

## CHAPTER ONE

### JENNA

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One Year Later

April 6

Anchorage, Alaska

5:02 p.m.

The plane dropped like a 3,000-pound stone.

Jenna Tikaani-Gray braced herself with one hand, and held a warm, foam cup away from her body with the other as they jostled along. These pockets of air were turning the flight into a wild ride at the fair. Good thing she loved the fair almost as much as she loved flying, because they were dropping again. Down, then up, then down again, until the sky turned to silk and the plane sailed along.

At least the turbulent takeoff hadn't spilled the coffee.

After a long, slow sip, Jenna released a sigh as their small de Havilland DHC-2 Beaver left the bowl of Anchorage, Alaska, and lifted high into the clear blue sky above. The mountains around Anchorage always produced a bumpy ride, but she'd managed to pass coffee to Hank and their other passenger without mishap.

Only one more leg of the journey and they'd be home.

A beautiful hand reached across the seat, welcoming her embrace, and she smiled at her twelve-year-old daughter, Andrea. Such a sweet kid. Jenna had been blessed from above with her only child. Andie had been through such trial and heartache, yet faced the world with pure joy.

Jenna squeezed her daughter's fingers as the radio buzzed and crackled.

"Juliet Kilo 3-2-6 November," Departure Control came through the channel loud and clear. "I'm getting no mode C on your transponder. Squawk 2-3-7-5 i-dent."

Hank, the pilot, replied, "Roger. 3-2-6 November, squawking 2-3-7-5 i-dent . . ."

"Negative radar contact. Maintain VFR. Do you have another transponder?"

"Roger. I'll switch to backup."

Jenna leaned over the side of her seat, watching Hank flip the switch from transponder A to B. She waited for word from Departure Control.

"Still negative radar contact. Can you maintain VFR?"

"Roger that, Control. No problem."

Hmmm. Very strange. How could both transponders be malfunctioning? She furrowed her brow. When they returned to North Pole, she'd have to get it checked out. Good thing Hank was an experienced pilot. Since Marc's death, Jenna hired him to pilot their plane, and knew he could handle whatever might happen.

Andie pulled on her arm, bringing Jenna's attention from the cockpit back to her daughter.

"Mom?"

"Yeah, sweetie?"

"What does VFR mean?" Andie's fascination with flying rivaled her own.

Jenna let the tension ease from her own features as she leaned close to Andie, a little thrill rippling through her body. How she

loved talking about flying. “Visual Flight Rules. Hank filed an IFR flight plan—Instrument Flight Rules—but the transponders must be malfunctioning, so the tower is instructing him to fly VFR, meaning visually. If we didn’t have a clear day, that would make flying VFR trickier, sometimes impossible.”

“Is it safe to fly VFR?”

Andie must’ve noted her reaction earlier. Jenna had never been good at hiding things from her inquisitive child.

Jenna noticed the other passenger glance back at them from his seat next to the pilot, and she held back a frown. The rough flight could explain the man’s lack of a smile, but what caused the fierce look he shot them? Jenna cocked her head, questioning the man with her silent stare. A poke from Andie brought her back to the question.

“Yes, it’s safe.”

“Just checkin’.” Andie giggled, the dimples indenting her cheeks so like her father’s. As she squeezed Jenna’s hand she turned to look out the tiny window next to her seat.

The man watched Jenna as she faced forward once again. Something in his intense gaze pulled at her, but she couldn’t discern what. She’d been so excited about going home that she hadn’t paid much attention when they were introduced. His name was . . . Cole? *Ugh. Good job remembering the details, Jenna.* Marc had taught her better than that.

Well, whether she could remember his name or not, something about this guy bothered her. Then again, the power of his gaze pulled her like a magnet. She forced herself to break the connection and focused on the scenery beneath them. Greens and blues melded with the white of melting snow. This was her favorite part of flying. Watching the beauty of God’s handiwork skim beneath her.

The two men up front spoke in hushed tones, bringing her attention back to their puzzling guest. Hank approached her before

the flight, asking if they could take another passenger, and she didn't mind. The added income would be nice. But who was this guy? And why, if he were just another tourist, was he so serious?

Jenna closed her eyes. Never mind about him. She had other, more amazing things to focus on. Namely, the news from Andie's neurosurgeon. The results were far beyond her expectations and, for the first time in many years, Jenna allowed herself to dream big for her precious child. Tragedy and hurt could now be replaced with hope. The future was, at long last, bright.

She reached for the dog tags around her neck. If only Marc could be there. He'd been distraught when, as a toddler, their daughter was first diagnosed. As if that first news weren't bad enough, the additional diagnosis two years ago just about broke the man. He'd never quite recovered, and his demeanor forever changed. The once crazy adventurer—a man full of life and laughter—closed himself behind a stone wall of protection.

She'd fought long and hard to penetrate his defenses, but taking care of Andie had become their focus, taken all their energy. When their daughter went in for brain surgery a year ago, the walls between them fell as they cried and held one another in the surgical waiting room. But Jenna never had the chance to discover what drove her husband to such emotional extremes. The accident took him before Andie was released from the hospital.

Opening her eyes, she blinked back the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. *Stop it! This is no time for tears. It's a happy day.*

They would move on from here.

She turned to gaze out the window. How long had she been lost in her memories? And, for that matter . . . she leaned closer to the glass, searched for familiar landmarks . . .

The scenery wasn't right.

Jenna frowned. Where *were* they?

She opened her mouth to ask Hank, but brisk movement in the cockpit drew her attention to the two men up front. All she saw was a sight that shoved her heart into her throat.

Hank and the man beside him were fighting! The man grabbed Hank's arm and—

A gun! Hank had a gun!

Before she could move, Hank jerked his arm free, took aim, and shot the radio. Jenna glanced at Andie, then ripped open her seatbelt. Andie's mouth hung open, her eyes wide. Jenna yanked the belt off her and shoved her over the seat toward the rear of the plane. She climbed after her frightened child, signaled her to crouch in the floor, then hunched over Andie, hugging her tight, whispering calming words to shield her from the horror of the scene unfolding in front of them.

The plane plunged and veered to the west.

Heart thundering, Jenna monitored the scuffle through a crack between the seats and prayed for wisdom and safety. What was happening?

Arms wrestled and tangled—the passenger pushed upward, almost hovering over Hank. What if he *killed* Hank?

The thought of losing their pilot had her straightening, ready to clamber over the seats. Someone had to fly the plane or none of them would survive. The plane teetered and shuddered. Jenna felt the panic rise in her throat. *God, no! You can't do this. You can't let Andie die! Not like this. Not when she's survived so much. She's all I've got left.*

The passenger rammed a fist into Hank's face. Though Hank fought back, he soon crumpled under the intense blows. But that wasn't what shocked Jenna. What sent a jolt of confused terror through her was the evil smirk on Hank's face as he croaked out five awful words: "You'll . . . never make . . . it . . . alive!"

What did he mean? Was that a threat to the man hovering over him? Or . . . to them all?

A sickening sound pulled her attention back to the men. Bone on bone. Apparently the passenger had delivered one last blow, rendering Hank unconscious. Determination stretched taut over the man's features as he shoved Hank to the floor behind him and climbed into the pilot's seat. He tossed a small cord to Jenna. "Tie his hands!"

He fought to level off the plane, then glanced back in her direction. His breaths were ragged and his eyes bore a glassy sheen. He looked different . . . unfocused. Dare she depend on him? Jenna wasn't sure about anything. It was all happening too fast.

Grabbing Andie, she hauled herself back over the seat and fumbled with the cording. It was a good thing Hank was unconscious, as her knots needed work. She darted a glance toward the cockpit, and decided to strap Hank back in. Their landing could be really rough if this guy didn't know what he was doing, and she wanted their former pilot to be in good enough condition to go to jail.

"Leave him!" Even though the man's upper lip was sweaty and his skin's hue resembled mashed peas, his glare could burn a hole through steel. "You two buckle up!" He turned back to the controls.

Jenna bowed her head. *God . . . help us . . .*

"This may be bumpy, I don't know . . . what they did to . . . your plane . . ." The man's words grew alarmingly slurred. "I'm not feeling . . . so . . . hhhoo . . ."

In a matter of seconds, he slid down his seat and slumped over the yoke, arms limp at his sides.

Time stood still. Jenna could hear her lungs taking in air, could see Andie's eyes widen, could feel the plane dive forward—but she couldn't move. *God, help me! Spare my daughter, please!*

Andie screamed.

In that split second, Jenna's survival instinct kicked in full force. Bolting up, she grabbed Andie. "It's going to be okay, baby."

She slid a hand down Andie's cheek, shooting a quick glance to the plane's air speed and altimeter. They'd dropped 3,000 feet since the last time she'd noticed. No time to panic. "I need you to help me move this guy, and then I want you to grab Hank's headset and buckle up in the copilot's seat. Can you do that?"

Without waiting for an answer, she squeezed Andie's shoulder and climbed over seats into the cockpit. Adrenaline pumped pure strength through Jenna's veins as she moved the bulk that was the man who had tried to save them.

Or kill them.

She shoved his solid, muscled frame over the seat, then into the seat behind hers. She motioned for Andie to help strap him as she tugged on the yoke to lift the nose. Hank was sprawled, his legs at an odd angle, but she had bigger concerns at the moment.

Like landing the plane.

As soon as the man was strapped in, Andie grabbed Hank's headset, dashed back to the front, and climbed into the seat next to Jenna.

Jenna took a deep breath and turned to the controls as Andie buckled in. Their brief nose dive had increased the air speed. She pulled back on the throttle, then looked through the windshield—and gasped.

Denali, "the high one," the tallest mountain in North America, loomed before her. They shouldn't be anywhere *near* the Alaska Range, and yet here they were—flying straight into the South Face.

"Your seatbelt, Mom!"

Jenna's hands gripped the yoke tighter. No time for a seatbelt. She needed control of this plane.

"Mom!"

"It's okay, honey. Calm down."

"But, Mom—" Andie gripped the headset—"can you save us?"

“I’m gonna try, sweetie.” For all the confidence she forced into those words, she knew all too well that two weeks of flight ground school and one lesson didn’t quite give her the know-how to get out of this alive. *Oh, God! Show me what to do!*

Pulling up on the yoke, she worked to level out the small aircraft. The Beaver’s response didn’t feel right. Her gut told her something was very wrong.

Calm. She needed to stay calm. For Andie.

A glance down at the gauges confirmed her suspicions. The fuel gauge was low. Too low. And still dropping. *Lord! What do we do?*

Stay calm. Stay. Calm. “Honey, I need you to set those four dials on the radio controls to 1-2-1-5. That’s the emergency frequency. 1-2-1-5. Okay?”

Andie nodded and obeyed. The kid had been through brain surgery and a lifetime dealing with a rare physical condition. She knew when to do what she was told without asking questions. Her hands shook as she sucked in a deep breath and started turning the knobs. “Okay, Mom.” Nervous blue eyes met hers as she handed over the headset. “It’s set.”

Slamming the headset onto her head, Jenna winced. *Careful. Breathe. Andie’s relying on you.* “Mayday! Mayday! Juliet Kilo 3-2-6 November needs emergency assistance. We have no pilot aboard capable of flying this plane. Mayday! Mayday!”

Crackling, hissing, static, and then silence.

“Mayday, mayday! Juliet Kilo 3-2-6 November requesting emergency assistance!”

Nothing.

“Mom, the radio’s dead. Hank shot it. Why would he do that, Mom?”

Andie’s sweet voice filled the cabin as reality set in. Tears quietly streamed down her daughter’s face.

“Baby, I don’t know, but I have to try to land this plane. Put your head between your knees right now and cover your head with your arms.”

Her brave little trooper obeyed, and Jenna prayed for guidance. Taking a firm grip on the yoke, she tried to turn the plane. The rudder gave a brief response and then locked. Something was wrong with the ailerons. What had she forgotten? Why wasn’t it responding?

*Okay, Jenna, think. Cut your descent. Flaps down. What else can I do? Oh, God, help me remember! Help me think.* The fuel gauge flashed at her now, only fumes were left. There was no avoiding it: they were going to crash. She needed to strap herself in. Fumbling with one hand made it all the more difficult. “Andie, help me with the buckle.”

Taking in the treacherous view in front of her, she made a decision for their lives. She had to steer away from Denali. Sultana stood to her left, towering in all her glory. If she could just get close to Kahiltna glacier, she might be able to land there. Tourist planes did it all the time. Right?

But they were too high. The controls were almost useless.

She’d have to find a different place to land and soon. With all her might she worked the yoke to turn west, away from the 20,320-foot Denali, but the mountain face of Sultana rushed toward her at a terrifying pace. The yoke locked and the plane jolted on a pocket of air, engines sputtering with the last drops of fuel.

Not much time left.

No radio.

No controls.

No fuel.

Nowhere to go.

Bracing her feet in the floor, she pulled on the yoke with all her weight—hoping she could lift the nose even an inch or two—but the plane no longer responded. At all.

As they raced toward the steep mountainside, Jenna did the only thing left to her: prayed for snow to be deep enough to cushion their landing.

With one last cry for help, Jenna let go of the useless yoke and flung her arms over her daughter's body, inhaling Andie's scent: Citrus shampoo and a sweetness all her daughter. But she couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene.

Metal crunched. Glass shattered and peppered her arms. The plane creaked and groaned as they slammed into Sultana's unyielding side. Metal screamed, and Jenna understood. The mountain had ripped the wings from the fuselage.

Her breaths seemed hours apart as the plane pummeled the snow-packed earth underneath them. *God—!*

But the desperate prayer was blotted out when everything went from the brilliant white of the snow to deep, deep black of unconsciousness.

## ANDIE

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April 6

Sultana, Denali National Park

7:23 p.m.

Air crossed my face.

*What's that? Was someone breathing beside me?*

Something rustled next to my hand.

*Wind . . . Is that the wind? As if a curtain lifted, my thoughts began to clear. Why would I feel the wind inside an airplane?*

Something wasn't right.

Placing a hand on my head, I put slight pressure to it. Why—how—was my head hurting? I lifted my sore eyelids.

*Oh! Bright light.*

How long had I been unconscious? Where was I?

Again I opened my eyes, this time with caution.

Blurry images floated around me. A spinning sensation flip-flopped my stomach. *Why am I spinning?*

Sunlight streamed through small, cracked windows and red polka dots spotted otherwise blank walls. *Where am I?*

The spinning stopped.

*Weird.*

I wiggled within the tight confines of my seatbelt, trying to escape its grip, but conked my head on a lumpy thing hanging in the air above me. *That's gonna leave a bruise.*

Why wouldn't these straps budge?

I unlatched them—then fell.

*Ouch.*

I rubbed my shoulder where I'd landed. Was it bruised too? *Perfect, just what I need right now.*

I looked up. I was on the *ceiling* of the plane? I'd been hanging . . . upside down? As if on cue, I could feel all the blood draining out of my head. Letting out a groan, I rubbed my cheeks and forehead. *Why is my body aching so much?*

And where was Mom? She wasn't hurt, was she?

I climbed out on my hands and knees through what must have been the windshield, but moving only made the dizziness worse.

“Ouchy!” My head started to hurt. Really hurt. What was the weird, zinging pain?

*Pain?* Emotions swirled through me, like a hurricane of confusion and fear. The last time I felt pain, they told me I needed brain surgery.

Tears slid down my icy cold cheeks.

*God, what's happening?*

I shook my head and continued crawling out of the broken-down airplane. *Do not let it irritate you, Andie.* As I wiped at the tiny

droplets, a gritty, dirty feeling coated my fingers. I looked down at my upturned palms. They were smothered in dirt. And blood.

Lots of blood.

*Oh, great.*

Spots danced in front of me like Mexican jumping beans . . .  
Then there was nothing.



My eyes popped open. The clear blue sky loomed above and blurry, lazy white clouds floated by.

It took a second to remember where I was . . . what had happened? I glanced around. *How am I all the way outside?* How long was I unconscious? Pain still shot throughout my body, unfamiliar electrical waves.

*Okay . . . Deep breath. Andrea Tikaani-Gray, do something.* I grunted and pushed myself to a sitting position. Why did it take so much effort just to sit up?

One more deep breath.

Reaching my left hand underneath my long, black hair, I gently touched the scar on the back of my neck. The familiar bumpy groove greeted my fingers—it was intact. The sticky feeling of blood didn't cling to my fingers . . . on that hand. So there was no blood or wounds on my scar, right?

My surroundings came into focus. Snow, more snow, boulders, more snow, glass, more snow, the airplane . . .

*Uh-oh. The airplane.* Hadn't I been in the airplane? Or did I dream that?

I glanced around, then wished I hadn't.

Some sort of big, metal, whatchamacallit was smashed against a rock and the tail-rudder-thingamabob had fallen off and lay on the other side of the crash. There was no sign of the wings, and the

windshield lay shattered in a million pieces sparkling on the snow as they reflected the sun's light. Lying in the middle was a lump.

*Mom?*

My body protested as I jumped up and ran over to her. Blood covered her pale body. *Blood . . .* Pulling in air, I jerked away before my stomach decided to rebel again.

“Mom! Wake up!” I shook her shoulder, but it didn't help. I looked around for somebody . . . anybody . . .

Another figure lay on the ground.

I clenched my eyes. This couldn't really be happening.

I trudged through the snow and fell on the ground. Tears spilled down my face turning into ice as a scratchy voice inside my head stated the most awful truth:

*They're all dead. You're alone.*