

Chapter One

Lorna Merryfield's jaw slackened as the tiny maroon and white airplane buzzed down to Earth and taxied jauntily over to the empty terminal where she sat, at Morey Field. She'd been there twenty minutes and no other planes had come in. But surely this wasn't her flight.

She glanced at her Movado watch then back at the miniscule aircraft.

Frowning, she pulled the itinerary her assistant had arranged out of her nubby ostrich briefcase and checked the name of the flight service against the logo emblazoned on the fuselage. Sure enough. AirGage.

Good Lord, did Gertie really expect her to fly in that thing? She'd seen larger mosquitoes.

The mousy girl had mentioned transportation options into and out of Flintlock, Wisconsin were limited. But this was ridiculous. Lorna dug into her purse for her BlackBerry and mentally ticked off her appointments for the next four days.

She was due to meet with John Preston and his family tomorrow morning, New Year's Eve. Her parents would fly in tomorrow night and if all went well, she and John would not only announce a planned merger guaranteed to launch their combined businesses into the stratosphere, they'd get some start-up money, too.

As a nationally recognized Image Consultant whom she'd met and lectured with on numerous occasions, John was debonair without being oily. The perfect gentleman and therefore the perfect partner to help spread her etiquette message to corporations across the country – Better Money through Better Manners.

With his expert grip on manipulation through appearances, John had choreographed their small fund-raiser against the backdrop of winter wonderlands and new beginnings. His parents were respected entrepreneurs in Flintlock. Though their

business was modest, John anticipated charming the Merryfields with his meteoric rise from such humble roots.

Worry tightened into a thick rubber band around Lorna's middle. Her mother and father weren't an easy sell, were more the glitzy country club types. But John had argued stubbornly for a cozy family dinner followed by fireworks al fresco. As the clock struck twelve, they'd make their pitch. Against her better judgment, she'd agreed.

Still, there was no way in hell she was getting on that toy plane.

Gertie had to find another way and find it quick. One Manolo clicked a tattoo on the freshly waxed tile floor. A door squeaked open, the room darkened and she sensed an electric wave of heat to her left. The fine hairs at her nape stood up.

"Ms. Merryfield?" a deep voice asked.

Ignoring the call to attention her body was hearing, Lorna held up a finger and turned away. The delicate bling of a low battery vibrated into her ear. "Great," she muttered and threw the phone back into her purse. Rounding on a thin heel, she came nose to chin with the electrical disturbance and vacuumed in a shocked breath.

"I'm Gage Archer. You must be my lucky passenger."

A scent of leather and something magnetically atmospheric flew into her nostrils and collided with the pleasure sensors in her brain. The distant memory of once-important desire awakened and howled through her body.

Odd. She hadn't felt that way since high school, when that cool boy she'd liked had knocked on her door. What was his name? Never mind. Her mother had put the kibosh on it quickly enough, sat Lorna down for a heart-to-heart. And the next day the boy ignored her in the hallway.

Boys had pretty much ignored her ever since. Fine with her. She had work to do.

Lorna clawed through the moist fog collecting at the base of her psyche and hung out her sanity to dry.

Tipping her head back, she tucked a strand of wayward hair into her ponytail, where it belonged, and glanced at her pilot-to-be. "Not if I can help it," she began, meeting dark brown eyes. "I don't fly in wind-up toys..." The statement ended in a hiccup and her hands started shaking. She tottered backwards but couldn't escape the velvet touch of his eyes.

The side of his mouth twitched and a gleam backlit his lingering gaze. "But I bought a new rubber band just for you."

A strange ripple, not unlike a giggle, erupted from her stomach and she covered it with a cough. Gage was...cute. No. Hot. Okay cute and hot. But giggling with a cute-n-hot flyboy was not on her agenda for the day. "I'm serious. I can't get into that thing." *With you.* "Can you help me find alternate transportation? I'd still pay you, of course."

"How much time you got?" He crossed his arms over a broad expanse of chest and once again the orgasmic scent of leather hit her nose. Why did he have to smell so good? And look so fine. The crown of sleek, dark hair on his head reminded her of mink.

This wasn't going to be easy. "None."

A smile eased across firm, masculine lips. "Then I'm your man. Fastest ride in five counties." He rocked back on his heels and a squirt of liquid fire dribbled into her panties.

Holy mother. That tickled.

"I can't ride you. I mean, ride *with you.*" *Oh. My. God.* Her face had to be as red as a mandrill's ass.

Gage watched her with amusement before shooting a glance over to the reception desk. A young man in a sweatshirt and baseball cap leaned over the counter, his eyes also filled with hilarity.

Lorna's teeth ached.

"Tell Ms. Merryfield how safe AirGage is, Tod."

"AirGage is safe."

"When was my last crash?"

"AirGage never crashed."

"How long has AirGage been in business?"

"AirGage—"

"You can stop now," Lorna hollered. But strangely enough, she felt better. Of course his dinky airline was safe. He flew in it, didn't he? She peered beyond Gage at the shiny airplane.

Outside in the snow, mechanics were swarming. The engine was being refueled, tire pressure checked. Someone eyeballed the prop.

Gage took her arm and through the two-ply cashmere sleeve of her sweater she felt the heat from his hand.

"Come on," he coaxed. "I'll show you how to do a pre-flight."

He made it sound like a prelude to sex.

Their eyes met and held and she saw he'd stopped laughing at her. "S'okay." She shrugged. "I really don't have any choice. I knew that from the start. Guess I just freaked for a minute."

"It happens."

Lorna drew a deep breath. She could do this. Despite messing with her, Gage had an air of responsibility. He wore plain but clean clothes. He was shaved and showered. And tall and leanly muscled with narrow hips honed for pumping. He smelled really, truly awesome...

Stop it.

Okay so the deep, probing eyes *might* cloak a devilish interior, but she didn't think he ran a shoddy operation.

She followed him out to the plane and squeezed into the backseat. Gage taxied to the end of the runway and eased the throttle.

The single engine sucked them down the strip in a gasp. Lorna white-knuckled the leather armrest and peered down to make sure of her seat belt. Touring the country to promote her newspaper column, she'd grown accustomed to the stability of jumbo jets. This gumball machine trinket buffeted through the air, every wobble a grisly reminder only a thin sheet of metal lay between her and runway pizza.

As they were jolted to altitude, she gulped air by the mouthful. The plane bucked and her butt lifted off the seat. Gage's head bumped the ceiling. He seemed to take it in stride, though. As if getting brained was a regular occurrence.

"Is this normal?" she shouted.

"Is what normal?" *Great.*

For the next thirty minutes they played dodgeball with air currents. Lorna pulled out her business plan and studied it with one eye. The other she kept trained on Gage for signs of impending doom.

At least that's what she told herself.

Rarely had she come across such a perfect specimen of male beauty. And to have it in the form of a pilot, for God's sake. Why couldn't hot guys go into Image Consulting? If John looked like Gage, she'd be all over him. So it was a good thing, really. She supposed. Otherwise she'd never be able to concentrate on her work.

Like now?

She smiled to herself, flicked her ponytail and licked her lips. A girl could fantasize, couldn't she? No harm done. There'd been a time when she'd yearned for sexual passion. Before practical reality intruded and she'd realized she'd never make it if she didn't focus on her studies and her job.

Still, once in a while she wondered what it would be like to lose herself in a totally impractical man. Like Gage Archer. The thought caused her clit to plump for the umpteenth time since she'd seen him. And for the umpteenth time, she reminded herself she was here on business. Gage's only role in her life was to deliver her safely.

Right now, her safety margin was dieting. The creepy plane quivered a lot, wings shimmying like Vegas showgirls.

They shot through a scattering of burly clouds and blasted out into bright sunshine. Lorna had just reconciled her skeleton to a clattering tube of pick-up sticks when the ride got strangely calm.

Popping out her earplugs, she unclipped the seat belt and leaned forward to tap Gage's shoulder. "Why did it get so quiet?"

He turned and flashed a Hollywood grin. Lorna was momentarily blinded by the glint of pure sex appeal off his silvered aviators. "The engine quit. Don't worry. We'll get her started again."

But he told me this wouldn't happen –

He glanced at the control panel. "Shit."

He promised...

"Buckle up." He flipped a couple of switches.

Lorna forgot to obey as a sour burp of betrayal singed her throat. Gage issued a volley of curses. Dread cozied up with her heart. "What's happening?"

"We're going down."

"Back to the airport?"

"Too far. But we're in luck. There's a big field ahead."

The plane gave a revolting lurch. Lorna's innards posted to the ceiling. She reached out to grab at something but her frantic hands had no place to go. So she laced them together tightly. In supplication, they came to her lips.

"Away we go!" Gage banked a hard left.

The snowbound earth rose fast. Lorna tried not to freak out and scream as they corkscrewed lower and lower.

"Never thought the engine would quit," Gage said. "Just had it rebuilt, too. Gonna give those folks a talking-to when I get home."

Was that her life flashing before her eyes? Years of studying quietly while her socialite mother hovered nearby.

No sex with boys.

Her physician father quizzing her for a test.

Still no sex with boys.

The time her brother had shucked her parents' wishes and joined the military. And Lorna, left behind, picking up the pieces and girding herself for her future as the new Emily Post.

Her mother's fondest wish.

Okay. Some diluted sex.

Then came John and their plans for the future. An empire of manners, politeness and teaching people what their parents should've taught them in the first place—how to behave to succeed...

Now she just needed to survive. To succeed at getting laid, goddammit!

The ground heaved toward them. Had Gage ever landed on snow? The surface was infested with moguls. What if a wing caught one and flung them into a cartwheel?

"I'm starting the flare," Gage said.

Was he asking permission? "Roger," she squeaked just in case.

"That'll reduce airspeed and make things better than horrible."

Suddenly the nose of the airplane lifted. Lorna sensed an immediate and dramatic slowing.

"Once we belly in, anything could happen. Take care of yourself, sweetheart."

Oh sweet Jesus. "You too," she choked.

The Mooney touched down softly. At first. All hell broke loose when it slipped into a skid, spewing powder like a snow blower. Hitting an ice patch, it spun loop-the-loop.

Gage reached back and grabbed Lorna's knee. His hand slid down her calf and she clutched his arm. Hot damn, he was muscular.

The Mooney chased its tail across the field and gained momentum. Lorna dropped her head into her lap, praying to the puke gods to spare her this one last indignity. Bad enough she'd be covered in blood and God knew what other bodily fluids in the morgue. But she had to draw the line at vomit.

When she felt brave enough to peek she regretted it. A Norway spruce loomed dead ahead.

"Holy sh..." she glued herself to the back of Gage's seat, burying her face in his shoulder to shield it from impact. For a moment, the warmth of his cheek lay against hers and she had the same all-consuming regret that'd become her death mantra – she'd never experienced a hard, screaming fuck.

Before now.

"Happy New Year!" Gage shouted.

The Mooney ground to a halt, whipping her around the seat, half onto his lap and plastering their bodies together with some big-ass Gs.

They clung to each other while the plane rocked gently. Scents of adrenaline and terror mingled with an explosion of pheromones in the panic-warmed confines of the tiny cockpit. Gage's capable hands on her ass kept Lorna from sliding off his leg and into the small crack between the seats. Was it her imagination, or was he squeezing harder than necessary? She tried squirming out of the awkward straddle and the thick hardness of his thigh molded into the crevice between her legs.

It felt like it belonged there. Should she keep squirming?

Why did she keep thinking these things?

Okay. God. Breathe.

"Damn," Gage finally sighed. "That was touch-and-go." One hand slid up her flank to cup the back of her head. "You okay?"

Touch me and go, go, go. With an erotic shiver, Lorna lifted her face and looked at him. "Yes," she murmured. "I think so, at least." The feel of a man's hands on her after so long...

He pushed aside a strand of her hair and she had to resist an urge to turn into his palm and lick it.

"Should've stayed in your seat," he said. "You'd have flown out the windshield if we'd hit that tree."

"I know."

He blew out a tense breath, its warmth and uniquely pleasant scent fanning her face and causing a whirling sensation in the pit of her stomach.

"I caught you."

"Yes." *In more ways than one.*

She ran into trouble dragging her eyes away from his. Some emotion she didn't recognize unfurled in her heart, caught an unfamiliar wind and began to flap wildly.

"It turned out all right," he said.

"Thanks to you. How'd you do that?" Gage was...incredible. Majestic. A hero.

He sent her a wicked grin. Bubbles of awareness popped in her pelvis. "I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

In your pants too, I bet. "But—"

"Feather the prop, reduce airspeed and hope for the best. Easy."

"For you!" Lorna smiled back in wonder. *My hero.*

His dark eyes searched hers as he reached around her to fiddle with some knobs on the instrument panel. She wondered what other knobs he might be interested in fiddling with and clamped her jaw to keep from asking.

What in God's green earth had gotten into her? Her pussy was watering at the thought of fucking him. But she didn't know him from boo!

“Damn.” Gage tore his fingers off the knobs and unconsciously put them back around her waist, kneading her flesh in frustration. “Don’t know what happened. All the oil got dumped. Only sixty-three hours on this turbo, too.”

She fanned her fingers across his broad chest and frowned. “You mean the oil leaked out?” He nodded. Not good. Her parents needed his services tomorrow night. “They can fix that, right?”

Gage shrugged and smiled good-naturedly. “Sure. But first I have to get the plane inspected and out of here.” His hands slipped beyond her waist to her back and she felt a light pressure as he drew her in.

She leaned closer, massaging his chest as if she’d known him for years. “How long will that take?”

Tentatively, his nose brushed hers. Her eyelids fluttered as she nuzzled him back and a low growl vibrated through his chest. Slowly, softly, the tips of their noses rubbed together until Lorna’s became as sensitized as her swollen, ready clit. And to think she’d always snickered about “Eskimo kisses” as they’d been called in elementary school. Maybe there was something to the northern style after all.

“A week, maybe two,” he whispered before nipping her lower lip.

She should be upset about that, she thought through the shimmer of mounting lust. His tactile lips surrounded and sucked gently on hers, seemingly intent on driving all concerns from her mind. “You’re supposed to pick up my parents tomorrow night at Morey Field,” she protested in a feeble voice.

“Not going to happen, sweetheart.” His tongue darted out and engaged hers in a brief fencing bout. “They’ll have to rent a car.”

With his hands freely roaming her body and his hot tongue tangling around hers, she couldn’t muster the energy to fret over her parents’ transportation options. They’d find a way.

Besides, she still straddled Gage's thigh and the slide of the thick seam of her jeans against her pussy made it ache for his hard, thrusting cock. All it'd take would be a few well-timed wiggles and she'd come on his lap. But she wanted much more.

A gust of wind rocked the Mooney. Then another, pelting ice against the windshield and drawing their attention to a suddenly steely sky. Gage snapped the headset on, shouted some incomprehensible pilot-speak then tore the headset off. "Rogue storm. Copter's been grounded. No telling when they'll arrive."

"How'd they know we crashed?" She hadn't heard Gage alert anyone.

"ELT—emergency locator transmitter. Kicks in automatically."

Cool! She hadn't known that. But still. He should've radioed in to let everyone know they were alive. Perhaps his mind had been preoccupied with something else? Like her? The idea turned her insides to goo. "So they suspended the rescue?"

Gage nodded and his eyes ran laps around her face. "Gonna take a while."

She licked her lips and his warm gaze followed the movement. "So we're stranded."

"In nowhere-land and I'm the nowhere man. No one will worry if I'm late." His chiseled features had softened with expectation.

"Me either." Not tonight, anyway. Suddenly she wished she did have someone besides her parents and brother who'd worry. She and Gage could freeze to death tonight and they'd be the only ones who'd miss her.

Wait a minute.

Freeze. To. Death.

Rescue was nowhere in sight. Subzero temperatures were moving in.

Had she survived a quick and painless end only to perish slowly and tortuously? "Could we die here?"

"Unlikely but possible."

She recalled reading a pithy quote somewhere, about being on one's deathbed and what one's regrets might be. The regrets never had anything to do with career advancement. "I've devoted my whole life to work," she told Gage in a faraway voice. "Built a solid reputation and an impressive portfolio, pleased my parents and am now set to climb even higher in my profession."

"Sounds great."

She tilted to face him. "And for what? To die in the snow with a stranger?" Until this minute she'd always thought of her life in positive terms—of what she had or would soon have. Now, what she might miss yawned into a hungry void. "To have never known what it was like to be..."

He reached out and massaged the nape of her neck. "To be what?" he asked gently.

"To be everything to someone. Just once." *Like you are to me at this moment.* "To make love with raw desperation."

The pressure from his fingertips increased and a pleasure-pain shot through her tense shoulders straight into her cunt.

"Is that your ultimate fantasy?" His voice had grown thick.

She nodded. "Do you have—" She cleared her throat. "Do you have a last wish? Something you've never done that you would like to do before...before you go?"

"How optimistic."

"I read the papers. People get stranded and die every winter in storms. Do you think we're somehow immune?"

"No," he said grimly. "I'm well aware I might not survive into next year. Dwelling on it isn't my bag though."

"What would you do if you knew you were going to die tonight?"

He raked her up and down until the heat from his eyes made her sweater smoke. "I'd fuck you with raw desperation."