, for listening, and for allowing me to share this remarkable story with you.

With gratitude,

Gail Robin Raes

Chapter 1

A Journey of Love and Purpose

"Some journeys begin the moment we realize we were never meant to earn the love we already possess."

— Gail Robin Raes

The email arrived on a quiet Tuesday morning.

Not every message that found its way into my inbox began with a dream.

Some began with a question.

Others began with heartbreak.

Maria's began with an unusual coincidence.

I recently read several chapters from your book, she wrote. That night I had a dream unlike any I can remember. The next morning I attended church, and the pastor spoke about dreams. I couldn't help wondering if all three were somehow connected.

She went on to explain that the pastor had shared the story of Joseph—not as a lesson about dreams themselves, but about life's unexpected journeys.

Joseph had experienced rejection, hardship, betrayal, and years of waiting before understanding the purpose behind his struggles. The message that stayed with Maria wasn't really about Joseph's dream. It was about learning whose approval truly matters.

She ended her email with a sentence that lingered in my thoughts long after I closed my laptop.

"Perhaps I'm still somewhere between the pit and the palace."

That sentence told me far more about Maria than any dream ever could.

A few weeks later, the bell above the front door chimed as she stepped into Dream On.

She smiled politely, although her eyes carried the quiet exhaustion of someone who had spent a long time taking care of everyone except herself.

"I almost didn't come," she admitted.

"I've learned that the people who almost don't come usually have the stories worth hearing."

She laughed.

"I hope mine is one of them."

"I have a feeling it is."

We settled into the familiar chairs near the window. Sunlight spilled across the wooden floor while the fountain in the courtyard outside whispered softly in the background.

"I should probably explain a little before I tell you the dream."

I nodded.

"Dreams almost always begin before we fall asleep."

She smiled.

"I spent over twenty years in the United States Air Force."

There was unmistakable pride in her voice.

"I loved serving."

She paused.

"It gave me purpose. Structure. Family."

"What happened after you retired?"

"I went home to Chicago."

She looked down at her hands.

"But not for long."

"My father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's."

"I'm sorry."

She nodded.

"My parents had moved to Phoenix years earlier. Mom needed help. Dad was declining quickly. So I packed up my life."

"You left everything?"

"My home."

She nodded.

"My job."

Another nod.

"My friends."

"And moved across the country."

"I never really thought twice about it."

She smiled softly.

"They were my parents."

She grew quiet.

"I wish I could tell you it was one of those beautiful stories where everyone appreciates the sacrifice."

She looked toward the window.

"It wasn't."

"My father..."

She stopped for a moment.

"The Alzheimer's changed him."

"He often didn't know who I was."

Her eyes glistened.

"Sometimes he did."

"And sometimes he would tell me to go away."

She swallowed.

"He'd look at me and say, 'I don't like you.'"

Silence settled between us.

"Other days he'd criticize something as simple as what I was eating."

"I knew it was the disease..."

She hesitated.

"...but it still hurt."

"And your mother?"

Maria smiled sadly.

"Mom was overwhelmed."

"I understand that now."

"But she became so dependent on me that sometimes it felt like no matter how much I gave..."

"...it was never enough."

She folded her hands together.

"I wasn't looking for praise."

"I just wanted to know I was doing the right thing."

"Instead..."

She shrugged gently.

"I spent a lot of time wondering if I'd somehow failed."

She looked up at me.

"The sermon I heard after reading your book reminded me that maybe I shouldn't be searching for my parents' approval."

"Maybe I needed to remember that my worth had never depended on anyone else's."

I smiled.

"That sounds like an important realization."

"It was."

She laughed.

"Then that night I had this dream."

I leaned forward.

"Tell me."

Chapter 2

The Invitation to Begin Again

*"Faith isn't always taking the pilot's seat.
Sometimes it's accepting the invitation to sit beside Him."
— Gail Robin Raes*

Maria closed her eyes as though watching it unfold again.

"I was standing on an Air Force base just before sunrise."

"The sky was painted with soft shades of gold and blue."

"Everything felt familiar."

"I wasn't wearing my uniform anymore."

"I had on jeans, a light jacket, and I was carrying my old military duffel bag."

"I could hear the distant sound of jet engines warming up."

"There was an announcement over the loudspeaker."

She smiled.

"I've heard thousands of announcements like that."

"Final boarding."

"I knew immediately that flight was mine."

"I started walking toward the aircraft."

"The closer I got, the lighter I felt."

"It was almost as if every step made the duffel bag weigh a little less."

"Then I heard someone call my name."

"Maria."

"I turned around."

"My parents were standing together."

Her voice softened.

"My father looked exactly as he had before Alzheimer's."

"He wasn't confused."

"He wasn't angry."

"He was simply smiling."

"He looked peaceful."

"My mother stood beside him."

"For once..."

Maria laughed quietly.

"...she wasn't asking me to do anything."

"She simply reached out her hand."

"I walked back."

"I hugged my father."

"I hugged my mother."

"It felt like time had stopped."

"When I stepped away..."

"They were gone."

"They didn't disappear in a frightening way."

"It was almost as though they'd simply become part of the morning light."

"I turned toward the airplane."

"The engines were running."

"The boarding stairs had already been pulled away."

"My heart sank."

"'I'm too late,' I thought."

"Then the pilot leaned out of the cockpit window."

"He smiled."

"'We've been waiting for you.'"

"I couldn't understand."

"I walked closer."

"The stairs appeared again."

"I climbed aboard."

"I looked down the aisle for my assigned seat."

"There wasn't one."

"Instead..."

"The cockpit door was open."

"The pilot looked directly at me and smiled."

"Then he motioned for me to come forward."

"I stepped into the cockpit."

"He pointed to the empty co-pilot's seat beside him."

"'This seat is yours,' he said."

"I just stood there."

"The pilot smiled warmly."

"'We've been waiting for you.'"

Why would anyone be waiting for me? I wondered.

"As if he could hear my thoughts, he smiled again."

"'We're ready whenever you are.'"

"I slowly sat down beside him."

"The moment my hands rested on the controls..."

"...I woke up."

For several moments neither of us spoke.

Finally I asked the question that had quietly formed in my mind.

"Did you recognize the pilot?"

She shook her head.

"No."

"But somehow..."

"I completely trusted him."

I smiled.

"I think that's the most important part of your dream."

She looked surprised.

"It is?"

"I do."

I waited before continuing.

"Most people would assume this dream is about an airplane."

"I don't think it is."

She listened quietly.

"I think it's about identity."

"When you served in the Air Force, you understood your mission."

"You knew your purpose."

"You knew where you were supposed to be."

"When your parents needed you..."

"You accepted another mission."

She smiled.

"I suppose I did."

"And you served that one with the same devotion."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I tried."

"I know you did."

I continued gently.

"But somewhere along the way..."

"...you confused serving with carrying."

She looked at me curiously.

"The duffel bag."

"It became lighter every step you took."

"I don't think it contained your belongings."

"I think it contained years of responsibility."

"Years of trying to be enough."

"Years of hoping that maybe one more sacrifice would finally earn the approval you longed for."

She was very quiet now.

"I think you're right."

"Then your parents appeared."

"They weren't there to stop you."

"They were there so you could leave with peace."

"Your father wasn't angry."

"Your mother wasn't asking anything of you."

"Your heart needed to remember them as love intended them to be."

Maria wiped away a tear.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"And when they disappeared..."

"It wasn't abandonment."

"It was release."

I paused.

"I don't think the airplane was the important part of your dream."

"I think it represented your next mission."

"You worried you'd missed it."

She laughed softly.

"That sounds exactly like me."

"But you hadn't."

"The pilot had been waiting all along."

She smiled through her tears.

"The co-pilot's seat?"

I couldn't help smiling myself.

"For years you were a passenger in everyone else's expectations."

"This dream wasn't inviting you to leave your parents."

"It was inviting you to help guide your own life again."

"You've spent years caring for others."

"Now you're being reminded that your own life still matters."

Maria nodded thoughtfully.

"There's one part I still don't understand."

"The controls?"

She smiled.

"Exactly."

"The moment my hands touched them..."

"...I woke up."

I smiled.

"Dreams are very careful with timing."

"Notice what didn't wake you."

"Not seeing your parents."

"Not boarding the airplane."

"Not sitting beside the pilot."

"Your dream ended the moment your hands touched the controls."

She thought quietly for a long moment.

"What do you think that means?"

"I think your dream had already said everything it came to say."

"Until that moment, life was happening around you."

"You were carrying the baggage."

"You were answering the boarding call."

"You were accepting the invitation."

"But the instant your hands touched the controls..."

"...you became part of the journey."

"Not because you were suddenly in charge of everything."

"No one is."

"But because, for the first time in a long while, you accepted that your life still had a direction of its own."

"You weren't taking control of the airplane."

I paused and smiled.

"You were finally taking hold of your own future."

Maria's eyes filled once more.

"I don't think I've ever looked at it that way."

"Perhaps your dream wanted you to."

She sat quietly, letting the words settle.

After a few moments she smiled.

"I've been afraid that wanting something for myself might somehow dishonor what I've done."

"It doesn't."

"Loving others never requires losing yourself."

Another long silence filled the room.

Finally Maria whispered, "I think that's what I needed to hear."

"I don't believe your dream came to predict the future."

"I believe it came to restore hope."

She smiled. "And maybe to remind me..."

"...that the best is yet to come."

"I think so."

Before leaving, Maria paused at the door.

"I almost didn't send that email."

"I'm glad you did."

"So am I."

After she left, I found myself thinking again about the coincidence that had brought her here.

She had read about dreams.

She had experienced one of her own.

The next morning she heard a message about dreams and purpose.

Some people might call that coincidence.

Others might call it confirmation.

Whatever name we choose, I have learned not to dismiss those quiet moments when life gently repeats itself.

Sometimes the same message arrives more than once—not because we failed to hear it the first time, but because our hearts are finally ready to understand it.

Maria believed she had traveled across the country to care for her parents.

She did.

She loved them faithfully, even when the journey was difficult.

But perhaps another journey had been quietly unfolding at the same time.

One that had nothing to do with miles between Chicago and Phoenix.

One that could never be measured on a map.

The longest journey she would ever take...

was finding her way back to herself.

And perhaps that was the destination the pilot had been waiting for all along.

Chapter 3

Finding Our Way Back to Ourselves

*"The purpose of a dream isn't simply to understand the night.
It's to awaken something within us before morning."*

— Gail Robin Raes

The Dream Interpreter's Reflection

After Maria left, I remained in my chair for a long while.

Some dreamers walk out the door with smiles.

Others leave with tears.

Maria left with something different.

She left with hope.

I've learned that dreams rarely speak in occupations.

A teacher's dream is seldom about teaching.

A doctor's dream is seldom about medicine.

A musician's dream is seldom about music.

Instead, dreams borrow the language we know best to tell us something about ourselves.

For Maria, that language was the military.

She understood duty.

She understood sacrifice.

She understood commitment.

She understood what it meant to accept a mission without hesitation.

When her country called, she served.

When her parents needed her, she served again.

Neither mission was easy.

Both required courage.

Both asked her to put someone else's needs before her own.

There is great honor in that.

Yet somewhere between those two missions, Maria quietly began carrying something that had never been assigned to her.

She began carrying the weight of everyone else's approval.

That burden is surprisingly common.

Many of us carry it for years before we even realize it's there.

We convince ourselves that if we work a little harder...

Love a little more...

Give a little longer...

Sacrifice one more dream...

Someone will finally say the words we've been longing to hear.

"You've done enough."

"I'm proud of you."

"You are enough."

Sometimes those words come.

Sometimes they don't.

But our worth was never meant to depend upon hearing them.

Dreams have an extraordinary way of revealing the invisible luggage we carry through life.

To everyone else, Maria's duffel bag looked ordinary.

To her heart, it held years of responsibility, disappointment, unanswered questions, and quiet longing.

Perhaps that's why it grew lighter as she walked toward the waiting airplane.

Not because her past disappeared...

But because she was finally discovering she didn't have to carry every piece of it forever.

One image from her dream has stayed with me.

It wasn't the airplane.

It wasn't the Air Force base.

It wasn't even seeing her parents healthy again.

It was the empty seat beside the pilot.

Dreams are careful with details.

They rarely include something without purpose.

The pilot never invited Maria to sit in the back of the airplane.

He didn't ask her to remain a passenger.

He invited her to sit beside him.

Beside.

It's such a simple word.

Yet it speaks volumes.

For years, Maria had allowed circumstances, expectations, and the needs of others to chart the course of her life.

She accepted every assignment with grace.

She fulfilled every responsibility with love.

But somewhere along the way, she forgot that her own life still had a destination.

The dream wasn't asking her to stop loving her parents.

It wasn't suggesting she had made the wrong choices.

Quite the opposite.

The dream honored those choices.

It simply whispered that there comes a time when caring for others and caring for ourselves no longer have to compete.

Both can exist together.

Both can be acts of love.

Perhaps that's true for more of us than we realize.

Not everyone has served in the military.

But many of us have accepted missions we never consciously chose.

Some become the family peacemaker.

Some become the caregiver.

Some become the responsible one.

Some become the child who spends a lifetime trying to earn a parent's approval.

Others become so busy rescuing everyone around them that they forget they were never meant to lose themselves in the process.

The roles become so familiar that eventually we stop asking whether the assignment has changed.

Life has seasons.

There is a season for learning.

A season for building.

A season for serving.

A season for grieving.

A season for healing.

And sometimes...

there is a season for quietly rediscovering the person we were always meant to become.

Perhaps that is why I love listening to dreams.

They rarely tell us something we don't already know.

Instead, they gently uncover truths our hearts have been trying to whisper for years.

Sometimes they remind us to forgive.

Sometimes they encourage us to begin again.

Sometimes they help us find the courage to close one chapter before opening another.

And sometimes...

they simply remind us that hope has been waiting patiently for us all along.

As Maria walked out the door of Dream On, I watched her pause for just a moment before stepping into the California sunshine.

She looked up.

She smiled.

For the first time that afternoon, she wasn't searching for approval.

She wasn't questioning whether she'd done enough.

She wasn't wondering if she'd missed her chance.

She simply looked like someone who believed another chapter of her life was waiting.

I couldn't help but smile too.

Some missions ask us to serve others.

The hardest ones ask us to remember ourselves.

Fortunately...

both can be acts of love.

*"Sometimes our dreams don't tell us where we're going.
They gently remind us who we were before we forgot ourselves."
— The Dream Interpreter*

Meet the Author

Meet the Author



GAIL ROBIN RAES

Gail Robin Raes has written more than twenty-five books spanning inspirational fiction, dream memoirs, women's fiction, children's books, and humorous memoirs. Her stories celebrate family, kindness, laughter, and the extraordinary moments hidden within ordinary lives.

 Gail believes every person has a story worth telling. Through her books, she invites readers to laugh, reflect, heal, and discover that hope often arrives when we least expect it. Whether inspired by a dream, a conversation, or an everyday moment, her stories remind us that even the smallest experiences can change a life, leaving readers inspired, encouraged, and ready to embrace the next chapter of their own story.


*Stories have the power
to heal, to inspire, and to remind
us we're never alone.*




Learn more about my books
and events at
www.GailRaes.com



Let's connect!



Hello, my friend...

I'm so glad you found your way here.

Whether this is the first book you've picked up by me or one of many, I'd like to personally thank you for spending a little of your time with my stories. As an author, there is no greater gift than knowing someone has chosen to share a few hours of their life with words that came from my heart.

People often ask me where I get my ideas.

Sometimes they begin with a dream.

Sometimes with a conversation.

Sometimes with a funny family story, an unexpected moment, or something so ordinary that most people would walk right past it without giving it another thought.

I've learned that the best stories are often hiding in plain sight.

Over the years I've been blessed to write more than twenty-five books, including inspirational fiction, dream memoirs, women's fiction, children's books, and humorous memoirs. Although each book is different, they all have something in common. They celebrate family, kindness, friendship, hope, laughter, and the remarkable people who quietly change our lives every day.

You might find yourself sharing a picnic in the vineyards of Napa Valley... listening to dreams that refuse to be forgotten... laughing through the adventures of Papa Dragon and his little dragons... discovering that an empty chair isn't always as empty as it seems... or slipping on a pair of flip flops to celebrate friendship and life's simple joys.

Every book is an invitation to take a different journey.

One of the greatest compliments a reader has ever given me wasn't about beautiful writing or an exciting story. They simply said,

"Your books feel like sitting down with a friend over a cup of tea."

I smiled when I heard that because it perfectly describes the kind of author I hope to be.

I don't write to impress people.

I write to encourage them.

I write to make someone laugh after they've had a difficult day.

I write to remind readers that kindness still matters, that families aren't perfect, that friendships are worth celebrating, and that hope often arrives when we least expect it.

Most of all, I write because I believe every person has a story worth telling.

Perhaps that's why I love listening as much as I love writing. Every conversation has the potential to become a story. Every dream has the possibility of changing a life. Every person I meet teaches me something new about courage, love, forgiveness, laughter, or simply finding joy in ordinary moments.

As you turn the pages of my books, my hope is that you'll find a little of yourself somewhere within them.

Maybe you'll laugh.

Maybe you'll cry.

Maybe you'll remember someone you've loved.

Maybe you'll look at your own life just a little differently.

If that happens, then every hour spent writing was worth it.

Thank you for reading my books, for sharing them with family and friends, and for allowing me to be a small part of your journey.

I hope our paths cross again in another story very soon.

Until then...

Keep dreaming.

Keep believing.

And never forget that your own story is still being written.

With gratitude,

Gail Robin Raes

Books by Gail Robin Raes

*"Every story begins in my imagination,
but the parts readers remember are written from my heart."*

Picnics Series

Picnics in the Vineyard

Uncorked: *The Story Behind Picnics in the Vineyard*

Picnic with Friends Book Club

Dreamer Series

Dream On

Dream On and On

Flip Flops and Friends Series

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The Mermaid of Flip Flop Cove

Just a Girl Who Loves Flip Flops

Flip flops, Friends and Fireworks

Confessions of a Flip Flop Girl

Dragon Tales Series

Dragon Tales: The Adventures of Papa Dragon

The Magical Adventures of Levi and Papa Dragon

ABCs with Papa Dragon

Dragons Need Manners

Papa Dragon's Fiery Fiesta

Papa Dragon's Trick-or-Treat Trouble

Dragon Tales – Holiday Magic with Papa Dragon

The Crazy Christmas Dragon

The Dragon Who Saved Christmas

Papa Dragon's Hot-Hot Holiday Fiesta
Papa Dragon's Spring Break Adventure
Papa Dragon's Sleepy Little Dragons
Rise of the Dragon: A Heavy Metal Legacy
The Dragonfly Who Roared
Papa Dragon and Buzzby the Dragonfly
Papa Dragon and the Birthday Wish Machine
Papa Dragon Rocks

Children's Series

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Honk, Zoom, Hooray-Levi Turns Two Today!
Laugh Your Face Off!
Frankie and Darby Make a Splash!
The Girl Who Loves Dragons
Ellabella and the Pink Dragon Dreams
The Sparkling Tales of Sparkle Twinkletoes
The Birthday Wish Machine
The Twins and the Birthday Wish Machine

Bruno Series

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Love on Tap
More Material for Guido

Fiction

Just Desserts
The Last Supper
Will You Marry Me?
Confessions of a Clutter Bug
Not Another Book!

Nothing Fits-And That's a Good Thing!

Don't Blame Me, Blame Barbie!

The Empty Chair

Conversation Highway

Reading, Writing and Wrinkles

Nonfiction

The Writer Before Me

Learn more about Gail's books, upcoming releases, events,
and bonus content: www.GailRaes.com

*Some dreams don't change our destination.
They remind us we still have one.*



After more than twenty years of serving her country with honor as an Air Force officer, Maria thought she knew who she was. But when duty called her home to care for her aging parents, everything she had built—and everything she thought defined her—began to fade.

Caught between a father who no longer recognized her and a mother who could never seem satisfied, Maria gave until she had nothing left to give. Praise was scarce. Appreciation even scarcer. And slowly, she began to wonder if she had lost herself somewhere along the way.

Then came a dream that felt more like a message.
A call sign. A reminder.

The Co-Pilot's Seat is a moving story of sacrifice, identity, and rediscovering the courage to choose yourself. It's about learning that our worth isn't found in the approval of others, but in the One who sees us clearly, loves us completely, and never forgets who we are.

*For anyone who has ever given too much,
lost themselves in the giving,
and longed to feel whole again.*



Gail Robin Raes is the author of more than twenty-five books inspired by dreams, everyday moments, and the remarkable people she meets along life's journey. Her stories celebrate family, kindness, friendship, hope, and laughter while reminding us that every life has a story worth telling. She invites readers to discover that even the smallest experiences can change a life.



*Every heart has a story
waiting to be heard.
Sometimes all it takes is someone
willing to listen.*

— GAIL ROBIN RAES



Dream On
BOOKS

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