



PROLOGUE

RAIN PELTED THE SIDES OF THE AIRPLANE HANGAR AS ETHAN Carlisle loaded the last box of food into the tail of the sturdy Helio Courier. This bird had been hopping between the seven thousand Philippine Islands for more than thirty years, and it showed. Ethan had passed the rigorous training necessary to fly in the mountains of north central Luzon, but he'd never get a chance to take her up if the weather didn't relent.

He slammed the cockpit door shut and walked across the hangar to look outside. The palm trees lining the airfield sagged from the down-pour. The sky glowed an eerie green.

He knew God wanted him in the Philippines, but if God didn't taper this storm, the two weeks he'd set aside to fly supplies to the region's remote villages would be a waste.

John, the supervisor for the mission operation out of Bagabag, walked up behind him and handed him a Styrofoam cup.

"How do you usually celebrate the New Year?" John asked as he looked out the hangar's door.

"With chips and salsa and a marathon of board games with a couple friends."

John nodded toward the airfield. "We may be having our own New Year's Eve party in the hangar tonight."

"I won't last until midnight."

"Go get some rest." John pointed to a small lobby at the side of the hangar. "Everyone's grounded until this afternoon, maybe tomorrow."

Ethan took a sip of the muddy coffee. "How long do you think it will last?"

"One of the missionaries called in this morning from a village north of here and said they had clear skies, but the radio's been down for an

hour.”

A gust of wind shook the hangar, bending the palms like they were rubber.

“Isn’t this supposed to be the dry season?”

“We get storms all year.” John saluted the weather with his cup. “We’ll pray that it clears up in the next few hours.”

Ethan squinted into the hazy sky and saw something dark move in the distance. “Is that a plane?”

John took a step forward as the black spot evolved into a Cessna 182. He groaned. “She knows better!”

Ethan watched the single-engine plane turn and dip toward the runway. “She?”

“The woman never listens ...” John mumbled as he raced outside.

Ethan stepped out under the awning as he watched the Cessna battle the wind. The plane teetered and shook as it descended and then bumped twice before it landed on the runway and taxied toward the hangar. He followed John toward the plane.

The second the propeller blades wound down, the pilot jumped out. She wore a tan T-shirt under denim overalls, and her honey brown hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. The rain streaked dirt down her forehead and arms.

She pointed back into the front seat. “We’ve got to get her to the hospital.”

John ran up to her, his hair and jacket soaked. “I told you to stay in Reauca until this storm blew over.”

Ethan heard a woman scream inside the Cessna, and then he heard a furious chorus of clucking.

“Dr. Andrews said this woman and her baby will die if she doesn’t have an emergency C-section.”

The woman screamed again, and Ethan peered into the open door. A pregnant woman was clutching her abdomen, contorting in pain. And the tail of the plane was filled with crates of angry chickens.

The pilot glanced into the hangar and then turned toward John. “Did I mention she’s going to *die*?”

“Call an ambulance,” John yelled to one of the maintenance workers.

The pilot jumped back inside the Cessna and helped the groaning woman climb out. A mechanic rushed a wheelchair into the storm, and the four of them lifted her into it. The mechanic battled the wind as he pushed her into the hangar and covered her shoulders with a blanket. Ethan turned back to John.

“I need fuel,” the pilot said.

John stepped between her and the plane. “Oh no, you don’t.”

“And a box of antivenom serum.”

“What happened?”

“A cobra bit an eight-year-old boy this morning.”

“And yet you brought a plane full of chickens instead.”

“He was too sick to fly.”

“I’ll try to radio Dr. Andrews and tell him you’ll return when the weather clears.”

She planted both hands on her hips. “The boy won’t make it.”

“I’m worried about you making it.”

“He’s eight, John!”

John looked as if he was about to strangle her.

“Leia ...”

“It’s only a twenty-minute flight.”

He lowered his voice as he stepped toward her. “These are high stakes you’re playing.”

“It’s worth the risk.”

John turned and rushed toward the hangar. “Get me the fuel truck!”

Leia pulled a crate of chickens out of the tail, the birds squawking as rain drenched their feathers. She climbed back into the plane, and when she emerged with another crate, she glanced down at the first crate still on the ground and then back at Ethan. “We need to get them inside before they drown.”

“Got it.” He wrapped his fingers around the thin slats of wood, but when he picked up the crate, a chicken pecked him, and the box crashed on the asphalt.

He looked up at Leia, and she rolled her eyes. “You have to pick it up from bottom.”

“Right.”

He carried the four crates inside the hangar and lined the angry chickens up against the wall.

A pickup truck with an aluminum tank pulled up beside the plane, and Leia pulled out the nozzle to start fueling. John walked out into the rain with a plastic bag, opened the door of the plane, and set it inside.

He nodded toward her. "It's the serum."

She planted the nozzle back into the flatbed and rushed into the hangar, two steps in front of John. Ethan looked out at the driving sheet of rain and then at the pilot.

"I'll go with her," he volunteered to John.

She glared at him as she signed the paperwork to release the serum. "Who's this?"

"It's his first day." John flung his hands between them. "Leia, meet Ethan Carlisle. Ethan, this is our rogue pilot, Leia Vaughn."

Ethan stepped forward and held out his hand. She shook it warily, and then he followed her out to the plane. When she climbed into the pilot's seat, he opened the door to the other side. He was used to the routine—he'd been nursing second seat since he was twenty-four.

"I'll fly with you—"

"No way."

He hopped into the plane. "In case you need help ..."

"I won't need any help," Leia insisted.

"... with the kid."

Apparently she didn't want to waste time arguing. She turned the plane as he buckled his seat belt.

Then she took off into the storm, the Cessna shaking and howling against the wind as they flew out of Bagabag. Ethan clenched the door handle like it was a parachute cord as they disappeared into the clouds.

"You know where all the mountaintops are, right?" he asked.

"I've got a pretty good idea."

He turned his head to stare at her. "Do you have a death wish?"

"We'll be fine if we die, but I'm not sure about the boy."

"Admirable."

"It's why we do this, isn't it?" The plane broke through a cloud and into the clear blue. "John's just blowing smoke. He's flown through

worse a hundred times when someone called for help.”

“Do you always fly with poultry?” he asked.

“They’re payment for the woman’s surgery.”

His fingers wound tighter around the handle as the plane bounced in the turbulence. “I hope the surgeon likes eggs.”

“He’ll trade them for something else.”

“Do you think the woman will be okay?”

Leia banked left, flying toward a ridge of imposing mountains. “She should make it to the hospital in time, but there’s no guarantee.”

Sprawled below them were miles of rigorous jungle, and a river snaked through the dense mangrove forest. They flew by a waterfall cascading into a clear pool. Nearby, lime-colored rice terraces stair-stepped up a mountainside.

She pointed toward the water. “It’s the Chico River.”

“Gorgeous.” He released his hold on the handle. “How long have you been flying over here?”

“I’ve volunteered between Christmas and New Year’s for the past five years.” Her blue eyes glazed for an instant. “How long are you going to be here?”

“Two weeks. I just got hired by Ambassador Air, so I’m starting my new job at the end of the month.”

“Good company.” Leia turned the plane north. “You’re ... what? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine?”

“Just turned thirty.”

“Someday I’m going to fly with the majors.”

He believed her. “Where do you work now?”

“At Corporate Direct. I fly charters.”

“Out of Denver?”

She glanced over at him. “That’s right.”

“I just moved to Denver.”

They were flying directly toward a mountain.

“Don’t you think you better ...” he started, pointing toward the crags.

She buzzed the rocky top, missing the summit by fifty feet. “You like mountains?”

He wiped the sweat off his face. “I prefer to ski on them.”

“Then you’ll love Colorado.”

She pointed toward a mountain in front of them. “That’s where we’re going.”

He leaned forward in his seat but didn’t see an airfield. “Where?”
“You’ll see.”

He squinted until he saw what looked like a thin piece of sandpaper that had been carved out of the mountainside. Their landing strip. If she didn’t hit the crude runway just right, they’d plunge down into the valley. It would probably be days before someone found them.

He started to say something about the shoddy-looking strip, but her eyes had creased into slits, her gaze boring through the window. She dropped the flaps as they descended; the plane smacked the runway. They bumped over the field of rocks—wheels rattling as if they were skating across marbles—before they screeched to a halt. Ethan opened his eyes and saw the edge of the runway fifteen feet in front of them.

He whistled.

“It’s a breeze.” She flashed him a confident smile, but he saw her hands shake. She was blowing a little smoke herself.

She killed the engine as a crowd of natives ran toward the plane. “Let’s get this medicine to the doctor.”

Ethan released his grip on the door and jumped out. A man with a safari hat covering most of his blond hair ran up to Leia. Dr. Andrews.

“I knew you’d come back.” When the doctor hugged her, it didn’t look as if he was going to let go.

Ethan stepped up beside them and cleared his throat. “Excuse me.”

Dr. Andrews released his hold as Leia turned toward him.

Ethan waved his thumb toward the plane. “Isn’t this an emergency?”

Four villagers brought the boy up the hill on a stretcher as Leia retrieved the box of antivenom from the plane. Ethan lifted the child and cradled him in his arms like a baby. As the doctor administered the serum, Ethan prayed softly that God would spare the boy’s life.



Five years later

IT'S ONLY A GAME," LEIA MUTTERED AS SHE SHOVED ANOTHER quarter into the Golden Wonder and pulled the metal arm. Red and yellow fruit whirled across three paylines, but she didn't blink. The display slowed to a tick. Her body tensed.

This roll was a winner. She could feel it. Time to recover some of the money she'd lost this afternoon.

The spinning stopped, and a white light flashed across the screen—two grape clusters, scattered lemons, a couple of cherries, and the token gold bar. No good. Why couldn't she beat this thing? One decent win was all she wanted instead of the measly ten quarters the machine spit out when it froze on a row of silver bells.

She dropped three more quarters into the slot machine and gritted her teeth as she spun again.

This was ridiculous. There was no reason for her to get worked up. Nobody was going to die if she didn't win. Nothing was going to burn down. Besides, if she didn't increase her bet, the maximum payout was only fifty bucks. The Vicodin she took this morning must be messing with her mind.

Another spin. Another loss.

She groaned. Winning was a matter of principle now. All she needed was one row of diamonds to recoup the cash she'd lost in the last hour. If she bet a few more quarters, a row of gold would pay for her entire ski weekend.

She wouldn't budge until the Golden Wonder gave her at least a portion of the money she'd crammed into it. All she wanted was a few dollars to make up for her time and the torture of sitting inside a musty casino on a sunny Colorado day.

She wasn't supposed to be here. She and Julie Kirk were supposed to be skiing down Copper Mountain's intense moguls. They'd planned this long weekend getaway last summer, a girls-only excursion to celebrate New Year's Eve.

The first day of their trip was amazing: powder-packed runs, temperatures hovering around fifty. The only wind a light breeze from the east. When Julie begged her to stop for a late lunch, they both gobbled cheeseburgers before racing right back out. They took the last lift up the mountaintop and skied around the groomers who emerged in full force at the end of the day.

Thursday had been perfect.

Yesterday was torture.

The morning started out fine. She and Julie left the lodge early, arriving at the lift twenty minutes before it opened. They were second in line. Overnight snow flurries had left behind a brilliant white powder, and the sky was a crisp blue. They rode to the top of a black-diamond run, and Leia ripped down the bumps with Julie close behind her.

Then it happened. A purple streak startled her two seconds before the snowboarder cut her off. With no time to stop, she catapulted down the hill, skis flying in opposite directions. She landed a foot from a pine tree. With her legs knotted under her like a pretzel, she spat out a mouthful of snow and lifted her head. The snowboarder had disappeared, but her right knee seared with fire.

When she tried to sit up, she screamed with pain. Julie yelled to a ski instructor for help.

The afternoon was a blur—the humiliating stretcher ride down the

mountain, waiting in the long emergency room line while she groaned with pain, and finally the diagnosis from a doctor who didn't look old enough to have a diploma. He explained that she'd fractured her tibial plateau—the top of the shinbone that joins the knee. He said the Vicodin would numb her pain until she scheduled an MRI and a visit with an orthopedist, but no driving for three months. No flying for at least five months. Happy New Year.

She stuck a fistful of quarters into the slot machine and brushed her hand over the leg that she'd propped up on a stool.

If only she could stop thinking about her injury. She closed her eyes as the machine spun, but it was impossible to focus when she lost again.

The career implications of her accident were overwhelming. She was in the midst of interviewing with Ambassador Air to fly 737s. Her dream job. She'd raced through the company's initial interview and the physical and psychological exams in December. Her simulator test was scheduled for next week. With Corporate Direct teetering on bankruptcy, she'd probably be unemployed by the end of the year if she didn't find something soon.

Pilots with decades more experience than she had were vying for jobs with major carriers like Ambassador Air. What would the company do when she told them she'd fractured her knee? Hiring another pilot would be a cinch.

She looked down at the immobilizer wrapped around her leg. She'd asked Doogie Howser what she was supposed to do with a knee injury, but the kid had only threatened her, telling her to take it easy or she'd ruin her knee. A moratorium on flying if she screwed it up.

She was supposed to be outside, enjoying the mountains and the fresh air, yet here she was on New Year's Eve, sitting in a Black Hawk casino by herself.

She looked up the aisle, a parade of whirling colored lights. *Where did Julie go?*

The crowded casino was decorated like an old saloon with painted mirrors, tinted windows, and a Western bar at the side of the room. A lemon Pledge scent clung to the furniture, barely masking the stench of body odor and fried food.

She looked above her at the loft restaurant. People clustered around the rail to watch the action below. Instead of the crystal she'd seen in Vegas, an antler chandelier hung over the casino floor, and the columns around the room were stacked with marbled river rock. If they took out the game tables and slot machines, this place could pass for an upscale fishing lodge.

She clasped three more quarters in her hands and kissed her knuckles. This was the play she needed. She could feel it.

She spun again. This time she won a dollar. Big money.

A loud whistle blared from the next aisle, followed by a scream. Someone was taking home a jackpot.

"Are you on a streak?" Julie asked as she sat down beside her and handed her a tall glass of tea and an ice pack.

Leia put the ice on her swollen knee and sipped the cold tea. "A losing one."

Julie flicked her arm with a French-manicured nail. "Aren't you grumpy today?"

"I've fed ninety bucks to this machine."

Julie lifted her drink, an orange concoction topped off with a cowboy hat. "Then you're overdue for some good luck."

Julie's black hair was pinned back in a French twist, and she wore a snug lavender turtleneck above a black fluted skirt and stilettos. With her flawless ivory skin and Barbie-like figure, Julie turned heads on both the ski slopes and the casino floor. She worked as a flight attendant for Corporate Direct, and several executives specifically requested that she be on board whenever they flew.

They never requested Leia as a pilot, but with her plain brown hair and stock uniform attire, she understood why. She didn't care if the passengers found her attractive as long as they respected her work, but they should request her. She was meticulous about punctuality, dedicated to arriving at their destination on time.

"Ethan's going to wonder where all my money went." She pointed down to her knee. "That little emergency room trip cost more than our entire vacation."

"Your insurance will cover it."

Leia sighed. "You don't want to know how big our deductible is."

"With that payment, Ethan won't even notice the money you spent today," Julie said.

"He counts every penny I spend—twice."

"Then just tell that cute husband of yours we went gambling."

"Why don't I just tell him we robbed a bank?"

"We couldn't just sit in the hotel room all day and do nothing."

"Yes, we could."

"And be bored out of our minds."

Leia rubbed her leg. When God created her husband, he gave him a heart the size of Colorado and a conscience that weighed more than a 777. She loved the strength in his grace as he softened out her many rough edges. She envied his steady moral compass and intense convictions. But his pursuit of righteousness drove him to avoid any activity that teetered on the fence between absolute right and wrong. In his orderly world of black and white, gambling was akin to drunkenness and lust.

She'd never viewed gambling as a sin. When she was younger, she even considered a few hours in a casino to be harmless fun. Ethan didn't know, but before they got married, she gambled when she had layovers in Atlantic City. She hadn't been inside a casino in four years, but the last time she visited Atlantic City, she'd left Caesars with two hundred extra dollars stuffed in her purse.

She couldn't tell Ethan about these excursions. Tiptoeing around issues like that was the secret to keeping their marriage intact.

Julie unclipped her twist, black hair pouring over her shoulders. "Just tell him we spent the day chilling in a spa."

"I can't believe I let you talk me into coming here."

"But you're having fun, aren't you?" Julie smiled as she deposited money into the machine beside Leia and spun. The game dinged as a trio of grapes clung to the second payline, and her friend let out a shriek. When she hit a button, quarters emptied out of the machine.

It figured Julie would win on her first try. She was the queen of good luck.

Leia pulled the knob again. She wasn't about to let a stupid game

beat her. After all, she'd spent the last seven years of her life at the controls of much bigger machinery, commanding G3s with her fingertips. No slot machine was going to get the best of her.

The Golden Wonder gobbled her last three quarters.

She turned to Julie. "Could you hang on to my machine while I get more cash?"

"No problem. Do you want me to get the money for you?"

Leia shook her head. "I can do it."

Curling her fingers over the white plastic rim, she grasped the bucket by her side before securing both crutches and hobbling toward the ATM at the center of the room.

Maroon-colored bar stools lined both sides of the aisle, someone sitting in almost every one. But instead of chatting with each other, the players were communing solely with the machines in front of them. She hadn't thought about it before, but gambling was a lonely sport, pushing buttons and pulling knobs over and over to jockey for the big win. A cheap thrill.

Didn't they know what real excitement was? Try jumping out of a plane at ten thousand feet or scuba diving with stingrays off Grand Cayman or landing on a sliver of grass—otherwise known as an airstrip—in the remote regions of the Philippines.

She entered her PIN into the ATM. This was the last try for her, and then she was out of here. There were a hundred other things she'd rather be doing if she could ditch her knee injury along with the crutches.

Forty dollars in quarters spilled out of the ATM, and Leia bent over to shovel the change into her bucket. So far this was the only way she could get cash in this casino. She should just stay here and withdraw from her bank account every ten minutes so she could hear the clang of falling change. At least she'd leave the place with some money.

As she balanced her crutches under her arms, a wave of panic hit her. What if the casino name showed up on their statement? Ethan would have an aneurysm.

Surely the withdrawal would just be recorded as a cash transaction. If not, she'd have to come up with a good excuse. Not a lie, of course.

She'd use part of the money for food, so she could tell him she treated Julie to a nice lunch.

Leia turned slowly to limp back to her machine. Yesterday she'd barreled down a black-diamond run; today she could barely cross a room. What was she going to do cooped up at home for three months? It would drive her crazy.

She heard a deep laugh, and it surprised her—a lot of people cheered in this casino, but it was the first laugh she'd heard all day. She spun her head toward a card table and gasped.

All she saw was his back—thick shoulders, buzzed hair, and the familiar brown jacket draped over the back of his stool. She squinted as he leaned toward a woman next to him. There was no question. Derek Barton was sitting at the poker table, his dark hair punctuating the backdrop of platinum blonde.

She snuck backward. She couldn't let him see her. If she went down another aisle, she could sneak back to Julie and say her knee was killing her. They had to get out of here before Derek decided to work the crowd.

He laughed again. Cocky was the best way to describe Derek Barton. A *Top Gun*-type aviator and her husband's childhood friend, Derek was last person she wanted to see today. She hated when he and his attitude came to visit them. He thought the world owed him because he grew up as a military brat and now flew F-16s for the air force. Ethan overlooked Derek's audacity because her husband suffered from a condition known as loyalty. Blind loyalty. Ethan could see a million faults in the world around them, but when it came to his friends and his sister and even his wife, he didn't need blinders. His eyes were already shut.

If he ever opened his eyes, he'd be stunned to find her personal rap sheet crammed full of flaws, but he never asked, and she never volunteered. Derek was never honest about his faults either, but if he saw her in this casino, Leia suspected that the man would relish in crushing Ethan's loyalty to his wife.

He'd probably be on the phone with Ethan before she said goodbye, explaining how she'd fed their hard-earned money to a slot machine.

She'd grab Julie and escape before he turned his head.

As she turned toward the aisle, someone bumped her arm, and her quarters clanged when the bucket hit a chair.

She felt the plastic slipping from her grasp, sliding toward the floor. She tried to hang on to it, throwing down her crutches and diving for the bucket on one leg before it hit the floor.

Too late. Silver clanged around her feet as the coins bounced off the tile like icy balls of hail.

She ducked and closed her eyes. Several people leaned down to help her, but she didn't move. Maybe Derek wouldn't notice her. Maybe he'd keep on laughing with his girlfriend or score a big hand. Anything to distract him from her plight.

Derek Barton couldn't find out that she was here.