



Season 3

Episode 4 Transcript

A Lost Wheel, a Daring Landing

Torah Kachur:

Taylor Hash is 21 years old and a hundred feet above the ground. She's flying a plane solo for the third time, ever.

Taylor Hash:

I had 57 total hours, so that's solo and with instructor, and I had 6.1 solo hours before this flight. On takeoff roll and lifting off the ground, everything felt great.

Torah Kachur:

Then she hears a message over the cockpit radio.

Speaker 3:

Hey, that Diamond Star that just took off lost its nose wheel tire on the runway.

Torah Kachur:

Taylor is flying a Diamond Star. That voice on the radio just told the air traffic control tower that her front wheel fell off.

Taylor Hash:

I freaked out a little bit like, "Wow, he's talking about me." Second thought, "Oh my gosh, I don't have a nose wheel on my plane right now." Third is like, "How am I going to land this?"

Torah Kachur:

Landing a plane without a front wheel is difficult, even for a seasoned pilot. Taylor is very much a beginner.

Taylor Hash:

Wow, this could go really wrong, I could end up not walking away from this or being injured. Those things were all running through my mind at a billion miles an hour.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur and this is *Tell Me What Happened*. True stories of people helping people. An original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

Taylor Hash is 20 years old and has no idea what she wants to do with her life.

Taylor Hash:

I was kind of in and out of college changing majors. I hadn't found something that I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing.

Torah Kachur:

In the spring of 2020, Taylor drops out of school and gets an administrative job with a private airline. It's just a gig, but it does come with a very special perk.

Taylor Hash:

My view from my desk is the runway, so I, every day, would just look out the window and there's planes taking off all day long.

Torah Kachur:

Before she knows it, Taylor's found her passion.

Taylor Hash:

Watching that all day, every day really just was like, "Wow, I want to do that. I have to do that. I loved it."

Torah Kachur:

To live her dream, Taylor has to get her pilot's license. This is no easy task. There's two parts, a written exam and then hundreds of hours of flying time, both with an instructor and then flying solo. It's an extremely expensive process, but Taylor is determined. In January of 2022, she passes the written test. A few months later, she climbs into the cockpit for the very first time. She's nervous, but the instructor's there if anything goes wrong.

Taylor Hash:

I hated landing at first. That's probably one of the hardest things I've done — almost had a fear of at first.

Torah Kachur:

But Taylor works through that fear and graduates to flying solo. On March 24th, 2023, she's heading out for her third flight alone, no instructor.

Taylor Hash:

The flight I was planning to do that day was just kind of to the northeast of the airport, practicing maneuvers and playing with the airplane, getting used to being in it by yourself.

Torah Kachur:

It's early evening when Taylor arrives at the airport. She calls her instructor to check in. That's routine. They discuss the weather, the flight she's planning.

Taylor Hash:

It was a little breezy, but nothing too bad. It was a good enough day for a student pilot to go flying solo.

Torah Kachur:

Next, Taylor heads to the plane.

Taylor Hash:

I fly a Diamond 20. It is a two-seater, very, very small single-engine aircraft. If you stand next to it, I'm about as tall as it, and I'm only 5'5". They're really, really small. I've flown this exact plane many times and I always check it out. That's something that I was taught early on. Always look at it, look for anything that looks wrong or off. You want to double, triple check everything.

Torah Kachur:

Taylor does a thorough check and everything looks good. She calls tower control.

Taylor Hash:

[Inaudible] four seven eight Delta Charlie Pontiac, runway niner eight clear for takeoff.

Taylor Hash:

So when I took off on takeoff roll and lifting off the ground, everything sounded, felt and looked good.

Torah Kachur:

Taylor is a hundred feet off the ground when she hears this over the radio.

Speaker 3:

Hey, that Diamond Star that just took off lost its nose wheel tire on the runway at rotation.

Taylor Hash:

At that point I'm like, "Wow, he's talking about me right now." And I was just kind of like, "Of course my instructor is not next to me right now. Of course, I'm flying this plane by myself and this happens."

Torah Kachur:

This, a wheel falling off an airplane shortly after takeoff is something that almost never happens.

Taylor Hash:

We train for engine failures and electronics failures and our communication not working, but you don't really train for a wheel falling off because it just doesn't happen. So I was just freaking out and just in pure disbelief that this was happening.

Torah Kachur:

Taylor's processing all of this silently. Time slows down.

Taylor Hash:

I would say maybe 30, 40 seconds, which at that point felt like an hour.

Torah Kachur:

The air traffic control tower checks in with Taylor.

Tower:

Seven eight [inaudible] Did you copy?

Taylor Hash:

Copy.

Tower:

Entire front wheel assembly is on the runway.

Taylor Hash:

Roger that. Should I remain in the pattern?

Torah Kachur:

That last voice is Taylor. She sounds more confident than she feels.

Taylor Hash:

I wasn't really sure what my next step was.

Torah Kachur:

This is *Tell Me What Happened*. A podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, whether you're stranded in a hurricane, lost in the mountains, or missing a wheel on your third solo flight.

Taylor Hash is trying to remain calm. At the moment everything is okay, but she knows she's going to have to land the plane without a front wheel all by herself. That's a challenging maneuver for even the most experienced pilot.

Chris Yates:

It possibly could have been a deadly situation if she was not prepared for it. Definitely the airplane would've been flipped over on its back and the flight crew would've been injured if they were not aware of what was about to happen.

Torah Kachur:

That's Chris Yates. He was on the tarmac that day, and to say he's a seasoned pilot is a serious understatement.

Chris Yates:

My father got his pilot's license when I was seven and I was his first passenger. I got bit by the bug, just hook, line and sinker.

Torah Kachur:

Chris went on to work as a commercial pilot for 30 years. Graduating from flying “Will you marry me?” banners to flying cargo freight and corporate jets.

Chris Yates:

We flew passengers, we flew worms. We flew college students to basketball. We did all kinds of stuff.

Torah Kachur:

Along the way, Chris becomes part of the vintage aircraft community, a close-knit group of pilots and fans of historic planes.

Chris Yates:

I actively fly a 1941 Stearman biplane, which was a primary trainer in World War II, and I actively fly a P-51 Mustang. Mustang was the Allied war victor for the Allied Forces in World War II, and that’s just a very special thing. Near and dear to my heart to be able to share it around the country, flying it to air shows.

Torah Kachur:

And then to cap off his career, Chris spent seven years as director of operations for SpaceX. When he retires from the job, he’s amassed over 15,000 hours of training, has a huge network and is qualified to fly almost everything. These days Chris is still flying, mostly freelance contracts for private clients. That’s what he was doing on the day Taylor set off for her third solo flight. As Taylor taxied down the runway, Chris was waiting on the tarmac preparing for takeoff.

Chris Yates:

We had our passengers on board. We closed the door. I just happened to look out the window real briefly to the right for a second. Something caught my eye and I turned out the window and I saw this small training aircraft. And as it left the ground, it was very obvious to see a piece fall off the aircraft. It kept bouncing down the runway is what I saw vividly. It was the tire and the axle and the front wheel of the aircraft.

Torah Kachur:

Chris’s first thought is ...

Chris Yates:

“Somebody’s going to have a bad day.”

Torah Kachur:

Chris assumes he can’t possibly be the only person at the airport who saw the wheel fall off, but he’s not hearing anything on the radio.

Chris Yates:

I waited for a few seconds. Nobody said anything. Nobody said anything, and it was very imperative to me that somebody needed to know, namely the pilot. So I radioed the tower to let them know what I saw.

Hey, that Diamond Star that just took off, lost its ...

I assumed it was probably a flight instructor with a student and the flight instructor would handle it correctly.

Taylor Hash:

Copy, Delta Charlie. Should I remain in the pattern?

Chris Yates:

When I heard her say, "Should I remain in the pattern?" it cued me into immediately, she's by herself. She's low experience. She's probably a student pilot or she wouldn't be asking that question.

Torah Kachur:

Chris checks in directly with Taylor over the radio.

Chris Yates:

You by yourself?

Taylor Hash:

I am solo. I would love a bit of assistance. [Inaudible] Delta Charlie.

Torah Kachur:

Chris realizes he's Taylor's best chance at landing this plane safely. Air traffic controllers aren't trained for this kind of situation.

Chris Yates:

They're trained to keep aircraft separated and keep the airport running and safe. So they have no experience in what you would know as a pilot, and I'm here and nobody else is offering, so I can't live with myself if I don't give her some best practices.

Torah Kachur:

Chris starts by slowing things down.

Chris Yates:

I had her just fly to the north and collect herself. We're here all day. The airport's closed now, you have all the time in the world.

Taylor Hash:

He started just not disregarding the situation, but just making me think about something else for a second, calming me down and taking my mind off the fact that I was going to have to land a plane with no wheels.

Torah Kachur:

At this point, Taylor still doesn't know who she's talking to over the radio. They're still using call signs.

Chris Yates:

So I wanted her not to feel alone and I also didn't want to overload her with information, so it just felt natural to me to say, "What's your name??"

Taylor Hash:

My name's Taylor.

Chris Yates:

So she said, "My name is Taylor." And then I choked up and welled up and I didn't come back on the tower audio for, I don't know, 10 or 15 seconds.

Taylor Hash:

And I'm thinking, "Oh, is my radio out? Is something wrong? Did he not hear me?" And I'm thinking all these things.

Chris Yates:

My oldest daughter's name is Taylor, and I taught her to fly when she was about 14, 15 years old. And she said her name was Taylor. I couldn't even speak. I had a frog in my throat. I had a frog in my stomach. I had a frog in my chest. And finally I came back and I said, "Taylor, my daughter's name is Taylor and I taught her to fly, and I want you to know you're going to be just fine."

Taylor Hash:

He starts calling me kiddo and he said, "Hey kid, it's going to be okay."

Chris Yates:

I call my kids kiddo. I call everybody probably under 30 kiddo, and it just was a natural way for me to relate to her and talk like a human instead of a robotic aircraft to aircraft situation.

Torah Kachur:

Chris knows his first step is assuring Taylor that she can do this.

Chris Yates:

She was choked up, you could hear, but after that, her confidence grew. I could hear it in her voice, and then when I started asking about her airplane, asking her technical questions, she started firing the right answers back.

Taylor Hash:

I was just thinking, "Wow, thank God he is here right now." I was just thankful that there was someone with experience and knowledge and his calming demeanor, that was probably the most important thing in this whole story was just how calming he was.

Torah Kachur:

The tower directs all air traffic away from the airport.

Tower:

Airport is closed. Advisory open. Thank you. We'll keep her alone up there.

Torah Kachur:

Chris and Taylor keep talking.

Chris Yates:

You going to be a career pilot?

Taylor Hash:

I was planning on it.

Chris Yates:

It's a good start. This is a good story to your legacy, kid.

Taylor Hash:

I stopped being so shaky and you can tell I just breathe and accept what's happening and just kind of keep telling myself, "It's going to be okay. I'm good. It's all good."

Torah Kachur:

From inside the cockpit of his plane, Chris can see the fire trucks and emergency response teams gather on the runway.

Chris Yates:

Taylor, what are your reference to airport?

Taylor Hash:

I'm about 6 miles.

Torah Kachur:

Everything that can be done for Taylor is being done.

Chris Yates:

OK. How you doing?

Torah Kachur:

But he doesn't think she's ready just yet.

Chris Yates:

I suggested let's not do a landing. Why don't you just bring the airplane in and simulate a landing, see where the wind's coming from and feel what it's going to take to control that with the airplane without the nose wheel steering.

Taylor Hash:

I say, "Hey, do I just treat this like a normal soft field landing?" And he goes, "Yeah, I was just going to tell you that." He's like, "You called it." And funny enough, earlier that week I did a flight with my instructor and we practiced soft field landings not two days before this happened.

Chris Yates:

And I said, "Now you know why." We practice them for a reason and usually we practice them to keep the nose out of the mud, but she was going to hold the nose off to save her bacon.

Torah Kachur:

A soft field landing involves touching down on the rear wheels and keeping the nose of the plane tipped up.

Taylor Hash:

So you land your two back wheels first and just keep it raised, keep it raised, keep it raised, keep it raised until you're going too slow and it just gently sets itself down.

Torah Kachur:

This way the plane doesn't tip over when it lands. It's not nearly as easy as it sounds, and it doesn't sound that easy. So Taylor turns around and flies back towards the airport, running through the steps of this complicated procedure.

Chris Yates:

Nice and stable. Let's just do that again the second time around.

Taylor Hash:

I climb and I'm talking to Chris and he said, "Okay, let's come in, but let's not land yet. Let's just get real low, real close to the runway and then take back off."

Chris Yates:

And I just watched her follow through with what we had discussed. And it was textbook, it was perfect. It was exactly like we talked about. She did a marvelous job.

Taylor Hash:

It felt really good and it really upped my confidence in being able to do it and I'm really glad he did have me do it.

Chris Yates:

How's that feel to you?

Taylor Hash:

Feels good. I feel comfortable.

Chris Yates:

You sound good.

Taylor Hash:

I'm going to go around.

Torah Kachur:

Almost a half an hour has passed since Taylor's front wheel fell off during takeoff. Now it's time for the real thing.

Taylor Hash:

I was scared, but I wasn't thinking about being scared and he's just talking to me the whole time. "Speed looks good. All right, let's bring it down a little bit." He was just kind of telling me everything that was going to come next, so I wasn't, I guess, surprised by it.

Torah Kachur:

Chris thinks about what would help his own daughter the most, what he would've wanted as a beginner pilot.

Chris Yates:

I would want in my earphones, "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay." The whole way down, it was just encouragement. "You're doing good, you look perfect."

Taylor Hash:

He told me, "You're going to hear some stuff that's not normal. You're going to feel some stuff that's not normal." Because I did still have a big long bar coming out of the nose of the plane that the wheel was attached to, so when that hit, it wasn't going to feel or sound normal.

Torah Kachur:

Finally, the make or break moment arrives.

Taylor Hash:

My back two wheels hit the ground and he said, "Okay, you look good. You look good. Keep that nose up. Keep that nose up."

Chris Yates:

I watched that through almost in slow motion as the nose came down and I said, "The nose is going to come down. The nose is ... There she comes. You're okay, you're okay. You're okay."

Taylor Hash:

It finally sets down and that bar hit the ground pretty roughly, skidded for maybe two seconds and then finally snapped. The plane kind of rocks back and forth, and then the nose hits the ground.

Torah Kachur:

Incredibly, Taylor has executed a textbook soft field landing.

Chris Yates:

Talk to me kid.

Taylor Hash:

I'm all good.

Chris Yates:

Thatta girl, proud of you.

Taylor Hash:

And I just sit there for a second and then just start crying, just kind of freak out, let it all loose.

Chris Yates:

And then I lost it. She's fine. The airplane stopped. The fire rescue team got ahold of her and I knew she was safe and walked away.

Torah Kachur:

All of a sudden, things are happening fast. Now that Taylor is out of the plane, she and Chris can't talk anymore. Plus, Chris has his own flight to get in the air now that the emergency is over and the tarmac is opening up again.

Chris Yates:

We departed with our passengers, business as usual. And we got halfway down the runway and I looked to the left and her and the two fire rescue guys, their entire bodies were waving at us, just both hands.

Taylor Hash:

And his plane takes off and leaves and I remember thinking, "Oh wow. I didn't even tell him thank you before I shut the engine off." I just instantly did it. So I was like, "God, I got to find that guy."

Torah Kachur:

Taylor does end up finding Chris, of course. They exchange messages and the two Taylors, Taylor Yates, Chris's daughter, and Taylor Hash become friends. But Chris isn't done helping.

Chris Yates:

She did everything right. She did everything right, which is why I'm so happy to stand behind her and help her move forward in her career.

Torah Kachur:

Chris knows how difficult and costly it can be to get a pilot's license and break into the industry. He set up a GoFundMe to raise money and to help Taylor and other young people who need support.

Chris Yates:

I always knew I wanted to start some kind of a scholarship or foundation for underprivileged kids to get into the cockpits. We're going through a pilot shortage, and I just wanted a way to give back.

Taylor Hash:

I'm honestly speechless about it all and he's so tired of hearing me say thank you. Honestly, there's no other words, I guess, to say how grateful I am for him, for what he did, and I still can't believe this is all happening.

Torah Kachur:

As a passenger on a plane, the chances of experiencing an event like this are extremely slim. You are much more likely to come across someone who has a fear of flying. Maybe that's you. If you or someone you're traveling with has flight anxiety, you might prepare for a trip by getting some help from an expert. Amy Morin is a psychotherapist, bestselling author and public speaker who's helped many clients work through their fear of flying. I asked her to tell me about a nerve-wracking experience she'd encountered on a plane because we've all had those moments.

Amy Morin:

Recently I was on a flight where the flight attendant was serving drinks and all of a sudden the plane really started rumbling and we were bouncing all around. The flight attendant did this move where they grabbed the overhead bin and swung around and they put their seatbelt on really quickly and it just all happened so fast, and it was a few moments of like, "Oh my goodness." Because normally they give you the warning and then you experience it slowly, but this turbulence was really sudden and pretty intense.

Torah Kachur:

How did you react to that?

Amy Morin:

I just looked around to see how everybody else was reacting, and I saw the flight attendant handled it swiftly, but yet within seconds he had pulled out his phone. So I had a moment where I thought either he's so used to this happening that he can check his email without missing a beat or he is texting his mother to say goodbye. But he looked incredibly calm and so that helped me stay calm and I thought, "All right, if the flight attendant doesn't seem to be worried, then perhaps I don't need to be worried either."

Torah Kachur:

What is it about flying that makes us so fearful?

Amy Morin:

Well, I guess we never really hear about flights that are successful. If it's going to make the news, it's going to be a plane that either got diverted because of an emergency of some sort, or there may have been an unruly passenger, or at worst it's a plane crash. And when we see those things, we remember it. That's what sticks in our brain and we forget that there are thousands of flights every single day that are successful because nobody talks about that. And so we start to think that that happens more often than it does.

For some people, it's not the flight itself that's scary. It's more like, "What if I get claustrophobic and the door is closed and I can't get up and go for a walk, especially if the seatbelt light is on so I can't stretch my legs. I can't get fresh air, I can't go outside." So for a lot of people, all of their regular coping skills are taken away.

Torah Kachur:

Feels a lot like it's mostly a loss of control.

Amy Morin:

That's it, exactly. When you're on a plane, you really have very little control over what happens next. So it's really important to figure out what's going to work for you if you're going to have anxiety on this flight. Having a plan is crucial, and we often talk about it, an if/then plan. "If I get nervous, then I will...", and you fill in the blank. And for some people it's about walking through the worst case scenario. "So all right, if I get on the plane and I end up starting to panic, but the flight hasn't taken off yet, what would I do?" Maybe you raise attention to the flight attendant, maybe you bring out a magazine and you start reading.

But as long as people know I have a plan in place and then they can keep the reward at the forefront of their mind, "Why am I doing this trip? It's because I really wanted to go on this vacation. It's important to my family. I really wanted to see this person." Whatever it is, just keeping a list of all of those reasons sometimes can help people say, "All right, this is scary, but it's worth it."

And for people to know too though, that sometimes even though you might have a plan laid out, the plan needs to be flexible. Knowing where your gate's going to be, it might change. You might end up thinking like you're going to be in a place where there's lots of seating available. There might not be. So to have a plan, but to also make sure that that plan is flexible, make sure that you have several different ideas so that if option number one isn't available, there's always another option.

Torah Kachur:

What should you do if you panic during a flight?

Amy Morin:

So some people when they panic, they might say, "My heart starts to race and I get sweaty and I feel like I can't breathe." Then we'll say, "What will you do when you feel that way?" And sometimes we even mimic those symptoms in the therapy office. Somebody might breathe through a straw and practice doing that. They might spin in a chair if they say they start to feel dizzy. And then we talk about, "All right, how do you manage those symptoms?" Although it's uncomfortable, panic symptoms themselves aren't dangerous, it just feels weird and causes us to think that something's about to happen. So then we really run through, "Well, how many times have you felt that way and nothing terrible happened?" And so for people to realize, "All right, how safe am I when I get on a plane?" Statistically, you're pretty safe.

So when they're prepared and they know, "All right, just because I feel panicky on a plane doesn't mean I have to get off, doesn't mean I have to do anything about it other than perhaps some deep breathing exercises to calm both my brain and my body." Then those panicky symptoms don't feel quite so scary anymore.

Torah Kachur:

What can other passengers do to help people who might even be strangers struggle with that flight-induced anxiety?

Amy Morin:

Sometimes it's a matter of striking up a conversation, and you might find that if the person next to you seems to be really nervous about the flight, you might just start talking to them to get their mind off of it so that they can get out of their head a little bit and have a pleasant conversation. You might also ask, "Is there anything I can do?" You might ask if they need some water, let them know that you fly a lot, that you feel really good about this flight. Even if those words come from a stranger, sometimes that can be quite soothing.

Torah Kachur:

Now, we've talked a lot about how people might fear flying. I, in fact, love it. Is there a flight that you took that you loved?

Amy Morin:

For my birthday one year, my husband let me take a flight lesson. He got it for me as a surprise. I was in Duluth, Minnesota. I had an incredible view of Lake Superior. The pilot let me fly for a couple of minutes. It was just an amazing experience to be able to see the plane from a different place other than just the passenger seat in the back.

Torah Kachur:

And your front wheel didn't fall off.

Amy Morin:

It did not fall off, thankfully.

Torah Kachur:

Amy, thank you so much for your advice today.

Amy Morin:

Thank you so much for having me.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people.

And if you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for a link at onstar.com. Or if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q&A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small. And while you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us on your podcast platform or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur, and please be safe out there.

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