

# Road to Eternity

Cynthia "Cropduster" Purdue

by Christy Summerland

This is for Smash.

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Stand Above

## CHAPTER ONE

Reggie Reiss wandered into the dirty garage with a scowl on his face that his bushy gray beard failed to hide. Just beneath his black and red bandana, his brown eyes flashed with annoyance and his boots made a thudding sound as he crossed to the 60-year-old rusty red Ford truck and spied the pair of combat boots sticking out from underneath. He wasn't very gentle as he kicked one of them, but no yelp of surprise greeted him as he expected.

Instead, after a short pause, the person under the truck rolled out to look up at him and he took a step back. "Oh. Cynthia. I thought you were Chase."

Cynthia Purdue calmly stared at him without expression, wiped a bit of oil off her cheek, and held back a smirk. He didn't notice, but he'd moved above her, one dusty boot on either side of her. Silently proclaiming his dominance. She grabbed the bumper and pushed, rolling underneath him and coming up behind him. She grabbed a shop towel and started cleaning her hands, ignoring him.

As usual, Reggie wasn't about to be ignored. "I told Chase to get this old piece of crap out of here. It's taking up space and it's never gonna run. We don't have enough gas reserves to try. Besides, even if it did run, we can't leave town with it or it'll get impounded."

She finished cleaning off her hands and walked back to the truck, climbed into the cab, and turned the ignition. The truck rumbled to life as if it hadn't spent the last 25 years in a salvage yard.

Reggie's eyebrow slowly lifted. "I'll be damned. But it doesn't matter. I told Chase..."

"And I might have told Chase you'd changed your mind." She flashed him a smile she knew would only annoy him, but at the moment, annoying him seemed to be the only thing she wanted to do.

He sighed and put his hands on his stocky hips, his black leather jacket spreading open over his ample belly. Reggie had once been a professional boxer but he was in his late 50s now. Years of sun exposure were evident on his face but his eyes still had the same spark Cynthia had seen in his photographs in the clubhouse.

"Cyn, I've told you a million times, if you want to hang out here, there are rules. You can't just run around like you own the place. Not all the guys are feelin' too friendly with you lately."

Cynthia turned off the truck and let the door slam shut as she climbed out. "I don't want another lecture. I fixed the truck because I knew I could and it'll pull the trailer from here to the yard a lot easier than the electric. Besides, your old lady keeps complaining about the power bill. If you'd let me futz with the solar panels, I could make her a lot happier."

Reggie watched her put her leather jacket back on, yet another thing she did that only caused him trouble. When she'd first arrived at his door a year ago she'd been soaked from the rain, having walked nearly six miles to find shelter while tornado sirens sounded all around the area. He should have known it would be an omen of things to come.

To see her now, with her long brown hair tied in a loose ponytail and her combat boots almost covered by her faded jeans, she looked like the 19-year-old she really was, until you looked in her eyes.

Or spent a small amount of time with her. Cynthia was a constant surprise who simultaneously stunned, aggravated and saddened him.

"The panels are Luther's job."

Cynthia chuckled lightly and pulled her bag out of the cabinet. "And we wouldn't want to make Luther mad."

"No, you wouldn't. We need to talk anyway, so don't get all itchy to leave."

She stopped, spun, and hopped up to sit on his tool bench. "Fine. What's up?"

"I need someone to make a run to Omaha. It's nothing major, just watchin' over a deal for a few days."

Her expression didn't change but her eyes flashed that combination of pain, anger and determination he'd come to know so well. "I will not go to Omaha. You know that."

"Yeah, yeah, too close to the AFB. Then I got somethin' else you can do up the 83. A delivery."

"Where up the 83?"

"You know. North from here."

She shook her head. "You should know by now, if you want to lie to me, you've got to do better than that. Why do you want me out of North Platte?"

Much to her surprise, he didn't try to deceive her. "Max is gonna be here for a few days."

"The Prez is coming to town, is he? I've been hanging out here for a year and I've never met him."

"There's a reason for that."

"Come on, Reggie. Why don't you want me meeting Mad Max Maxwell? I'm sure he'd grow to begrudgingly love me like you have."

Reggie sighed and looked around to make sure no one was nearby, then he closed the garage door for privacy. "I told you when you showed up here that a motorcycle club isn't the place for you. Especially this one. Max is major old school. He won't respond well to your...attitude."

"My attitude? Which one? The one that thinks it's a waste of my time to be somebody's bitch?"

"That would be one of them, yeah."

Cynthia laughed. "It's 2042, Reggie. I think it's time Mad Max grew up."

"Which just goes to show how little you know him. Some of the guys have already complained. One of the reasons he's coming is to see if you're as uppity as they say you are and if you are, to fix the problem. Needless to say, they probably understated. So just go spend a few days on the road with Sarah. Take Chase, too. You're a bad influence on that boy. I don't want him mouthing off, either."

Cynthia hopped down. "No way. I've got a project tomorrow in town and I'm not vanishing with your wife and the knight in shining armor so you can pretend I'm the meek little voiceless rat Max wants me to be."

She climbed onto the Harley FatBoy she'd customized and stopped when she saw his hand out. She slapped it playfully. "Don't tell me you need cash. I thought you gave up your secret lotto addiction."

"Give me your key."

"Which one?"

He let out a sigh, his face full of anger but his eyes full of sadness. "All of 'em. The house key, the club key, the bike key, all of 'em."

"But why?"

She looked so tough but he could once again see it in her eyes. He had no doubt she could take on the world and live to tell but deep inside, she was still the lonely orphan who'd knocked on his door and eventually spent seven months fighting an alcohol addiction so intense he'd had no faith at all that she'd survive. The threat of kicking her out not only meant she'd be homeless again, but she'd lose his wife, Sarah, her number one supporter, and the small scrap of stability she'd forged for herself at the Red Platte Crew MC clubhouse.

He was threatening to destroy her life and despite how much trouble she caused him, he hated to do it. She just didn't understand his intentions.

"I've let you act out, go crazy, almost destroy my sanity and come out the other side as someone I actually like. Many times I cursed Sarah for talking me into letting you stay here. I don't know what'll happen to you out there, but I do know if I let you run into Max, it's gonna be a lot worse in here. He won't put up with you. All you have to do to stay here is to leave for a few days. I don't think it's too much to ask when I'm only trying to protect you."

"I can't leave town right now. I won't. And I don't need protection."

He sighed again, wondering how this stubborn woman had become such a big part of his life. "Jacques has a plane he needs worked on. I could probably talk him into lettin' you stay there while you work on it."

"Jacques hates me, and I don't know how to fix a plane. That was... I don't do planes."

"You didn't do cars before you came here."

"That's entirely different."

"I know. The whole thing with your uncle..."

"Off limits, Reggie."

"Fine. But I do pay you for what you do around here, which makes me your boss, your landlord and the man who lets you spend countless hours watching crappy TV with his wife. So I don't have to give you choices but I do because I'm such a nice man."

He grinned, which always looked more terrifying than cute due to his scraggly beard and weather-beaten face. He was trying to disarm her and it wasn't about to work. He finally gave up and turned serious again. "Either go on a little trip with Sarah or go hang at Jacques' place and fix his plane. Otherwise, I want your keys on my desk in five minutes."

He stalked away and opened the garage door again before he headed to his office. Cynthia always knew when she'd hit a wall with Reggie, even if their battles had become less and less frequent. She had definitely smashed into the wall this time.

She looked down at the motorcycle she'd spent so much time working on, the small parts giving her focus while she struggled to get sober. She had another six months to go before it would really be hers and the idea of leaving it behind hurt almost as much as being shut off from Sarah. But she knew she was just as capable as the guys who were officially part of the Red Platte Crew - and in several cases, far more capable - and she didn't like the thought of anyone trying to stuff her in a box. She didn't care who it was.

She looked up when she heard the sound of an empty can being kicked into the garage. Chase Verdayne was walking casually toward her, his jacket over his shoulder, his RPC bandana covering most of his short black hair. He was wearing black jeans, a black shirt and his "home boots," the outfit he always wore when he was going to be working in the garage.

"Reggie tear you up for keeping that truck in here?"

"Not exactly. He's trying to get rid of me for a few days."

Chase casually tossed his jacket on a table and nodded, running a hand over his goatee. "Yeah. You're like Max's worst nightmare. I can see how Reggie'd be concerned."

Cynthia just shot him an annoyed look. "I can handle myself."

He grinned and held up both hands. "I have no doubts about that but I can't say it's a bad idea either. Max likes women quiet and subservient and those are two things you will never be."

"Are you telling me Sarah turns meek and subservient when Max is here?"

"No, but she has cache being Reggie's old lady for 27 years. As far as Max is concerned, you've got nothing. I can think of one way Reggie'd agree to let you hang out and meet the Prez."

"Oh, really. And what would that be?"

"You could hook up with me."

"Right."

He grinned again. "No, seriously. I might only be 21 but I spent three months on the road with Max. He likes me. If you mouthed off at me, he'd probably laugh and say I deserved it. And if you decided you wanted to throttle him, we could disappear and he'd just assume we were off having a fine old time. Besides, it would make the other guys leave you alone."

She just stared at him as she shook her head. "I have to go."

"You know Reggie's not gonna let you take that bike."

She climbed off the bike and walked out of the garage with her bag over her shoulder. He followed, hands in his pockets. "Where are you going?"

"To Jacques'. I'm apparently an aircraft engineer now, didn't you know?"

"Sarah won't be back with the car for an hour. At least let me give you a ride."

"Not necessary."

"It's seven miles from here."

"I know where it is."

She heard him turn and walk in the opposite direction. She wasn't sure she'd even go to Jacques', but right now she didn't want to be here either.

She had a feeling appealing to Sarah wouldn't help. If Sarah thought Reggie was trying to protect her, Cynthia would be double teamed. And there was no chance Sarah would tell Reggie to stand up to Max. It was the older woman's only major flaw, her ability to condone almost anything in the name of club business.

Cynthia reached the gate and pulled it open as Chase pulled up next to her on his motorcycle. "Care for a ride?"

"Do I get to drive?"

Chase laughed and Cynthia calmly walked away from him toward the road. He followed, keeping his feet on the ground as he walked the bike alongside. "Come on, Cyn. Don't kill yourself trying to make a point. We all know you're tough. Well, I do, at least. I'm sure that counts for something, right?"

"Maybe I just want to take a long walk."

"That's great but you can't just go walking through Blood Dog territory."

"Not going to."

He scowled. "Don't tell me you're thinking of walking through Bailey Yard alone."

"I've done it before."

"Yeah, a year ago, in a tornadic thunderstorm. You think Blood Dog central is bad? There's no one in Bailey Yard anymore except the worst people you could ever hope to avoid. The NPPD won't even go in there."

"Which I'm sure is why you guys go out there once a week."

"You're not supposed to...never mind. Look, either let me drive you or I'll just go hang out at the bar."

She stopped walking, closing her eyes to keep the flash of rage in check. He always knew exactly how to poke at the parts of her that still felt guilt over what had happened when she'd come in out of the rain. Chase had taken an instant liking to her and the sheer intensity of her addictions had pushed him back into his own. She'd finally come out of it almost as much to save him as to save herself.

Which made this tactic completely unfair.

When she turned to face him she could see he'd already come to that conclusion but he wasn't about to apologize. He was a member of the RPC. He'd never apologize for anything. "You do whatever you want. I'm not your keeper. But if you ever threaten me like that again, you'll wish you hadn't."

He opened his mouth to say something and then decided not to. He spun the bike and roared away from her, back toward the clubhouse. She turned back and started walking again in the opposite direction. Chase was the closest thing she had to a friend her own age but he could be really infuriating.

A North Platte Police Department helicopter sailed past her and stopped to hover a few hundred feet away. She could see the pilot looking at her, though his visor hid his expression. She was sure he was surprised and she didn't blame him. It was rare to see a single person of any gender walking through this side of town, and women were almost never seen without backup or a semi-automatic rifle strapped to their backs.

A large farm transport flew past them and the helicopter pilot lost interest in her. He followed the transport and turned on his lights. He was either going to verify payment of the airspace fee if he was a decent cop, or he'd be taking his percentage of the transport's haul if he wasn't. It wasn't her business either way.

She considered her options as she passed the abandoned Reynold's World gas station, the pumps long gone. She'd heard Reggie talk about taking it over since every plan to date to renovate it had fallen through, but seeing its pathetic state convinced her he shouldn't bother. The NPPD would demolish it eventually and turn it into city property.

Options. She had a few. She could turn back and tell Reggie she'd go hang out in Valentine for a few

days. He'd let her take her bike if she did. She could put up with crotchety old Jacques. Or she could hit the road again and see where she ended up. The very thought made her shudder but before she could decide, the RPC's electric Pathfinder pulled up beside her.

The tinted driver's side window slid down and Chase grinned. "Hello, again."

"You're being very persistent today."

"I heard a little bird say the Blood Dogs are fighting today so if you're going to Jacques', you'd better go around. That makes it 14 miles. So I thought I'd give you another option."

He stopped the vehicle, got out, and climbed into the passenger seat. Cynthia stood staring at him as he waved at her with the sweetest smile he could manage. "Come on, you even get to drive. Reggie wants me to drop off a couple boxes to Jacques anyway, so you might as well come along."

She shook her head because he looked so funny when he tried to be adorable.

"Give me this, Cyn. If you don't I'm going to drive the whole way right next to you and it'll take me all freakin' day to make a 20 minute trip. Reggie would not be happy."

Cynthia looked up at the gray clouds and groaned.

"Please? It's not safe, even for several of us in a group, and I really don't want to identify your body. It's not a knock on you, OK? Not from me."

Cynthia sighed and climbed into the driver's seat. "You're pathetic when you beg. Are you sure you didn't pick the Pathfinder so no one can see you being driven around by a girl?"

He held his hand to the back seat, where two large boxes sat. "Really do have to make a delivery."

She put the Pathfinder in gear. "Fine. I'll take you to Jacques'." She'd figure out where to go from there later.

Cynthia pulled into the driveway of the Jacques Renier Crop Dusting Company, a tiny piece of land outside of town that sat at the end of one of the only dirt roads left in this part of Nebraska. Two ancient but well-kept mobile home trailers sat perpendicular to one another near the parking area. A large red barn stood like a sentry a few hundred feet away and a one story garage with huge bay doors sat next to an asphalt lot with a long dirt runway on the far side.

Cynthia shook her head. "Not a lot of money in crop dusting, obviously."

Chase grinned. "Jacques makes enough. He likes his trailer. Help me with these boxes."

"Tell me there aren't any drugs in them."

"There aren't any drugs in them. You don't know Jacques very well."

"Of course not. Every time he comes to the garage he looks at me like I'm an alien."

The man himself emerged from his trailer at that moment, and in the light of the sun Cynthia decided he had to be at least 70. His long hair was gray and tied in a ponytail and he was wearing jeans that looked like they might fall off at any time and a red t-shirt with a yellow goose head on the front. He wasn't wearing any shoes but it didn't seem to bother him at all as he walked to the Pathfinder.

"Got my delivery?"

Chase opened the door and pulled out the first box. "Right on time, as usual."

Jacques got a look at Cynthia as she pulled out the other box and followed Chase to the trailer, where they slid the boxes in through the front door. Chase pointed to the table. "Grab the first one and put it up there. The other one goes in the back room."

She shrugged, walked up the steps, and dropped the first box onto the table. She suddenly heard tires squeal in the gravel and she ran and jumped out of the trailer. She cursed because Chase was already gone, kicking up dust as he went.

She felt like throttling him but before she could decide what to do next, she saw Jacques watching her, holding her bag over his shoulder. He was eying her with that appraising and somewhat incredulous look that always drove her crazy.

"OK, why are you looking at me like that?"

"I feel entitled. I get two boxes and a woman delivered. This is not normal. You must be the one

Reggie told me would be fixing my plane."

"Sorry, but I don't do planes. Reggie just wants to be rid of me for a while."

He sighed and tossed her bag to her as he walked back to the trailer. "I ask for a mechanic and he sends me someone who can't even do the job."

She spun and followed him, annoyed by his tone, his look and even his French accent. She was so annoyed, even the grass bothered her. "Hey. I didn't say I can't do it. I said I won't. There's a difference."

"Not in my world."

He walked up the steps and opened the first box, pulling out several books. That surprised her.

"Reggie sends you books?"

"Whenever he finds some on my list."

He went about the task of emptying the boxes, then started putting the books on shelves in his tiny living room. He looked up at the top shelf and Cynthia realized he was probably a good six inches shorter than she was. He strained to reach the shelf, grunting with exertion, a pained look on his face.

"Oh for crap's sake. Can I help you with that?"

He turned slightly and shrugged. "If that's what you want to do."

She climbed into the trailer and grabbed the book, sliding it onto the top shelf next to a series of books on plants and gardens. "You could have just asked for help."

For the first time since she'd met him months ago, he smiled at her. "But then you wouldn't have had a chance to offer."

He handed her more books and pointed to where he wanted them to go. "If you like to read, you can borrow any book tonight. Tomorrow you fix my plane."

"No, tomorrow I go somewhere else."

"You fix my plane and you can stay in the loft in the barn for a few days. And then I pay you."

She finished stocking the last book and turned toward him with her arms crossed over her chest. "I already told you, I don't do planes."

"You'll do mine."

"Oh really? Why?"

He grinned slightly. "Because you want to."

He left the trailer and she followed more out of exasperation than anything else. "No, I really don't."

He kept walking toward the barn and opened the door, pointing to a ladder. "The loft has a very comfortable double bed and a little bathroom. It is for short stays. You fix my plane to my satisfaction, maybe I'll give you a job and you can live in the other trailer until you find your own place."

He handed her a book entitled *75 Years of Crop Dusters* and pointed to a bookmark. "You find all you need to know there."

He had to be senile. Surely he wasn't just daft. "I'm not going to read this. I hate planes."

"My plane is old. You must read to understand it."

"I don't want to understand it. Where are you going?"

He stopped halfway up the ladder that went to the roof of the barn. "There are many loose shingles. I need to secure them before the next rain."

He teetered slightly on the ladder and she reached up to make sure he didn't fall. "All right, old man. How about I fix the shingles in exchange for spending the night and tomorrow I'll go home and you never have to see me again."

He slowly climbed back down the ladder and seemed to consider the offer. "OK. You fix shingles so I don't break my hip, and I will feed you dinner and give you a place to stay tonight."

He walked away and Cynthia let out a relieved sigh. Her relief disappeared as he threw back a last command. "And tomorrow you fix my plane."

He was too far away now for her to argue effectively. Cynthia shook her head in exasperation, then threw up her hands and headed up the ladder.

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Reggie left his office and ran into Chase in the lobby of the garage. "Did you do it?"

"She's with Jacques, but remember, you promised to protect me if she comes back and tries to pound on me."

"I will. Just go finish cleaning out the guest room. Max is gonna want to stay in there and if he knows we've been letting her have it, he won't be very happy."

"I'm on it."

Reggie sat on a stool at the bar and accepted the beer Kerry handed him. She was wearing the same short shorts and tank top she always did, a favorite for Max. Cynthia would never be caught dead in an outfit like that. He rubbed his face with his hand and took a drink, giving his wife a nod when she sat down beside him.

"Feeling a little nervous?"

"You have no idea."

Sarah pulled on his beard playfully. "This would be a lot easier if we'd moved her into an apartment a couple months ago. She'd be at our house, working for me, instead of hanging around here all the time."

"And with what money did you expect me to do that?"

She sighed. "I don't know. I was hoping she would have hooked up with Chase by now. That would have solved everything."

"You know that's never gonna happen. Not after last March."

Sarah nodded, thinking about last March 8<sup>th</sup>. She and Reggie had gone away for two days, leaving Cynthia and Chase at the clubhouse with Decker. Decker had taken off with a girl and Cynthia and Chase had discovered the underground liquor vault and trashed the collection, the lobby and themselves. They'd ended up way too close, too soon, and part of Cynthia still remembered that Chase had been sober when it started. Chase wasn't the type to take advantage of such a situation, but he'd been very close to the line that night.

She shrugged. "You're probably right. It doesn't seem like there's anyone alive who can keep her in line."

"A problem we could have avoided if you hadn't decided to go all maternal in the first place."

Sarah waved a hand dismissively, tossing her long blond hair as she leaned against him. "I'm going to the grocery store. Want anything special?"

"No. Take Merris with you."

"I always do." She waved at Merris, who hopped out of his chair and grabbed his handgun from the shelf on the wall as he followed her.

Reggie watched Kerry clean off the bar, knowing the young woman was far from Cynthia's biggest fan. Kerry had been paying her dues with the club for years and Reggie didn't doubt she'd been sending messages to Max. He wasn't about to let her hear any details about where Cynthia really was.

The bell over the lobby door chimed and the handful of men in the chairs nearby sat up straighter. Reggie got up and met "Mad" Max Maxwell on his way to the bar and the two men hugged. Max grinned, his dark eyes taking in his surroundings as he towered over the six men who'd come in with him.

"Looks like everything is still in one piece. Including your gut, old man."

Reggie shrugged. "You know how Sarah cooks."

"Yes, I do." Max wandered across the room to his favorite chair and dropped into it, stretching his long legs out in front of him and tossing his leather RPC hat onto the side table. He looked even more massive than he ever had, his arms straining the sleeves of his RPC t-shirt. Obviously Max still liked steroids as much as Reggie liked to eat.

"So where's this new girl I keep hearing about? Seems like she's gone from your charity case to your overlord, Reg. I want to meet her."

"You didn't give me enough notice. She's out of town with relatives right now. I think the stories you're hearing are grossly exaggerated, though. She's spunky, but she knows her place."

"She'd better. Hey, Kerry, why don't you bring me a beer?"

Kerry didn't hesitate, sliding onto Max's lap and opening the bottle for him. Reggie couldn't help but think of the night she'd gotten drunk with her brother and spilled the story of a store Max was planning to rob. The brother had called the cops but Max had seen them coming and bailed on the job. Max had spent the next two days beating Kerry black and blue. Her brother hadn't been seen since.

Reggie didn't know why that had come up again. He hadn't paid much attention at the time. It was an unspoken rule that what was said in the clubhouse stayed there, or else. Then again, he'd been thinking differently about a lot of things lately. Life really had been simpler before Cynthia showed up.

Max laughed and tossed Reggie an envelope of cash. "You drifted, buddy. That's a cut of a new deal I got going in Omaha. You'll be seeing a lot more where that came from once the boys take over the driving."

He pushed Kerry until she stood up, rising up next to her like a lineman ready to fight. "So since I don't get to meet your charity case, I'm going to go relieve some tension. We'll meet up later about financials and stuff."

He grabbed Kerry's hand and pulled her toward the hallway and the guest room. Reggie almost stopped him, but Chase emerged before he could, flashing a thumbs up. Reggie let out a sigh of relief and put his beer against his forehead.

## CHAPTER TWO

Cynthia knocked on the door to Jacques' trailer and, after some grunting and stomping from inside, it opened. Jacques blinked as if he was surprised to see her. "What?"

"I finished the barn roof. You didn't tell me how many shingles needed repair."

"You didn't ask."

"So I didn't. Do I always have to ask?"

Jacques grinned slightly and handed her a small black box. "Always. If you never ask the questions, you never know what you need to know. You can't depend on the answers being handed to you."

"Jacques Renier, philosopher. What's this?"

"Some tools. You need them to get the shower in the barn working. It's not a big deal, but I turn off the system when no one's using it. I put your bag in the loft, as well as some other items. You use that bag a lot?"

"I'm never without it. Everything I need to survive is in that bag. Left over paranoia from the streets, I guess."

"You do a good job on my plane, maybe I'll buy you a better bag that isn't going to fall apart soon."

Cynthia put a hand against her forehead. "You are the most stubborn person I've ever met."

He grinned fully this time. "I was about to say the same about you. Come in. Dinner is ready."

He didn't wait for a refusal as he disappeared down the hall. Cynthia shrugged and entered the trailer, washing her hands in the kitchen sink. She sat down at the scarred oak table and took the chance to get a look at the place Jacques called home.

The trailer was small and stacked top to bottom with shelves of books, knick knacks from a long and obviously interesting life and photos of Jacques and a lot of people she didn't know. Despite the massive amount of stuff, it didn't really look cluttered. The leather couch was worn but perfectly adequate, although the carpet had seen better days.

Before she could look around more, Jacques returned to the kitchen and pulled a tray out of the oven, straining with the weight. Cynthia got up and took it from him, and he put a potholder on the table for it. As she lifted the lid off the tray and stared at the perfectly roasted chicken, he put out bowls of salad and fruits and took his seat.

"You like?"

Cynthia sat down and smiled for the first time since she'd arrived. "I haven't had food in front of me that looks this good in a long time. How do you manage it with the crap that's available around here?"

He forked some chicken onto his plate. "I figure, if there's anything worth spending money on, it is good food. My main client has a large ranch with many animals and acres of fruits and vegetables. All quality. Part of my pay is on this table."

"How many clients do you have?"

"Two."

"Two? I guess that explains the trailer."

He regarded her calmly until his steady gaze made her put her fork down. "What?"

"Do I need more than this? It is small, easy to keep clean and shelters me."

"OK, I can dig that. But what about savings? What if you get sick or something?"

"I am paid well enough that I don't need to worry about much as long as jobs keep coming in. Besides my two main clients I pick up additional temporary jobs often. I live the way I want and can hire a pilot and a mechanic to work full time. One of my clients is expanding soon, so there will be more opportunity for an additional pilot so I can retire from that part of the job."

"Wait. You have a mechanic? Then why the hell am I here?"

"He had a family emergency and had to leave. He could be gone for months. If I miss that much time, it could ruin my entire business."

He looked at her with a solemn expression and she shook her head. "Surely there is someone in this area that can fix your plane."

"There is. You."

"How many times do I have to tell you this? I've never fixed a plane; I don't want to work on planes; I am not the person you need. Tomorrow morning I'll go back to the clubhouse and you can find someone else."

"From what I hear, maybe the clubhouse isn't a good place for you."

She finished putting food on her plate so she didn't have to look at him. "I'll manage just fine. I softened Reggie up, after all."

"If I might ask, how did you come to be there? I can tell you, the Red Platte Crew isn't exactly a good group of people. Reggie has only become tolerable in the last eight months."

"If you don't like them, why do you use them?"

He shrugged. "They're the only ones with a salvage yard that's worth anything. Every machine needs parts. But you still haven't answered my question. Why hang out with a violent motorcycle club?"

She didn't answer for a while, partly because she didn't want to and partly because she was ravenous. After she'd eaten most of the chicken, she saw he was still staring at her, waiting. "Not every club is like the RPC. I spent six months with another crew down the road and they were a good group of people. They did a bunch of charity work, took care of the community, and escorted families through rough parts of town. Everyone was equal there."

"Why leave?"

"Let's say they enjoyed partying but I was just too much for them. After I blew off three interventions they gave me an ultimatum, so I left. Ended up hitchhiking 60 miles until the truck driver had to pull over because of storms, so I walked another six miles. When the tornado sirens started going off I finally decided shelter was a good thing but no one would answer the door until I got to the clubhouse. Then I just never left."

"If you wouldn't take an ultimatum before, why did you get sober?"

"I discovered I wasn't the only person I was destroying. Sarah helped me deal with some of the things I'd been trying to hide from and, I guess it was just time."

"So you like it there?"

She thought about it for a moment. "It's gotten better. Most of the guys are sexist jerks but they know Reggie wants them to leave me alone. So they pretty much do now."

He made a low, somewhat incredulous sound and returned to his food.

"What?"

"I'm old. I make lots of sounds. Finish your dinner. There is still time to study that book tonight so you can fix my plane tomorrow."

Cynthia didn't bother to argue. There was no point. She'd pack up in the morning and ask around. Surely she could find a good mechanic who could work on the stupid plane. Then she'd escape Jacques and his endless questions.

## CHAPTER THREE

Max sat at the club table, the fanged deer logo painted across the top. He scanned through the papers in front of him and ignored Sarah when she put a cup of coffee down for him nearby.

Reggie walked in and closed the door, taking his seat on Max's right side.

Max flipped some of the pages over and sat back, his huge frame barely able to fit in his chair. "Still doing good with the other Omaha runs, and along the 30. A big drop off in Gothenburg, though. What's up with that?"

Reggie shrugged. "Gothenburg got itself a grant from some rich guy that lives there so they now have a private police force with some pretty wicked weapons. I decided it was better to bypass than to go to war with a well-financed group like that."

Max accepted that easily. "Probably a good idea. Why did the costs go up on the H?"

"Drake dropped out of the business. The guy I found to make it costs a little more, but he's got a secure high rise and top rate product. If you look at our Kearney numbers, you can see those went up when we started pushing the new stuff. It's way better and the extra cost is worth it for the professionalism."

Max smiled slightly. "That's why you're my VP, Reg. You can weigh all the sides and find the benefits. So what benefit are you getting out of feeding the ragamuffin?"

"Look at the garage stats. The NPPD really cracked down about a year ago and we lost a huge chunk of business. Cynthia's a good talker. She's really good at closing deals, so she's actually got the garage business up again. She earns her keep."

"From what I hear, she talks way too much. 'Too smart for her own good' was the common refrain."

"She's smart. But she's no more part of the decision making process or any meetings than Kerry is. Which is to say, not at all. I wouldn't worry about it."

"Oh, I'm not worried. I just want to get to know her a little better. Doesn't seem like she's attached to anyone."

"Chase likes her."

"Then why hasn't he done something about it?"

"I haven't let him yet. I want to make sure it's a good fit first. They both have past alcohol problems."

Max considered that with a bit of amusement. "All right. That sounds like a plan. I want you to come with me in about an hour. There's a couple guys over at NPPD I haven't talked to in a while."

"I think you'll find we still have a little stroke over there. But you know how they like to talk to you."

Max grinned. "Doesn't everybody?"

Cynthia emerged from the barn and blinked as the morning sun glinted off the windows of the garage. She'd left the loft exactly as she'd found it and hoped she could catch a ride into town soon. She wanted a replacement mechanic for Jacques before he did something crazy, like handcuff her to the plane.

She was just about to pass the garage when a complete stranger walked out of it. He stopped, just as surprised to see her. "Um...hi."

She looked him over, taking in the faded jeans, work boots and Renier Crop Dusting t-shirt. He was clean shaven, with short, spiky blond hair and he didn't look to be much older than her. He didn't seem threatening at all.

He grinned. "Am I being appraised? I promise, the only weapon I'm carrying is a shop towel."

"I just like to know what I'm dealing with."

He held out a hand. "You're dealing with Dustin Pedersen. I'm the other pilot around here."

She shook his hand, still watching him intently. "Cynthia Purdue. The one who's going to find Jacques

a mechanic so I can leave."

Dustin laughed. "Good luck with that. If Jacques wants you, you're the one. Besides, I can pretty much guarantee you won't find someone else. We don't exactly use planes from this decade. Or the last several, for that matter."

"That would explain the book he gave me. Why does he think I can do it if no one else can?"

"I'm sure someone else could, but it wouldn't exactly be lucrative for them. Maybe he thinks you're good at figuring stuff out. Or maybe he has ulterior motives."

"Like?"

Dustin grinned. "With Jacques, you never know until you know. But there's always a reason for every little thing he does. You'd be better off just fixing the plane. I can show it to you if you want."

"No. I don't do planes. I don't like them."

"You might want to get over that, because if Jacques says you're gonna fix it, you will. Come on. At least look at it. It won't bite."

Cynthia paused, mulling it over. Maybe if she at least looked at it, she could tell Jacques she'd tried and he'd let her off the hook. She followed Dustin to the garage and he pulled open the big bay doors. Inside was one of the oldest planes Cynthia had ever seen. Nearby, a huge tarp was covering something that looked to be the same size.

"Well no wonder it doesn't work. It's got to be..."

"Approximately 45 years old. You'd be surprised. An Antonov AN-2M crop dusting biplane. Refitted with an engine that can handle regular fuel or the bio stuff. The problem is, something's not quite working right and we can't get it off the ground anymore."

"What's under the tarp?"

"An older one that even our staff mechanic couldn't get going again. I think it goes without saying how badly we need this baby to run."

He opened the door so she could look inside but she didn't move. "I can't."

"Why not? It's completely harmless."

"I can't explain it to you."

He crossed his arms, but his face was slightly amused. "Try me."

"I just can't."

"That's very unoriginal. Two years ago, I was afraid of heights. Now I'm flying crop dusters. There's one of my secrets. So tell me."

"How did you get over your fear of heights?"

He grinned. "Way to deflect. Jacques helped me. He found me after I got aged out of the orphanage and gave me work around here. Eventually he got me in the air. The rest is history."

"You were an orphan?"

He patted the side of the plane. "Yep. I'll tell you all about it if you'll get on the plane. Or tell me why you won't."

She stalked past him, got on the plane, and got right back off. "Happy?"

"Not really. Just tell me this. Could you fix the plane?"

She let out a sigh and looked up the ceiling. "I seem to have a mechanical aptitude so, with the book, yeah. Probably. But..."

"But you can't."

"That's right."

"Because you hate planes."

"Yes."

"And you won't tell me why."

After a pause, she answered. "Maybe later."

"I'll take that as a victory if you'll help me stock the chemicals we got in today. Otherwise Jacques will try to help me and it'll take longer."

"Say no more. I'll help."

"Hurray for me." He grinned as he walked out of the garage. She shook her head and followed.

Chase rolled a dolly stacked with boxes to the clubhouse bar. Kerry made a space so he could stack them for her to stock and grinned as Max entered the room. He slapped Chase on the back.

"It's about time I got to see you, boy. You haven't been stayin' out places you shouldn't, have you?"

"Still sober, and gonna stay that way."

"Good. You cost way too much money when you're not. I've got another road trip I want you to go on in a few weeks if you're up to it."

Chase put his hands in his jacket pockets and shrugged. "I'm up for just about anything."

"That's what I like to hear. Reggie told me you've got your eyes on this girl everyone keeps telling me about. That true?"

"It might be."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

"I'm trying to be smart, sir. We used to get in trouble together. I don't want to risk doing that to the club again. But I think everything might be OK."

Max nodded and smacked him on the shoulder. "I like you, Chase. You're a good hand and you're determined. Determination is very important to me. If you're not determined, you don't get anything done. People can walk on you."

"Nobody's gonna walk on me, sir."

Max smiled slightly. "Good. You see to that. You stay determined and there might be big things in your future. Big, big things. You just got to show me you can be king of your own domain before you can step up in mine."

He ruffled Chase's hair and walked off into the lobby. Chase caught Kerry looking at him with amusement.

"What's your problem?"

She shrugged and went back to work.

Cynthia stood on top of the garage, enjoying the view the height afforded her. After she'd helped Dustin unload, Jacques had mentioned another possible job. She was willing to do anything to avoid fixing that plane. So far, he hadn't appeared, and the sun was steadily going down.

Dark gray clouds floated across the sky but these weren't rain clouds. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference between drifting pollution and an oncoming storm, but these clouds didn't have the right form for rain.

It was one of the advantages of living in this part of Nebraska. There was pollution everywhere but here, shutdowns were rare. In places like Chicago, they were almost a daily occurrence.

She sighed and climbed down the ladder. Jacques hadn't mentioned dinner either but surely she'd done enough today for him to decide she'd earned it. She walked toward the trailer but stopped on one end when she heard voices. She peeked around the corner and saw Dustin and Jacques sitting at a picnic table near the front door, looking over paperwork.

Jacques held his head up with one hand, holding papers with the other.

Dustin pointed to a line on one of the sheets. "There's always the back bit of land. I know you like to keep it open but we could rent it out temporarily."

"We'd have to find someone who would be willing to pay upfront. And I really don't like the idea of what could happen to the land. It's all I've got left from my grandparents."

"I could do runs for the clinic again."

Jacques grinned slightly and patted him on the back. "I don't like thinking of you dodging bullets again to deliver medicines. It's not in your nature. Even if you did, I could not take money you earned yourself."

"I'd be OK with it. I still owe you a lot."

"Not enough that I would ever agree to that. You paid me back by growing into a fine young man."

Dustin thought about it, but he was out of ideas. "So if we don't make our deadline next week, what are we looking at?"

"You are looking at finding other work, which you can do well. I am looking at losing both of those jobs. Some people may pay well, but they also won't wait. Since the planes don't work I can't use them to pay any bills. I'd have to give up the land. Within a few months most likely."

He squeezed Dustin's shoulder and put on a half-smile. "But this is not for you to worry about. Go home. Rest. I can still pay you for the next month, so I'll see you in the morning."

Dustin begrudgingly got up and went into the trailer to grab his keys. Jacques shook his head and gathered up the paperwork and went inside.

Cynthia cursed under her breath and then tried to relax. "This is not my problem. Jacques would tell me that himself."

She headed back to the barn and climbed into the loft, dropping onto the bed. After a few minutes she looked over at the book Jacques had given her. She shook her head and put her arm over her eyes, determined to go to sleep and forget about it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jacques admired the rising sun as he made his way to the barn and stepped inside. He climbed the ladder to the loft but the bed was empty. The only sign that Cynthia had been there was her bag, so he knew she hadn't left yet. He climbed back down and walked out of the barn, listening intently. A slight smile crossed his lips as he heard noises coming from the garage.

He opened the bay door and found Cynthia reorganizing the tools in his maintenance bag. She looked up and yawned, turning off the shop lamp she'd been using all night. "Good timing. Give it a shot."

"Why don't you? You should finish the job."

She sighed and climbed into the cockpit. The plane's engine roared to life and Jacques smiled, climbing in with her and closing the door.

"What are you doing?"

"We have to fly it to make sure everything is good."

She tried to get up but he grabbed her arm. She pulled it loose. "There is no way I am flying in this thing. Let me out."

"You need to be here to listen in case there are other problems."

"That makes perfect sense, but I don't care."

"Eh, you're no fun." He adjusted the throttle and the plane jumped forward. Cynthia dropped into the seat and grabbed hold of the sides.

"I am not kidding, Jacques. This is not fair."

"I am the best. You have nothing to fear."

"It's not fear, damn it, it's pain! Let me out."

He stopped the plane at the start of the runway and looked at her. She claimed no fear but she looked terrified. "You survived the streets, alcoholism and motorcycle gangs and this is what floors you? You're too young to wall yourself away from where you belong."

"Oh really? Where do I belong, Jacques? A mental ward?"

He looked up. "You belong up there."

She laughed without humor. "No one belongs up there. Least of all me."

"You're a prisoner."

"I am not a prisoner."

Jacques shrugged. "Is that true? The last word that comes to mind when I see you is the word free. That makes you a prisoner."

She sat back in the seat and sagged in resignation. "Fine. Fly the damn plane. I don't have much to live for anyway."

He raised an eyebrow. Her wounds were deeper than he'd thought. He considered putting the plane back in the garage but if he didn't take off now, he knew he'd never get her back in the cockpit. So he guided the Antonov down the runway and smoothly pulled it into the air, rising steadily over the field.

Cynthia closed her eyes and tried to imagine she was anywhere else in the world. But every image she came up with was drowned out by the noise of the plane. Just to keep from going crazy she opened her eyes to find Jacques thoroughly enjoying himself, serene, banking the plane so he could get a good look at the fields below.

He grinned at her. "You do good work. She hasn't flown like this in years. You try."

"Me try what?"

"You try fly," he said with a smirk. "Put your hands on the other yoke and see how it feels."

"I don't need to do that."

"You're already up here. You've seen the diagrams; you know what everything does. Just try it."

"That's OK."

"You're going to miss out on a lot in your life if you keep smacking your head into the wall. Oh, well. I'm not always right."

"And what does that mean?"

"I thought you had guts."

He looked at her challengingly, almost arrogantly, daring her to say she was a gutless coward so she wouldn't have to fly. He wasn't disappointed.

"Oh for hell's sake." She grabbed the yoke and he let go, turning the plane over to her.

He watched her shake, her breath coming more rapidly, her eyes darting back and forth like she was waiting for a mountain to jump up in front of them. "Bank right and in a minute you'll get to see Lake Reservay."

When she didn't move he gently reached over and helped her. "Relax. Let the plane talk to you. It can take you places you never thought you'd go."

They flew over Lake Reservay, the man-made waterway built by Dyton Reservay in 2035 in his attempt to keep North Platte viable. It was now heavily protected by the military, but from the air the most noticeable feature was the gently rolling water.

Jacques continued to watch Cynthia, who was slowly becoming more relaxed. "See that cloud right there?"

She didn't say anything, but she did nod.

"Head toward it. Go ahead. Pull back."

She raised the nose of the plane and followed his directions, trying to keep her hands still. As she lost sight of the ground and the only thing left was sky, she suddenly felt like something fell into place. She hadn't even known she was missing it.

Jacques sat back and enjoyed himself as she settled into the controls, her natural instincts taking over as she flew the plane as if it was a part of her. She executed a wide turn and descended, picking up a little speed as she headed back the way they'd come. They raced low over the fields and pulled up again as they reached the garage.

Jacques took control again and Cynthia's hands went up in surprise. "Hey. What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to test it out. There's too much to do to stay up all day. You can do it again tomorrow if you want. I'll have Dustin take you on a run."

She didn't argue, but her attention was fixed to the controls as Jacques guided the plane in to a landing on the runway, rolling up to the garage before he shut off the engine.

"So. How do you feel now?"

Cynthia let out a deep breath. "When I get my bike back, I can come here every day. You said you needed another pilot, right?"

"Fairly soon, yes."

"Train me. I'll do it."

She followed him as he exited the plane, gingerly stepping down to the asphalt. "No, thank you."

Cynthia wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. "Excuse me, what did you say?"

"I said I don't want to hire you."

"Then what was the point of all of this?"

"Come to me tomorrow, and you tell me."

She stopped and threw up her hands. Dustin approached and stood with her as Jacques walked back to his trailer.

"I just don't get that guy."

Dustin grinned and shrugged. "It takes some time to get to know Jacques. Keep after him. He'll eventually let you in on what he's thinking. But in the meantime...how did it go?"

"It was terrifying. And everything I never knew I wanted. I fought this, I really did. And now I'm a

little ticked off that he lets me touch it and then won't let me have it."

"Sounds like Jacques. With him, you've got to earn everything."

"How?"

"You never really know until you know."

She slapped him on the arm. "That's really helpful."

He smiled. "You know what I like to do after landing?" He walked over to the plane and put his hand against the side of the nose. "She likes to be praised when she does well. Come on."

"If Jacques won't let me, I..."

"Come on, stubborn." He grabbed her hand and pressed it against the nose. "See? For some people, it's more than a plane. Someday, I want to find another variant, where there's cockpit access to the back. Then I could fly around, land in a field somewhere, and sleep in it."

"That would rack up a lot of airspace fees."

"Not if you know exactly where you're going."

"I wish I knew exactly where I'm going."

He grinned slightly but turned when the sound of a motorcycle reached them. Chase spotted them and pulled out of the parking area, driving across the grass to the lot where they stood. He got off the bike, his eyes locked on Dustin.

"Who are you?"

Dustin didn't flinch. "That depends. Who are you?"

Cynthia put a hand against Chase's chest so he'd stop moving forward. "Chase, Dustin. Dustin, Chase. Chase is part of the RPC. Dustin works for Jacques. Are we good now?"

Chase pulled off his gloves and dropped them on the bike. Then he pointed at Cynthia. "I don't really like other guys touching her."

"Oh, come on. Back off, Chase."

He ignored her and continued to stare a hole through Dustin, who stayed completely calm and ambivalent. "I think you're being a little unreasonable, pal."

Chase pointed to himself. "Me? I don't think so. I don't go around touching your stuff, do I?"

Cynthia scoffed. "Your stuff?"

Dustin held up his hands. "Look, dude, I don't know you but you're really not coming off like someone I care to know. So why don't you do what she said and back off?"

"I don't remember anyone makin' you Lord and Master. Why don't *you* back off?"

"Just chill out, man."

Chase didn't want to chill out, and instead he punched Dustin as hard as he could, knocking him against the plane. Cynthia grabbed his arm and shoved him hard enough that he almost tripped over his bike.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

He looked like he might say something, but he obviously thought better of it. "I want you to come home. I know how to handle Max."

"I know how you think you're going to handle Max, but right now, I am on a way different page. I don't give a crap about Max. So do me a favor and go home."

"I didn't mean to go crazy. I just want to take you back."

"There are things I promised to do here and I'm not leaving until I do. And I really don't want to look at you right now so just go home, Chase."

He scowled, his rage fighting with his desire to stay with her. Finally he let the rage take over and he climbed on his bike and churned up dirt and grass as he made a quick trip back to the main road.

Cynthia turned back to Dustin, who calmly leaned against the plane, one hand rubbing his jaw. "He's a charming chap. You're not really..."

"No. He just wants me to be." She reached into the plane and pulled out the medical kit Jacques kept there. "Sorry he decided to be a jackass. He does have his good side." She pulled out an instant cold

pack, activated it, and handed it to him.

He took it and pressed it against his face. "Don't worry about it."

"You should have knocked him out."

Dustin shook his head. "Why? I can't fly well with a broken hand. Besides, Jacques always says, 'Sometimes the stronger position and the best revenge is to be the better man.' But if he ever does that to you, I'm gonna change my mind real quick."

"I can handle myself."

"You do that. I'm going to go chill out for a while before I have to fix the tower transceiver."

She let out a deep breath as he walked away, then climbed into the cockpit and stared out the window, trying to chill out a little herself.

Jacques was sitting at his kitchen table, a book open in front of him as he made notes on a pad. He shouted a "come in" when he heard a knock on the door but didn't look up from his work. "Hello, Cynthia."

Cynthia stepped inside and closed the door. "I was wondering if I could ask you a favor."

He still didn't look up. "What do you think?"

She didn't know what to think. The more time she spent with Jacques, the more infuriating he became.

"I need to go into town and it would take me too long to walk. I was hoping I could borrow the truck."

"No."

"That's it? I have no chance at all?"

"What do you have to do?"

"I have to visit someone."

"And it can't wait?"

"No. I need to be there in a half hour."

He finally looked up. "That's very bad planning on your part."

Cynthia resisted the urge to growl in frustration. "All right, I'll tell you what. If you let me borrow the truck, I'll help Dustin fix the transceiver on the tower later."

"Do you know anything about transceivers?"

"No, but I'm sure I can help somehow. Does that work for you?"

He looked at her calmly, then back down to his notes. "No."

"Come on, Jacques. No one comes down this road. That makes it a little hard to hitchhike."

"I didn't say I wouldn't take you. But I am not prepared to trust you with my truck yet. So I'll drive."

He got up and grabbed his keys and gingerly made his way down the steps to the ground. "Are you coming?"

She wanted to mouth off but decided against it. At least she got to go. She'd figure out the rest later. "I'm coming."

He climbed into the truck, looking a little comical as his head barely cleared the steering wheel. Perhaps he drove it on sheer will alone. She claimed the passenger seat and hoped the ride would be a quiet one.

"Where are we going?"

"Reservay Drive."

Jacques was silent after that, enjoying the drive as Cynthia sat on edge, wondering when his questions would start. Much to her surprise, they never did. He pulled into the lot she pointed to and turned off the truck.

"How long will you be?"

"Not long. Thanks, Jacques."

"No thanks. You'll be earning it later."

She closed the door and walked into the long, single story brick building that had once been an elementary school. Now it housed people whose minds ran the gamut of human maturity.

A nurse spotted her and waved. Cynthia waved back. "Hey, Mary."

"I'm glad you're here. Grant's started to get agitated and Don wants to get this done."

Mary opened the door to room 112, where Dr. Don Lawrence waited outside. He nodded to Cynthia and the three of them walked into the room.

Grant was sitting on his bed, his hair slightly disheveled but his clothes neat and his room tidy. His eyes held a permanent youthful glow though all estimates of his age ranged from 40 to 50. The moment he saw Lawrence, his face contorted with rage and he yelled, jumping off his bed.

Cynthia stepped out from behind Lawrence and Grant's face suddenly softened. He sat down and she took a seat beside him.

"Hey, man, how's it going today?"

"The birds are green. Kitties played nice."

She ran a hand through his hair and he smiled. Everything he said made perfect sense to him, and Cynthia would never let on that she had no idea what he was talking about. He never expected a response, so she never gave him one. He didn't respond well when it was clear he wasn't being understood.

"Do you know what day it is?"

He nodded, looking a little annoyed.

"Do you want your shot?"

He sighed, then smiled at her. "Bump."

She grinned and kissed him on the forehead. Bump always meant yes. If he'd wanted to say no, he'd have used the word bugger.

Lawrence slowly pulled out the syringe and Grant held out his right arm, hugging Cynthia with his left. When Lawrence was done he left the room. Cynthia caught sight of Jacques in the doorway but didn't have time to deal with him.

"All right, you know how it goes. You get sleepy for a while and when you wake up, you get to go outside."

Grant rested against her and yawned.

After he'd fallen asleep she returned to the truck and climbed into the cab. Jacques asked no questions, but he didn't turn on the truck either. He was obviously curious. Maybe if she gave him something he didn't ask for, she could get more out of him later.

"Grant's got problems. There's a shot that keeps him really calm, productive and sweet for two weeks at a time, but when it's time to get another, he flips out."

"Unless you're there?"

"Unless I'm there."

Jacques considered that information. "And how did you come to know this?"

"I met him when I was living under the Charles Clark Bridge for two weeks. He was out of his mind all the time, hurting himself, scaring people. For whatever reason, he responded well to me. I hadn't planned to leave for a while but one night, one of the other people there attacked me. Grant killed him. Messed him up bad. The prosecutors wanted the death penalty but I begged the judge to help him, so now he lives in the Reservay Drive Mental Health Facility."

"Interesting."

He didn't say another word as they drove back to the trailer. He got out first and stopped before turning back to face her through the window. "It is a good thing you do for Grant."

"He deserves it. Does this mean you'll teach me how to fly the Antonov?"

"Nope."

She resisted the urge to slam her head into the dash as he walked into his trailer. Instead she climbed out of the truck and went looking for Dustin.

Sarah was sitting up in bed when Reggie walked into the bedroom, the strain he was under apparent on his face. He tossed his jacket onto the dresser and dropped to a seat on the end of the bed. Sarah put

down her electronic magazine and cocked her head.

"Feeling a little tense?"

He rubbed his face with both hands. "I think I might have messed this up. There's no way Max and Cynthia are ever going to get along."

"What were your options? You didn't have time to find her a place to go permanently, she's not about to hook up with Chase and Max is always going to be Max. He's easy to get along with when you know the rules."

"Cynthia knows the rules. She just doesn't intend to follow them."

"She's the one that decided to stay here. There are consequences for everything we do."

"Yeah. That's my problem right now."

Sarah patted the bed next to her. "Come on. Take a load off. Maybe you can talk Max into going back out on the road tomorrow. Give you some more time to figure out what to do long term."

Reggie dropped down beside her and sighed. "That would be the best case scenario."

Cynthia finished climbing the small tower that held the transceiver Dustin was studying. She swung off the ladder and sat on one of the side rungs.

"So what is this supposed to be doing?"

Dustin opened the case and looked at the components inside. "This is what we use so one of us can communicate with the other in the plane when we're on a job. It goes just far enough to cover our territory and a little more. Unfortunately we've only been getting static lately."

He handed her the manual and she stared at it. "How old is this thing?"

He grinned. "I don't want to know."

"Have you ever fixed one?"

"Nope. That's DeMarco's job, but obviously, DeMarco ain't here. Jacques still driving you crazy?"

"Just a bit. I don't know what he wants me to do."

"And I think that's the whole point."

She flashed him an annoyed look. "And what..."

He looked down as Jacques appeared under the tower. "Dustin, come down, please. I have something I need your help with."

Dustin grinned and patted Cynthia on the back. "Have fun."

He climbed down to meet Jacques and Cynthia leaned over to shout down at them. "What do you expect me to do?"

Jacques looked at her like she was daft. "Fix it, of course."

"Of course." She sighed and looked at the completely foreign parts inside the transceiver. She flipped open the manual and started reading.

Jacques returned to the tower several hours later to find Cynthia standing on the ground, wiping her hands on a shop towel. "Did you give up?"

"Nope. Try it out, but I'm pretty sure it's fixed."

He looked impressed, which for some reason made her feel good. "Very nice. You are a fast learner. In some things."

"Bet I could show you just how fast I am if you teach me to fly the Antonov."

He looked unconvinced but she didn't let him argue.

"No, check this out. I'll be trained in no time. Then you can retire, or fly less, or just fly for enjoyment or hell, take a vacation. I could even get you more clients if you want. And to top it all off, Reggie will be happy to have me out of the clubhouse for a while every day."

Jacques considered it, his eyes softening somewhat. Until he said, "No."

"Oh come on! You obviously expect something of me so why don't you tell me what it is?"

He didn't answer as he walked toward his trailer. But he soon turned around and she had a split second

of hope. He quickly dashed it. "Dinner will be ready in an hour. Then I'll see you in the morning."

"What if I'm not here in the morning? I did my job, and more."

He turned back again. "You'll be here."

"Is that right?"

"You have to know. It's one of the things I like about you."

"I don't like being manipulated."

"That's a good lesson."

And he was gone. Cynthia tossed the towel down, then thought better of it and picked it up back up. She cursed as she went toward the barn to get ready for dinner.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The sky was unusually clear when Jacques left the trailer the following morning. He saw Dustin's truck in the lot but didn't see his pilot anywhere. That was also unusual. He peeked into the other trailer but it was empty. A look inside the barn also turned up no one.

He climbed the ladder and noticed with some sadness that Cynthia's bag was gone. The loft had been cleaned up and the bed made, and now there was no sign of her.

He climbed back down and headed for the garage. Dustin was supposed to help him with the plumbing under the trailer before he went out on his run, but if the man would be anywhere else, it would be the garage.

He opened the bay door and stopped, surprised. The huge tarp that had once covered the older Antonov was gone, and the plane had been pulled up even with its twin. Dustin was cleaning the outside of it, making it shine for the first time in years.

"Just what are you doing? Cleaning this plane is a waste of time. It's scrap."

Dustin grinned and shook his head. "Not anymore."

The plane roared to life and Jacques took a step back. Cynthia's head appeared in the cockpit as she let out a sigh of relief. Dustin pumped his fist in the air and hugged Jacques, who had no idea what was happening.

"Third time's the charm!"

Cynthia climbed out of the plane and gave Dustin a high five, looking at Jacques with amusement and a little bit of arrogance. "Scrap, is it? It just needed a little love. And a couple new parts."

"And where did you find the new parts?"

"Dustin and I might have snuck into Reggie's scrap yard."

Dustin grinned and pointed into the cockpit. "We even found fuzzy seat covers. How awesome is that?"

When Jacques didn't speak, their excitement started to wind down. Dustin put his hands down and cocked his head. "Are we in trouble?"

Jacques suddenly broke out into a grin and grabbed them both in a hug. "No, no trouble. Though you would have been if you'd gotten caught stealing from Reggie."

Cynthia shrugged. "With the amount of work I do around there, I deserve a few things now and then. But you know what this means. It's got to go up so we can make sure everything works."

Jacques had to admire her gumption. She'd obviously spent the whole night talking Dustin into going along with her plan, and then executing it, with no promise of Jacques changing his mind. "All right. Let's take it up for a few minutes and work out the kinks." He looked under the plane. "Did you change the tires?"

Dustin grinned. "That was my other job. She makes it run; I make it look damn good."

Jacques shook his head. "OK, mechanic, hop in and keep your ears open."

Cynthia climbed into the cockpit and waited for Jacques to haul himself inside. "Can I take off?"

"Nope. Take offs and landings are my thing."

"For now?"

He didn't answer as he moved the plane to the runway, said a small internal prayer, and pushed the throttle. They glided across the dirt and into the air. Jacques laughed when he heard Dustin come over the radio.

"This is AM 235, and today we'll be playing sloooooow jazz."

Jacques put on his headset and turned it on. "It appears our transceiver is working now. How

convenient."

Cynthia watched him talk to Dustin, enjoying his happiness. She'd already decided Jacques was a pain, but as Dustin had promised, there was more to him than that. At the moment, he looked happier than she'd ever seen him.

He finished talking to Dustin and looked at her. "Want to take over?"

She grabbed the yoke and he laughed as he sat back to let her fly. He watched her intently, fully understanding the serenity that came over her when she had control. It was the same way he always felt. She was born to be in the air but she was still burying too much pain. The kind that could cause disasters to happen.

He held up a map that showed the areas they could use freely without airspace fees and she quickly figured out his notations and landmarks. The biplane didn't stutter or stall once, flying smoothly above the fields and roads.

Jacques allowed her to make the route several times, content to sit in silence. When he felt they'd used enough fuel, he tapped the yoke and she begrudgingly let him take over.

"Will you train me now?"

He didn't answer as he brought the plane into a smooth landing, taxiing to the garage with ease. When he'd turned off the engine, he finally said, "No."

"And why not? Obviously, I can do this."

"Obviously. You have a quick mind and you're not afraid to learn new skills, for the most part."

Cynthia sighed and sat back in the seat. "For the most part. If you like me for my work, then why won't you train me? I'd do a good job."

"Surely. But this is only your second flight, and I had to practically kidnap you to get you on the first time."

"Well, there are reasons for that."

"There's a reason for everything under the sun. And the reason I won't hire you is because I need people who can stand on their own."

"What are you talking about? I've been standing on my own for two years."

"No you haven't. You've been surviving for two years. There's a difference."

Now she was starting to get angry. "And I've been doing a damn good job of it. Just because I was afraid of flying at first doesn't mean I'm incapable of doing it now."

"This has nothing to do with flying. I know you can do that. I need another pilot. What I don't need is to have to carry you into adulthood."

Her jaw dropped. "What the hell does that mean? I've seen more at 19 than most people see in their first 30 years, so don't talk to me about adulthood."

"And all those things you've seen have done nothing to make you an independent human being."

"Independent? Look, old man. My parents died when I was 11. Luckily for me, my uncle Henry was there for me. Two years ago, his jet exploded on a mission. Just blew up in midair. I used to fly with him all the time, but you can't blame me for being a little messed up about it when all of a sudden, parts of him were scattered all over Washington State. For no damn reason."

He watched her as she turned and looked out the front of the plane. After a moment, she continued. "I'm thankful that you got me back in the air, OK? Thank you for that. But I've lived on the streets. I'm more than able to handle myself."

"Then why don't you?"

She looked back at him, her eyes flashing with anger. "What right do you have to say that I'm not? I have a job. I pay for my room. I pulled myself out of an alcohol addiction that the AA group said I'd never get out of. How's that for help? Even AA gave up on me. I'm still here. I'm stronger than you think."

"There's a fine line between strong and stupid sometimes."

"Did you just call me stupid?"

"It's just a thought. I have many of those. I would love to hire you. Go live some more and find your strength. Then come back and talk to me."

"And what exactly do I have to do to prove something to you?"

He just stared at her.

"Nothing? No sage advice? I should just go back to the clubhouse."

"I'm sure they will continue to take care of you."

"Nobody takes care of me. They just... Is it so bad that they helped me out when I was a puddle of nothing on the floor?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. Everybody needs help sometimes. The problem only comes when we rely on it completely."

"I don't rely on it completely."

"Don't you?"

"No, I don't. You don't know me."

"I know you better than you think. I've been there myself. Everyone who's ever worked here has been an orphan at one time or another and every single one of them had to find themselves before I'd hire them."

Cynthia scoffed. "I know exactly who I am."

"You won't know who you are until you no longer depend on other people to tell you who you are. Or give you something to argue about. Arguing doesn't mean you know what you're talking about when you're only doing it to hear yourself speak."

She slapped her forehead. "I don't have to listen to this."

"Of course not. But you are."

Cynthia sighed in frustration. "OK. Let me give you something so you'll think this conversation mattered. I'll admit I'm still a little screwed up about losing my entire family. I don't think you can fault me for that."

"I can't."

"Good. But it doesn't mean I'm not independent."

"You tell me. Do you grieve because it's what we all do and it's a natural process? Or do you hold on to it because it gives you an excuse any time you fail? If you need an excuse to fail, you're not living to your potential. Are you where you want to be? Or is it easier to try and convince yourself that you are rather than step out to find the truth?"

"If I write you an essay, will you hire me?"

He climbed out of the cockpit and smiled at her. "Nope."

And he was gone.

Cynthia suddenly realized she'd never felt more alone. Damn, she hated that guy.

Reggie and Chase walked into the garage, where Max was sitting on the hood of the old Ford truck, reading something on Kerry's computer. His six favorite lieutenants sat around calmly. Max looked up and smiled.

Reggie looked around and shrugged. "We've got four jobs to go out tonight. Where are the others?"

Max put down the computer and hopped off the hood. "I needed them to do something else for me for a while, because you and I need to have a little talk."

"What's up?"

"Kerry's smarter than I gave her credit for. Did you know she was able to get past the internet blockade? I didn't understand all the technical stuff but she helped me find out some very interesting things I thought I should share."

Chase could see Reggie tense slightly, and he hoped Max didn't notice.

"For instance, your girl Cynthia has had a very interesting life. Turned up in the news a couple times. The one from when she was 11 was really sad. Both parents killed in a car wreck on the way to pick her

up from school? That's very distressing. And then just a couple years ago, the uncle who adopted her gets killed on an Air Force mission in Washington? That had to be hard, but the hard thing for me is figuring out how someone can be visiting family, when she doesn't have any?" He looked at Reggie with a curious expression. "Maybe you can enlighten me on how that's possible?"

"I only told you what she told me. I'm not a biographer."

Max grinned, a wicked glint in his eyes. "Right. That's two lies. How many more have you told me, Reg? Or do you save betrayal for the little whelp you say you're not attached to? I'd hate to think you've got more loyalty to some girl than you do to me."

Reggie didn't answer, because there wasn't anything he could say.

"Where is she, Reg? I love you, man, so I'll give you a shot at saving your position."

Reggie stood up straight but he gave it some serious thought. He hadn't done much in his life that most people would consider right, but for some reason he couldn't back down now. He hoped Chase would understand and run to get Sarah and Cynthia out of town until Max cooled off.

"I don't know."

"And that's three. You know what they say about three strikes, Reg."

In a flash, his six men were up and had a hold of Reggie, dragging him to one of the benches and tying his hands. Chase stepped forward but a glare from Max made him stop.

Max walked over to Reggie and leaned down. "Don't worry, Reg, I'm not going to kill you. There are things I want to do that I want you to have to live with. But you're not going to ride again. It's hard to ride without a hand."

He pulled out a long survival knife and Chase grabbed his arm. "Wait. You don't have to do this."

Max laughed. "You do have some balls, don't you? This is happening whether you like it or not. So step down."

Chase weighed the consequences for all of his options and then stood straighter. "No. Reggie took me off the streets. I can't let you do this."

"And you're dumb as hell, aren't you?"

He knocked Chase over with a hard punch and raised a hand. Before Chase could even get up, the jackals surrounded him.

Reggie felt his last chance for redemption go up in smoke.

Cynthia ran her hand along the side of the Antonov, still annoyed with Jacques for digging so deeply into everything she feared. He just didn't understand what it was like to be completely alone, chained to your body's weaknesses. Or maybe he did. He said everyone who worked here had been an orphan. Was he? She wanted to find out.

She headed back toward the trailer to find him but stopped when she saw the RPC Pathfinder roll down the dusty road toward her. It swerved and clipped one of the fence posts, coming to a hard stop just shy of the driveway.

She changed directions and approached the vehicle, hoping Chase hadn't fallen off the wagon with keys in his hand.

She pulled open the driver's side door and Chase tumbled off the seat, landing on the ground with a thud. "What the hell are you..." He rolled over and she saw his face was a mask of blood and bruises, his shirt ripped, the patches on his jacket torn off and missing.

She flashed back to the night Reggie had found him outside the bar, drunk and beaten and out of his mind. The night she'd really turned herself around for the both of them.

"Chase, what on earth happened to you?" She pulled him closer to the fence so he wouldn't be in the road and checked his sides for broken ribs. The last thing he needed was a punctured lung.

Chase's voice was weak and tired but he tried his best. "Max found out Reggie lied."

"Lied about what?"

"He said you were off visiting family."

Cynthia wanted to slam her head into the post. "That's about the easiest lie to debunk. I can't believe he'd be that stupid."

"Max wanted to get his hands on you. Reggie wouldn't tell him you were here. Max was gonna cut Reggie's hand off but I couldn't let him. So..."

His eyes started to close and she shook him. "Hey. Don't fall asleep until I know you don't have a concussion. You should have gone to the police." She knew when she said it that he wouldn't have done that, but he surprised her.

"I did. The guy said it was about time we did each other in. Maybe he'd send someone in an hour. Give Max plenty of time to follow through on his threat."

"What threat?"

"To ruin Reggie's whole world."

Cynthia heard Dustin's boots before she saw him come up behind her. "What happened here?"

"Max Maxwell."

Dustin shook his head and cursed. "Let's get him inside."

Chase grabbed Cynthia's arm. "No. I'm a dead man. I barely snuck out to begin with. He can't find me here or he'll take out everyone. You need to get as far away as you can. Take the Pathfinder."

Dustin considered all of the options. "We take him to the hospital and Max will find him there, too. We can hide him in the barn for a little while until we figure out what to do."

He helped Chase up and kept him on his feet. "You can hide the Pathfinder.."

He was already too late. The Pathfinder was pulling away from him in a hurry. It swung and headed toward town.

"God..." He blew out a breath and focused on what he needed to do first. "If anything happens to her I'm going to smother you in your sleep."

"I won't stop you, dude."

"Come on. The sooner I get you to the barn the sooner I can do something about this."

Max paced from the garage door to the truck and back again, over and over as he enjoyed the tension in the air. Reggie was sitting next to one of the work benches, both hands tied to one of the legs. He was doing everything in his power to stay stoic.

Max finally stopped pacing and faced his VP, crossing his huge arms in annoyance. "It's not even the fact that you lied to me, Reg. It's the fact that you've lost your guts. The Reggie I started this club with would never have let some teenage trollop give him the run around. When I left to expand our distribution channels, I thought I'd left the right guy in charge. Then I come back and find out you're just some old man who's gone soft. It's really pitiful."

"I haven't gone soft. There's more to it."

Max grinned and shook his head. "More to it? You don't know how to keep someone in line anymore? Throw a chick across the room a few times and she'll do whatever you want. You think other clubs are gonna take us seriously if they find out some kid's in charge? It's bad for the image."

"Times have changed."

"Right. Times have changed. For them, maybe. But in this club, girls don't make the moves, ride the bikes or wear the colors. That's the way it's always been. That's the way it will always be. You know what I have to do now."

He knelt down close to Reggie and patted him on the chest. "The patches come first, then the hand so you can't ride anymore. And since you lied to me, I'm gonna make sure you can never lie again. Sarah might thank me for that one. Can't argue with no tongue. Or you can earn back my trust. We could start by letting Sarah illustrate how a woman is supposed to behave."

"I'd love to know how a woman is supposed to behave."

Reggie cursed but Max grinned as he stood up and turned toward the door, where Cynthia was calmly standing as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"So you're cocky, loud mouthed and dumb as hell? Geez, Reggie, you know how to pick 'em."

Cynthia took a quick look around. Max had obviously sent away anyone who might have defended Reggie, leaving only the men who hated her the most. Jacques' voice flashed across her mind as she heard him say, "There's a fine line between strong and stupid sometimes." She figured she'd just found it.

But she couldn't back down now. "You've shown your muscles, now back off."

Max laughed and clapped once. "Did she just tell me to back off? Little girl, I'm the only one who tells me when to back off. There's a lot you need to learn."

He approached her with an air of barely restrained rage. "You should introduce yourself to me properly, and be grateful you have the privilege."

"No, thanks. I'm really not interested. I'm kind of busy today."

He slapped her so hard she saw stars, but instead of falling, she slapped him right back. A sharp intake of breath could be heard from almost everyone in the room.

Max stood still for a moment and blinked, then turned back toward her. "Just how stupid are you?"

"I haven't failed a test yet. But if you're going to treat me like that you should expect to get the same in return."

He laughed hard for almost thirty seconds, then stood straight, the laughter gone, his face a mask of rage. He made a nod and two of his lieutenants grabbed her by the arms. He grabbed her roughly by the chin and made her look at him.

"You don't get to call the shots, girly. You're not my equal. You're nothing." His wicked right hand almost took her down to a knee but she managed to stay standing. "Did you hear what I said? You're worthless. A nobody. Nothing."

She ignored the small amount of blood she could taste in her mouth. "I'm nothing, but you need two guys to hold me for you. Not sure I'm the one who's nothing."

"I don't need anything." He motioned for them to let her go but just before they did he punched her hard in the stomach, dropping her to her knees. "Nobody talks to me like that." He used his boot to knock her to the floor, then buried a kick into her side.

She tried to catch her breath but the pain was intense. She grabbed his belt to pull herself to her knees again and he pushed her head back. "At least you're in the right place now."

She spit in his face and barely registered Reggie's pleas to stop. She heard Max say, "That's it," and winced as he pulled her up by the hair and flung her over his shoulder. She kicked but he held on and carried her into Reggie's office, slamming and locking the door and tossing her onto the couch.

"You're going to learn your place if I have to beat you senseless."

He dropped to a knee on the couch but she fought him, determined to make this as hard for him as humanly possible. For the first time in a long time, she let her uncle's face cross her mind, remembering their time in the gym at Offutt Air Force Base.

She could hear him say, "Remember, size doesn't matter if you know what to do but most importantly, you have to know when."

She clipped Max's chin with an elbow and he roared with rage and pulled her off the couch and into the air. She took the opportunity to grab him in a chokehold, which only enraged him more. She felt the veins and muscles ripple in his neck as he started running toward the wall and she braced for the impact. He slammed her against the wall but she held on, forcing herself to find a breath.

She heard someone rattling the door but she couldn't focus on that right now. Max spun around but she held on with everything she had. She heard him make an agonized sound and he suddenly pitched forward. As they hit the floor she felt her position change and knew without a doubt he wasn't going to move again.

She slowly let go as the door was kicked in and wondered if this was how she was going to die. But instead of Max's boys, three NPPD officers charged in and took in the scene. One knelt down and put two fingers to Max's neck and shook his head.

"He's dead."

Cynthia put her head back against the floor and vaguely heard one of the other officers bark orders to arrest everyone in sight.

## CHAPTER SIX

Cynthia didn't move, pain radiating up her side, her temples pounding. She'd been lying on the table in the interrogation room for over an hour since someone had last come in to see her. She'd been questioned four times in the last seven hours and as far as she was concerned, the silence was welcome. Not surprisingly, the lawyer she'd asked for had yet to make an appearance. He probably never would.

They had to know by now that there was no family to come looking for her. She'd be swept into the system so fast she'd probably never see daylight again. Maybe they'd let her make some calls. She had to find someone else to check in on Grant. Maybe Dustin could reach him.

The door opened and she put an arm over her eyes to block the bright light from the hallway. Once it was closed again she looked up at Reggie.

"How you doin', kid?"

"I've been better. And a whole lot worse, so I guess I can't complain."

"Cops are letting you go. They were willing to see the self-defense side anyway but the doc found out Max actually had a massive heart attack."

"Before or after I broke his neck?"

Reggie regarded her calmly, seeing the mix of emotions in her eyes that belied the tough stance she was choosing to take. "Before. He broke his own damn neck when he fell."

She looked up at the ceiling for a while, not sure whether she could believe that or not. If Reggie was lying, he'd picked a good one. A heart attack was perfectly plausible for someone who relied on steroids as much as Max had.

Reggie waited a few more minutes before he spoke again. "Come on, get up. Someone'll give you a ride back to the clubhouse."

"You'd really let me go back?"

"Of course. We'll take care of you like we always do. Anyone has a problem, they can go somewhere else. Besides, Sarah says watching me get badgered is sexy. There's just something a little wrong with her."

He left the room and she stayed where she was, thinking about what he'd said. It was another half hour before the last officer she'd seen, Beckham, returned to the room. He looked surprised to see her.

"You were told you're free to go, right?"

"Yeah. I needed to think."

"Need a ride? I have to reopen this room."

She slowly rolled over and slid off the desk, trying not to show her pain and risk being carted off to the hospital. "I'll take the bus."

"Suit yourself."

She walked down the hall past other officers who looked at her with a variety of expressions, some concerned, some indifferent, a couple almost grateful and a few who seemed angry. She tried not to think about what might be going through their minds as she left the station and waited for the bus. It might not be the safest way home but she knew at least a few officers were on Max's payroll. They'd probably leave her alone, but that didn't mean she wanted to risk being in a car with one.

She stopped short when she thought about going home. The clubhouse was the only home she knew, and she believed Reggie when he said he'd take care of her. Maybe that was what she needed. Jacques was right after all. She'd never really been on her own, in control of her own destiny. Not even on the streets.

She kept thinking about it as the bus drove through the misting rain. It was coming down a little harder

when she finally stepped off the bus and looked at the RPC gate and the fanged deer logo above her head. Once again she was starting an uncertain life, standing in the rain.

Thunder rolled through the trailer as Dustin slid his chair closer to the table, waiting for Jacques to join him. Jacques pulled out his chair but didn't sit yet.

Dustin eyed him calmly. "Still worried?"

"She's not being charged, but that's all I could find out."

"You think she went back to the club?"

Jacques shrugged and started to sit down, but stopped as another roll of thunder shook the sign hanging over the front door.

Dustin cocked his head. "What's up?"

"Heard something else."

This time the knock could be clearly heard. Jacques walked to the door and opened it to find Cynthia standing there, soaked to the bone, her bag in a bundle of plastic sheeting. He took in the cuts on her face and the swollen areas that were already bruising and held in his anger. Instead he raised an eyebrow. Cynthia cut him off.

"Before you say anything, I'm not here asking for help. I've walked this far. I can keep going. But I want to fly, and this is where I can do it. And you're going to pay me to do it, because you know I can and I know you want the help. And instead of my first paycheck, I'll take some icepacks and bandages if you've got them."

Jacques felt a rush of what he imagined paternal love might feel like as he watched her standing in the rain, determination written on her face. "No need for that. Technically I never paid you for fixing the plane. So I owe you some ice packs and bandages. Probably a little soup, too."

He moved just enough for her to see the table, where Dustin stood next to his chair, not able to hide his rage nearly as well as Jacques could.

She stayed still, trying not to wince at the intense pain in her side. "I think you might be right. It's an acceptable trade to me. The other trailer still comes with the job?"

"For half your pay."

"We can negotiate that in the morning. Can I have the key?"

He reached above the door and took down the key. "Obviously you want to change before dinner."

"Obviously." She took the key even though it hurt to raise her arm. Dustin held down a bag of icepacks and Jacques' medical kit and she took that as well. "Thank you, whichever one of you yelled at the cops. I'll just see you after the rain stops. "

Jacques nodded. "Get some rest. You start Monday."

She nodded and walked through the rain toward the other trailer, limping slightly.

Dustin let out the breath he'd been holding. "Think she needs help?"

Jacques shook his head. "No. She'll be just fine. She has to be." He closed the door and smiled. "She's my new crop duster."

## THE ETERNITY SERIES

***Road to Eternity: Cynthia "Cropduster" Purdue*** is a short prequel about one character from my larger novel, *Flight to Eternity*. *Flight* is the first of a series of books that detail the lives and experiences of the Air Force Space Group known as Team Apollo and the people they meet along the way.

There are two offshoots of this series: one that follows a group of people stranded on Earth's oceans and one that follows those who end up in another place at the end of *Flight to Eternity*.

While writing this series, Cropduster became a favorite character to many of the people who've read the stories that are currently in progress, which is why I decided to write this short prequel.

If you'd like to follow my journey or check out other writings, visit my website at [www.ChristySummerland.com](http://www.ChristySummerland.com). Signing up for my free email list is the best way to keep up with what I'm doing. You'll also receive occasional free stories, coupon codes when new books are released and my undying gratitude.

*Flight to Eternity* is currently available on Amazon, Smashwords, Barnes and Noble, Kobo, iBooks and more. It is also available in print via Amazon and CreateSpace.

Thanks for reading.

Peace, love and Eliza Dushku,

Christy Summerland