

Chapter 1

If there'd been any other way, Leah would have taken it, welcomed it with open arms. But there wasn't. She rolled her tongue around her mouth, trying to make enough moisture to swallow, and scrubbed sweaty palms across denim-clad thighs.

Another patch of rough air and the tiny twin-engine plane dropped like a stone. Leah's stomach lurched into her throat; hands flew to the armrests, knuckles blanching. Cold sweat prickled between her shoulder blades. Being buffeted about in a small aluminium capsule thousands of metres above sea level had just rocketed to the top of her list of least favourite pastimes.

She risked a look sideways. The man crammed into the seat across the narrow aisle hadn't even looked up from the *Guns & Ammo* magazine spread across his lap. Her gaze darted around the small cabin and the remaining four occupants appeared just as unperturbed. And the pilot was laughing and chatting to the passenger in the seat beside him.

The moisture she'd been searching for moments before flooded her mouth when the Piper Chieftain shook and shuddered like a boat tossed about on a wild sea. More of this and her hastily eaten breakfast would reappear. Were the experts lying when they said air turbulence wasn't that dangerous?

She plunged her hand into the seat pocket but came up empty. Great. No airsickness bag. She did a rapid inventory of the contents of her hand luggage. The only bag she had *was* the canvas carryall.

Her eyes watered. She licked her lips and swallowed hard, held onto the armrests until her fingers ached, silently drafting her eulogy. Always did her best . . . Not afraid to stand up for what she believed in . . . Scared witless by turbulence when flying in small aircraft.

The pilot's voice sputtered through the tinny intercom. 'Apologies for the bumpy ride, folks. It shouldn't be much longer. Keep yourselves belted in and I'll see what I can do.'

The small plane bounced and chopped some more. Leah squeezed her eyes shut, mentally rehearsed the brace position and hung on. After what felt like an eternity, the twin engines changed pitch and the flight smoothed. With considerable effort she relaxed the death grip she had on the armrests, flexing her fingers.

She would have to get used to this. Flying in a small aircraft was the way she'd get to and from work for the next months. Being sick in her own lap or, worse, onto the bloke sitting next to her wouldn't be a stellar start to what was already a tenuous position.

Leah made herself look out the tiny Plexiglass window. She tried to concentrate on the dry watercourses snaking their way through the desert below instead of rehashing, for the umpteenth time, her final interview with Cameron Crawley, the Head of Safety, Security and Environment.

She scanned the blindingly bright salt pans, the intermittent drifts of red sand. But there it was again, that interview . . . The man in his slick-looking suit with his thinly veiled misogyny; an attitude at odds with his age and his position in the company. Cameron Crawley had looked younger than Leah's thirty-eight years, and although she'd bumped up against similar prejudice before, it had usually been from the more senior, blue-collar male workers.

The horizon flatlined into infinity. She pushed against the ache that tightened her throat. In the interview he'd made his position abundantly clear, more by what he hadn't said than what he had. He would have preferred the job went to someone, anyone, with more testosterone. He'd kept reiterating how rough and tough the construction fly camps were for men, the subtext being how did *she* think she'd survive out there? Few women did, and only by being as rough and tough as their male counterparts.