

Grounded Games



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Chapter One



A nasally voice bellows out “coming through” as if everyone boarding should step aside and let His Highness proceed. With my bad luck, this guy will sit next to me. Curiosity gets the best of me, and I peek over the seat ahead to spy on the loudmouth when I spot a hot guy standing in the aisle. His chin is jugged forward, giving a cocky air about him, so I could imagine him being pushy, though I hope I’m wrong.

He catches me staring at him, which normally I’d find embarrassing, but my disapproval steadies me. He smiles, but I maintain a scowl to let my displeasure sink deep. His eyebrows rise as though he’s questioning me, and I give him a slow, deliberate you-know-what-you-did blink. To my surprise, he throws up both hands in innocence and discreetly jabs his thumb at the balding, red-faced man behind him. I bow my head in apology, and he waves this off. Then we’re both grinning at one another, which kicks in my awkwardness. I slump down so he can’t see me.

Hidden in my seat, I realize I’ve just had an entire exchange with the hot guy using nothing but pointed glares. He can actually read my mind. This man is dangerous. I’ll be in so

much trouble if he sits next to me. I'm already swooning, which means I'll likely be horrible at detecting if he's dull or dashing, but I guess I'll never find out because the hot guy turns toward the aisle a row ahead and across the plane.

The loudmouth man stops at the two empty seats beside me. "Bonus—the person in the window seat is already there," he announces to the woman trailing behind him. She's sporting a no-nonsense bob and a pearl-button sweater in a shade of oatmeal that says I am not interested in small talk. I hope she takes the middle seat.

"This way we don't have to climb over you," the man explains to me. I flash him a wan smile as he tosses his backpack onto the middle seat. His olive-green T-shirt reads, "Thou May Ingest a Satchel of Richards." It takes me a beat to decode this to, "Eat a bag of dicks." Okay. That's kind of funny.

He stretches his arms wide, letting out a guttural groan, then squeezes into the middle seat, shoving his bag into the storage at his feet. "Flying sucks."

"That it does," the woman and I say in unison, which startles us both into a laugh. The shared misery warms me up to this couple.

"Never much cared for it," the man says. "And now they pack us in like livestock. Moo. But we'll survive." He jabs his hand in front of me. "Anyway, I'm Hugh. And this here's my beautiful wife, Wendy."

His hand is so close I have to T-Rex my arm to shake. "Nice to meet you both. I'm Serena."

Wendy waves, then closes her eyes and tips her head back. Hugh stays twisted toward me, radiating the low-level energy of a man who has never once sat quietly in his life. "You live in Hotlanta?"

"Um, basically." And I leave it there, because nobody really says Hotlanta anymore, and I'd rather not elaborate that I actually live in slow-paced Peachtree City, in my parents' basement.

After college, my boyfriend and I had our cute (read cramped) apartment on the west side of Atlanta, but it was within walking distance of a trendy marketplace. I was killing the adulting thing until our relationship imploded. I took the first job that'd get me out of town, landing in a crappy sales-support role peddling material-handling systems to manufacturers. Now, I live out of a twenty-two-inch Samsonite, traveling to the industrial outskirts of exotic destinations like Akron, Bowling Green, and Columbus. Since I'm rarely home longer than a weekend, a place of my own has felt pointless.

"Not us," Hugh says, cracking his neck side to side with two percussive pops. "We're heading on to Florida. Hotlanta transfers to all points south—passed Lucifer himself up in first class."

"Ha ha, right." I lift my book, hoping Hugh will take the hint that this is the end of the conversation.

He bends forward to squint at the cover. The front features a square-jawed man in an unbuttoned shirt with an eye-bang stare so intense my panties almost fell to the floor the first time I saw the book.

I blush as though I'm the one half-dressed on the cover. "It's popular. Lots of people are reading it."

"Oh, I know. Even I've heard about that one." Hugh lifts his eyebrows. "Better watch out, or Lucifer'll snatch you onto his connecting flight."

He brays at his own joke, then elbows Wendy and practically shouts, "Did you catch that? She's reading one of those sexy books, and I said the devil's going to take her on the layover."

Half the plane now knows I'm reading a "sexy" book. Including the hot guy, I'm sure. I'm so glad no one can see me.

"Good one, babe," Wendy says in a voice as sweet as orange blossom honey. "That reminds me—pass me my reader."

Hugh busies himself with digging through his backpack. He hands Wendy her e-book reader in a black case with the cover shut, so if she's reading a sexy book herself, none of us will ever know. For himself, Hugh pulls out a paperback, a thriller that made headlines because it's being turned into a movie. The book should keep him entertained and spare me from any further conversation about my book choice.

As we take off, I watch Seattle recede, the tall buildings shrinking into dots lining the edge of the water, all of it scintillating in the afternoon sun. This week I was in Bellingham, Washington, which is a cute coastal city, though I didn't spend time in any photogenic spots. I'm always off in the grungy industrial area in warehouse-sized buildings surrounded by a sea of asphalt.

Hugh mumbles, reading under his breath, but his voice is lost in the background noise of the airplane, and soon I lose myself in my book. I'm so wrapped up in the story, I almost forget where I am, until a flash of light outside my window reminds me that I'm in a metal can in the sky. The flash is followed by a loud boom and a shudder of the plane, scaring me. I drop my novel into my lap, losing my page, which is a shame because I'm in the middle of the first sex scene.

"Did ya see that?" yells Hugh.

I press my face to the cold oval of the window. "The flash looked like it came from the wing. But everything looks—"

"That was an engine," says someone from a few rows back, in a calm, authoritative tone.

"The engine?!" Hugh pivots and cranes over the seatback. "You're joking!"

He plops back down. "Wait—do you feel that? We're pitching down." He holds his hands up as though he's protecting his face from a strong wind.

Panic seizes my stomach. I peer out the window, expecting to be hurtling toward a mountain, but there's nothing but blue sky and white clouds. I track a puffy one off in the distance and we remain level with it.

"There are multiple engines, Hugh. We're holding steady," Wendy says as she pats his hand.

I pop my head above the seatbacks and scan the plane. A dozen other passengers are also peeking up like prairie dogs, scanning for danger. I spy no gnarled metal or blown-out windows. My clenched jaw relaxes a bit.

The hot guy is also craning his neck and turns toward me. When our gazes meet, I fight the urge to pretend I wasn't just checking him out, and I maintain eye contact. I brave smiling at him, which I instantly regret. The engine just blew up—this isn't the time to be smiling. I immediately plop down. Too bad he hadn't sat next to me. If this is to be my last hour, I'd much rather share it with him than Hugh and Wendy.

The intercom crackles. "As some of you may have seen or heard"—the pilot begins, his voice the particular brand of measured calm they must teach in aviation school—"we've lost an engine. There's no cause for alarm. Our other engine is holding strong, and we're maintaining altitude. We will, however, need to make an emergency landing. Please remain seated with your belts fastened. We're in contact with a regional airport in Idaho, and I'll have an update shortly." A soft ding follows the silence.

"Emergency landing! Oh, no, no, no!" Hugh yells. "Did you hear that, Wendy? Em-er-gen-cy!"

She lays her e-reader on her lap. "Does it feel like we're crashing? No. We're fine." A confident strength has replaced her previous sweetness.

I don't know how she can be so calm. Hugh's outburst has me clutching my seat cushion. But perhaps a lifetime of calming him down has made her a Zen expert. Though Hugh looks like he should be the chill one. The tufts of gray hair on the sides of his head, together with his green shirt, make him Yoda-esque. Yet missing is the tranquility within him.

"Fine?" he says. "She says we're fine!" He pivots to me. "Does this seem fine to you?"

How does one answer that? Nothing is fine, but Wendy is clearly the ranking officer of this marriage, and I don't need to be a Jedi to know I should fall in line. "Nothing to freak out about," I squeak.

Wendy gives me an approving nod. "Listen to Serena, Hugh. Do you know that Serena comes from the root word serenity? See how serene she is? Nothing but an inconvenience. An unplanned layover. We'll change planes and be on our way. This will be a minor hiccup."

"A hiccup," I parrot.

"Spare me your psychoanalytical crap. You're not shrink-wrapping this. I'm entitled to my feelings." He grabs my forearm. A jagged thumbnail digs into my skin. "You know we're going to die!"

"No, we're not!" The words come out sharper than I intended, surprising Hugh and startling me. I am typically Serene Serena, but his mania is contagious, a wildfire spreading through the dry kindling of my own anxiety.

His grip goes slack, and I snatch my arm to my waist. Dying in a plane crash is a huge fear of mine, and twenty-five is too young to bite the dust. My end cannot be on this flight. With Hugh. When I haven't even figured anything out in my life. My job's meh. I live with my parents. I haven't been on a date in almost a year.

"We're not dying," I whisper.

"Keep telling yourself that. We're going to crash into a potato field and become potato crisps."

Before things can spiral further, a flight attendant materializes beside us. Her dark hair is pulled back in a tight bun, and her name tag reads AMANDA. She's doing a heroic job of keeping her expression professional while scanning the cabin for the next problem. She leans toward Hugh with a practiced smile. "Captain Sommer has decades of experience. There is no situation he can't handle." She straightens before any of us can respond and continues up the aisle, leaving a faint trace of jasmine behind.

"See." Wendy gives Hugh a smug little smile and pats his hand again, to which Hugh says nothing. I'm glad he's calmed. His paranoia's contagious, and who knows where things would've spiraled.

The intercom crackles again. "We're near a regional airport outside the city of Spudderton, Idaho, and they're happy to accommodate us. Flight crew, please prepare for an emergency landing."

"He said emergency again! And Spudderton?" Hugh's face contorts. "That doesn't sound like a real place."

Amanda reappears carrying a small canvas bag. "Do you have sharp items, possible projectiles, that you'd like us to store? Keys, metal jewelry, phones."

Hugh shakes his head in a rapid, jerky denial. Wendy mouths no. I shake my head, though not as possessed-looking as Hugh. I hope.

When Amanda moves to the next seat, Hugh leans toward me, eyes enormous. "Did you hear that? Projectiles! If we don't end up as potato crisps, then it's a key in the peepers. A slow, and painful death."

I cover my eyes. How I love them so. We're going to crash, be stabbed by a thousand projectiles, and suffer slow, agonizing deaths. I try to swallow, but I can't. This was supposed to be a big shopping weekend with my mom and grandmother to buy dresses for two upcoming celebrations—my brother's wedding and my grandmother's ninetieth birthday. I won't get to be part of either celebration, not to mention one day have my own wedding or ninetieth celebration. Worst of all, I won't get to tell them how much they mean to me. Tears come to my eyes. It's happening—my life is flashing before me.

That's it, I'm telling my family I love them. If I'm a goner, then I'm texting them goodbye. I check the aisle before sneaking my phone from my bag. I angle toward the window, giving Hugh and Wendy my back as I switch off airplane mode. The glow of two little bars wink at me, promising enough bandwidth for my final farewells.

I open the family group chat. The last message was me reminding them when I'm to arrive this evening. I type out *I love you*.

"What are you doing?" Hugh asks.

"Nothing." I tuck the phone under my leg.

"No, what's that?" He lunges at my leg and snatches my phone in one unexpectedly agile move, and then drops it onto Wendy's lap. "Turn it to airplane mode. Quick, before it makes the other engine explode."

"Give Serena back her phone." Wendy holds the phone toward me.

Hugh intercepts and tucks my phone into his sweat-ringed armpit. “She’s going to kill us. We’re already down an engine. Now she’s bombarding the only one remaining with her cell signal. How much do you think this plane can take?”

“I’ll turn it off.” I reach for it.

Hugh clamps his arm tighter against his side, but I’m undeterred and dig my hands into his sweaty armpit, which makes him squirm. Inside, I’m squirming as well. The phone drops to the seat, but he grabs it first. As we grapple over it, he yells, “You can’t be trusted with a phone. It’s your crack. You’ll kill us all for a hit on Tinder.”

He flings it into the aisle. It strikes the arm of the hot guy one row up, then bounces to the floor near his feet. He picks it up and furrows his brow while inspecting it.

I unbuckle and reach over the seatbacks toward him. “I’m so sorry. That’s mine. Can you pass it to me?”

“Don’t do it!” Hugh shrieks. He grabs at my outstretched hand. “Don’t give it to her. Power it off. She’s going to blow us up.”

“Chill out, Hugh! I’m not going to blow up anything. I only wanted to text my family that I love them.”

Everyone is staring at us, and quite a few people give me scathing looks, but some have a guilty glint in their eyes, as if they themselves have been breaking the rules and sending out words of farewell.

The hot guy wobbles the phone. He’s taunting Hugh and me.

“That’s mine!” My hand snaps in the air for it, even though I’m trapped by Hugh, who spread his arms wide to body block me. I’d have to climb over his shoulders to retrieve my phone.

“Don’t give her the phone,” he bellows. “She’ll kill us with her Tinder crack.”

“Tinder?” The hot guy raises an eyebrow. “Good to know.”

“Give us the phone.” Hugh nods to Wendy, not daring to put down his arms. “We’ll make sure it stays off.”

“I wasn’t on Tinder,” I tell the hot guy, pleading my case.

Hot guy’s lips twist into a dubious frown.

“I sent my family a text.”

“Sure,” he says. And there’s that cocky smirk of his again. He’s enjoying this way too much.

“Just give me my phone.” I jerk upright, banging my head on the overhead, then I blurt, “I’m not on any dating sites. I haven’t had sex in forever.”

Why. Did. I. Say. That?

To the entire plane. I rub the sore spot on the top of my head. Hot guy gives me the most pitying look ever. He leans forward, arm extended, to hand me my phone.

Amanda rushes to the scene. Thank goodness, because someone needs to calm Hugh down.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but you have to remain seated with your seat belt fastened,” she scolds.

“Me?” My mouth hangs open, but I don’t argue and take my seat. “I’m sorry, Amanda, but my phone slid over there. Can you hand it to me? The *gentleman* ahead has it.”

“Don’t give it to her.” Spit sprays from Hugh’s mouth. “It’s... it’s not her phone. She’s lying. Don’t give it to her!”

“I need everyone to calm down. We’ll be landing shortly. We can resolve this matter once we’ve landed. Are you okay, sir? Can you settle down?” she asks Hugh.

He nods, red-faced, and wide-eyed, but silent. The attendant points at me. “We’ll deal with the phone once we’ve landed. Until then, keep your seatbelt buckled.”

“Okay.”

I glower at Hugh before turning to the window, where Idaho spreads below in flat, green squares.

Somehow it seems fitting that my last minutes on earth will be spent with a tufted-haired demon while torpedoing into a potato field after confessing my crappy sex life to a hundred strangers.



The plane tilts. Hugh lets out a whinnying moan. My mind jumps to the second engine failing, but there’s no loud boom, no shuddering. All’s good. Deep breaths. Even with an engine down, everything feels like a regular landing.

I close my eyes. The image that surfaces is Bugs Bunny freaking out when a gremlin sabotages his plane. The vision of his puffy cheeks contorting through a dozen faces of fear and panic doesn’t make me feel better, so I switch to watching out the window. Tiny houses that could fit in my hand

dot the farmland stretching to the horizon, as ant-sized cars move along ribbons of asphalt.

Then the airport comes into view, or at least I think it's the airport. There's a small building that from high above looks like a shack, but it's next to a long, paved strip, so I guess this must be it. As the ground gets closer and the landing gear whirs, I clench the seat cushion, not releasing it until I feel the vibration of the tires touching down. The brakes jerk into place, and the plane shudders as it slows. We taxi to the side of the terminal.

"Oh, thank God, we made it!" Hugh punches his clenched fists toward the heavens.

Wendy says, "See, it was fine."

"It was. You were right." He grabs her face and plants a big one on her lips.

The fasten-seat-belt light dings off, signaling the end of the harrowing flight. Laughter and clapping erupt.

Hugh lurches over Wendy, jumping into the aisle, and yells, "We made it. We're alive, everyone. We're alive." He throws his arms up, which somehow gets a few hoots and hollers.

Hugh moves forward to make room for Wendy, and she offers to let me squeeze into the aisle with them, but I remain seated. I'm worn out from worry, but mostly I need some distance from Hugh.

The woman in the seat in front of me glances back, giving me a searching once-over like she's comparing me to what she'd imagined for the pitiful woman with a sexy book but a bad sex life. Thanks, Hugh.

Once deplaning reaches my aisle, I spot the hot guy waiting at the end of his row. I guess I can't hide out here forever. I scooch into the aisle.

"You lose this?" He holds up my phone.

"Oh, thank you!" I take it from him, all smiles, before remembering how foolish I must've looked. My cheeks blush. I turn from him to pull my wheelie-bag from the overhead luggage.

He reaches over me and lifts it down, but then rests it in an empty row. He nods to the empty seats in front of him. "I'll need you to wait here. We need to discuss the accusations made by your seatmate. I'm going to need some further information."

His voice is so cold that for a moment I think he's being serious.

"Right. I'm such a danger," I joke, but his face remains stony.

Unsure of what is happening, I slide into the row. He slides into the aisle in front of me.

"Those were very serious accusations." He cocks his head to give me a stern look. "I need you to answer a couple of questions."

"What?"

"I have to log this incident, especially since you threw your phone at me." He rubs at the back of his arm, turning it toward me, almost as if he expects me to pat his boo boo. When I scrunch my face in response, he falls back into serious mode and taps at his phone. "First name."

He's filing a report on me? I scan his belt loop for a badge, though I don't find one. But isn't being undercover part of the whole deal with air marshals?

But there's no way he's a marshal. Unless I'm the unluckiest person alive. I tailspin on my worsening day. It's Friday afternoon—I could be stuck in jail all weekend. How does bail work? Will my dad have to fly to Spudderton to get me out of the clink? What if Dad thinks I need to learn a lesson about my phone usage? *If you'd followed our rules about no phones at the dinner table, then you'd have some self-control, and none of this would've happened.*

I press my hand over my heart. Calm down. You can handle this. Be nice to the air marshal and make him understand that this is all a huge misunderstanding. "I swear I didn't throw my phone. The guy next to me did—Hugh. He was freaking out, and he threw my phone. On accident," I add because, even if Hugh isn't my favorite person, I don't want to get him in trouble. "I promise it was all a misunderstanding. Please don't arrest me. Or him."

"There'll be no need for that. Plus, I forgot my handcuffs." He winks. Okay, that was highly unprofessional. "Back to the report. Your first name."

"Serena." I put my hands on my hips. "And what exactly is your title?"

"And your phone number?" he asks, speaking over my question.

I pause, annoyed that he's ignored my question. There's no way he's an air marshal. What's his game? He shakes his phone impatiently. As I recite the numbers, I tiptoe so I

can see his screen—he’s entering the information into his personal contacts.

I moan, unable to believe I’ve been so slow on the uptake. “Did you just trick me into giving you my digits?”

“Trick’s a little strong. Clearly, I was joking around.” He puts his hand out for me to shake. “I’m Liam.”

“Seriously? This is a joke to you?” I stare at his extended hand in disbelief. After an emergency landing, this guy’s pulling pranks. “Please tell me I’m on some reality TV show and that there’s nothing wrong with the plane. Oh, and Hugh’s an actor.”

“The guy beside you? No, I’m afraid he’s the real deal.” He gives me a lopsided grin as though he expects me to joke along. He’s sadly mistaken if he thinks I’m going to slap my leg while saying *good one*.

Amanda squeezes around the last of the passengers and approaches us. “Do you have your phone? Everything resolved?”

I hold up my phone, thankfully undamaged. “Yes, no thanks to this one.” I narrow my eyes at Liam. Then I pull my carry-on bag into the aisle.

“I literally returned it to you,” Liam protests.

Amanda continues along the aisle, checking the seats as she goes, uninterested in our minor drama.

“We almost died. And I already had to deal with Hugh freaking out. This is hardly the time for practical jokes,” I say as I drag my bag behind me, not caring if Liam’s keeping up or if he’s able to hear my retort.

“Surviving a stressful situation makes this exactly the right time for jokes,” he says.

His response needles me, but I’ve reached the plane door, so I ignore him and brace myself against the opening. There’s no jetway, only a set of stairs descending onto the tarmac. The little terminal awaits, with its retro low-slung lines and stacked-stone exterior, a throwback to poodle skirts and hotrods.

“Let me help with your bag,” Liam offers.

I retract my pull handle and grab the side grip. “Don’t pretend you’re a gentleman now.” I clomp down the stairs and into the crowd below, happily losing him.

Chapter Two



The interior of the terminal is a single waiting area the size of a school gymnasium—if the school had been built in 1952 and no one had touched it since. There’s only one waiting area with a few dozen funky yellow chairs sprouting from the tiled floor. Against one wall, a single luggage carousel hums beside a car-rental counter with a Formica top. The furnishings are all real-deal mid-century, preserved through low-usage until they became fashionable again.

I station myself near the pine-paneled flight attendant’s kiosk to eavesdrop. Amanda talks with a gray-haired man wearing a tan button-down shirt and a plastic name tag that says JERRY. Underneath his name are small printed letters. They’re hard to make out, but I’m pretty sure it spells out Spudderton County Regional Airport.

“Do you have an intercom?” Amanda asks Jerry. “I need to make an announcement.”

“Nothing but the highest tech here at Spudderton Regional.” Jerry picks up an ancient yellow phone receiver with a gnarled cord and hands it to Amanda. Her face pales, but

before she takes it, Jerry puts the handset back on its base. “Just kidding. We’re not that high-tech.”

He swings around a metal chair, stands on it, and whistles long and loud. This gets everyone’s attention.

“Listen up, folks. Amanda here has something to say.” He steps down and holds out his hand to help Amanda up.

She cups her hands. “I need all passengers with Big Banana and Awesome Apple level status to line up over here. Again, that’s our Big Bananas and our Awesome Apples.”

Drats, I’m a Cheery Cherry. I used to have Awesome Apple status, but I used a bunch of miles on a family vacation, and then my region changed, and I’ve been flying a competitor more in the past few months. But my change to a lowly cherry is recent, so maybe I can convince Amanda to give me whatever perks are being handed out.

I follow the elite fruit crowd, and Liam sidles up beside me. Of course, the cheeky bastard has status. Hugh and Wendy are part of the in-crowd as well, and they give me a thumbs-up as they press to the front.

Amanda yells out to the crowd, “One of our smaller commuter planes is being sent, which will take you to Denver to a connector home tonight. Those remaining will fly out tomorrow.”

I’m so over this day and so in need of a normal, relaxing weekend. For my sanity, I need to get on tonight’s plane.

“As we work through this process, please be patient,” Amanda says. “I’m working with what I have, which isn’t a lot, to be honest.” She flashes her phone at us.

“We don’t usually fly through Spudderton, so our systems aren’t set up here.” Then she points to the ancient monitor at the attendant’s desk. “I’m going to be getting everyone’s information to verify their level over the phone, but let’s get a quick count here. If you’re Big Banana, please raise your hand.”

Hugh’s and Wendy’s hands shoot up.

“And Apple.”

I notice that Liam, like me, didn’t raise his hand either time.

He whispers to me, “Why are you here? What’s your game?”

“No game. I’m a Cheery-Cherry. Just hoping I might get lucky. You?”

“Same.”

As Amanda talks into her phone, I overhear her say that there’s room for all the Apples and Bananas with one seat to spare. Whatever I have to do, I’m getting that last seat. There’s a glint in Liam’s eyes, and I can tell he’s thinking the same thing.

“Any other weekend, I’d be a gentleman and give you the seat, but I need it,” he says.

I roll my eyes in response. How conceited of him to assume the seat is his to give or take.

She yells to the group, “Good news, folks, we have enough space for all the Apples and Bananas.” She moves beside the flight attendant standing by the window. “Melissa here will take everyone’s name so we can get tickets texted to you. Does everyone have their phone?”

There are lots of heads nodding as people file over to Melissa. I rush up to Amanda at the attendant's stand with Liam hot on my heels.

"Excuse me, Amanda, but I overheard you say that there's an open spot. I'm a Cherry. Any chance I can get it?" I ask.

"Oh, well, there's quite a few Cheery Cherries," Amanda says.

"Like me." Liam shoots his hand out at Amanda for a handshake, which she tentatively accepts. He cups his other hand over hers while shaking. "I love to share the cheer. Let me make things easy for you, Amanda. Give me the empty seat, and you won't have to worry about figuring out how to assign it."

Oh no, she's going to have to worry about this one. No way am I letting Mr. Casanova get it. "Except I was here first, so I should get it. That's the fair way to do it."

Jerry surfaces from behind the desk, pushing a stray stapler into a drawer. "I'm glad I'm not in your shoes," he says to Amanda with a glance at us.

This loosens Liam's grip on Amanda's hand. "The only reason Serena was here first is because she elbowed me out of the way, not to mention her throwing her phone at me earlier, and I'm too much of a gentleman to play so rough."

"Uh! I did no such thing. But Amanda, the important thing is that I flew Awesome Apple for two years, and I fly so much, I will again."

"I was a Big Banana. And who can say no to a *Big* Banana?" He puts his forearm on the stand and leans forward.

The corners of her mouth twitch with a micro smile. Ugh, I could barf all over Liam. I don't know how Amanda isn't running away to douse herself as he gives her a sleazy once-over.

I sigh. "My grandmother is going to be so disappointed to hear that I'm going to be late tomorrow. It would mean so much to her if I made it home tonight. Her ninetieth birthday is this weekend, and we're having a big luncheon to celebrate her tomorrow." This is only a slight stretch. I do plan to find a dress for the party this weekend.

"Her ninetieth—how wonderful," Amanda says.

Liam thumps his chest. "That cuts close. Too close." He clears his throat. "My grandfather was going to turn ninety later this year. Sadly, his health took a turn for the worse, so we won't be celebrating that milestone. We had all hoped we'd have one last Christmas with him, but he didn't make it. I'm actually traveling for his funeral."

He looks off to the side. His eyelids flutter with fake mist. "Poor Grandmommy. She's beside herself, having lost the love of her life. I want to be there as soon as possible to comfort her."

Amanda gives a little sniff. This can't be happening. She can't be falling for this.

"Isn't that convenient?" I mumble.

"Convenient that my grandfather died?" He straightens.

Amanda looks at me, her eyes wide with shock.

"I'm sorry," I say to her. "That came out wrong. But what are the chances? I give you a genuine reason involving my grandmother, and then he comes in and one-ups me with a dead grandfather."

She responds with a frown. At me. Crap. She believes him. There's nothing to do but be a gracious loser. I tip my head to Liam. "I'm being insensitive. You should get the seat. It's important for you to be with your family during this difficult time. I'm sorry for your loss and give my condolences to your *grandmommy*."

Liam flashes a smug smile, but before he can say anything, Amanda shakes her hands between us. "Let's keep this clean. Give me your names. Whoever has the most points gets the seat."

Oh, thank goodness I was wrong about Amanda falling for Liam's nonsense.

"Ladies first." He waves his hand for me to give my information.

"No, you're under more duress. You go first."

Amanda drops her head. In fear that I'm about to lose the opportunity, I blurt out my name and my status ID. Liam smirks while I recite the numbers, but I don't care. He can have this minor win if it means I have a chance of getting out of Spuddsylvania, the suckiest of potato towns.

While giving his number, Liam deepens his voice as though he's a late-night radio DJ. Ugh, if I spend another second around him, I'll never be able to eat again.

I retreat to find a place to sit. With only a single waiting area, there aren't enough seats to fit the nearly hundred passengers. Clusters of people sit on the floor, stand by the windows, or lean against the walls. I decide to explore and see if there's an undiscovered lounge. There's a single hallway. To the right are the bathrooms. On the left is a break room with

vending machines with a few tables, but once again, all the seats are taken.

Continuing down the hall, I find a supply closet and a locked wooden door to the administrative offices.

That's that—I'll have to sit on the floor. I drift back near the flight attendants so I can continue my eavesdropping. Thankfully, Liam has disappeared.

While I dig out my novel, Liam stops in front of me. "Very smooth back there." He's standing over me, leaning a bit on the handle of his bag.

"We can't all be as smooth as you," I say.

"Eh, not my best work." He looks to the side, out the window, to the tarmac. The late afternoon sun falls across his face, bringing out the green of his eyes. "So, what's the real deal? Why do you want that ticket? Sell me on why you should get it."

"You say that like it's yours to give." I tap the top of my roller bag, faded and tattered with use. "My bag and I have seen a lot of miles together. I'm feeling good about my chances on getting that seat."

This makes him chuckle. "Is that so? That's how you want to play this?"

I hadn't intended to throw down a gauntlet, but Liam's cockiness is bringing out a rare competitiveness in me. "Bring it."

"Okay, Serena, game on." Then he strides off.

The hair on my arms stands at attention as if Liam's dared me into a real competition, but what can he do? Nothing. If

he could hack into the system to give himself miles, then he'd already be an Awesome Apple.

I go back to reading, but a few minutes later, Liam's voice cuts through the cacophony of conversations. "I figured this is a long day for both of you, so I got you some coffee." He thrusts a cup toward Melissa. He's talking loudly, and if I had any doubt if it was for my benefit, he looks back at me and winks.

Melissa waves off the coffee.

"You sure? Spudderton's finest," he says.

She remains firm and doesn't take it. That's right, Melissa. He's a snake. Don't fall for his oily gift, his slippery words, or his devilishly handsome face.

But Amanda succumbs and accepts the offering. Poor Amanda. Don't you see how rotten he is? You don't want his banana.

"Can I interest you in a little sugar?" Liam flaps a packet in front of her.

"No, I take mine black. I like my coffee strong." Amanda raises her cup to him. He raises his own, then takes a sip, watching her as he does. I can't blame her. If she's looking for a one-night stand, he checks the fun and sexy boxes.

Liam leans on the kiosk, blocking Amanda from my view. Hugh and Wendy are shouting into their speakerphone about how they'll be arriving later tonight, further hindering my attempt to eavesdrop, but Amanda's gleeful titter makes it over Hugh's booming voice. Liam throws his head back in laughter. I want to chuck my book at the back of his head. He puts his hand up to his ear with his thumb extended—he's

making the call sign. Is he asking her for her number? No—I bet he’s telling her to call and put him on the fly-list.

Oh, no, I’m not letting him get the seat that easily. In the break room, I scan the vending machine options for bribery offerings. Too bad there isn’t a gift shop with fancy chocolates. I settle for candy bars and chips, which is better than Liam’s coffee, except I don’t have his charm, or his big banana.

As I return, I clutch my meager gifts close to me, doubly embarrassed, firstly to be brown-nosing, and secondly to be doing so with piddly vending-machine goodies. Then I notice that quite a few people are reading to pass the time. Amanda and Melissa are probably stuck here tonight with the rest of us and might enjoy something to read. I can give one of them my book, but I need a second one.

There’s a woman nearby sitting on the floor reading a book that a friend recommended to me. She appears to be near the beginning. I hover nearby, not sure how to approach. Maybe the seat isn’t worth pestering a stranger. Really, what am I doing? All of this is so silly.

I glance at Liam, and he holds eye contact while doing a little victory dance, lifting his index fingers like he’s number one. Oh, I’m doing this.

I kneel beside the woman. “Hi! How’s the book?”

She lowers it and gives me a suspicious glare. “It’s good.”

“I’ve been dying to read it.” I spot the price printed on the back. “Can I buy it off you? I’ll pay you double the list price.”

She clutches the book close to her. “Um, sorry. I’m really into it.”

“But it looks like you just started?”

“No, I’m twenty-some pages in.” She looks at the top corner. “Twenty-eight. It jumps right into the action.”

That sounds like a perfect book to read when you’re stuck somewhere. “Triple the list price.”

This makes her pause. She bites her lip. She’s caving. If I offer quadruple, she’ll sell it to me, but that’s a lot when I have no idea if Amanda or Melissa will be interested.

“You know what? I’m being ridiculous. Forget it. Enjoy the book.”

Chips and candy bars will have to do.

But then I remember Hugh was reading a bestseller. He’s still yelling into the phone while enjoying the waiting area seats, relaxed knowing that he and Wendy are about to be whisked off to Denver. He doesn’t really need that book. And after the phone incident, he owes me.

I stand beside them. Neither of them notices, so I clear my throat.

“Hey, it’s the phone girl.” Hugh points at me.

“Who’s that? Did you bump into someone you know?” A woman’s voice blares out from the speakerphone on Hugh’s knee. “What a small world to run into someone in Idaho!”

“No, it’s someone from the flight,” Wendy yells.

“What’s she want?” the phone demands.

“I don’t know. Geesh, why don’t you let us ask?” Hugh shakes his head as he waves at the phone, then he looks up at me. “How can we help you?”

“I was wondering if I could have your book. You don’t seem to need it.”

“What’d she say?” the phone booms.

“His book. She wants his book,” Wendy yells.

Could they be any louder? Everyone in the terminal stares at us. And of course, Liam is watching with an intrigued glint in his eyes.

The person on the phone chirps out, “Why’s she want his book? That’s a weird ask, don’t you think? Can’t she get her own book?”

“Never mind,” I mumble. But Liam is enjoying my embarrassment too much as he leans on the podium, smiling like he’s taking in a sunny day at the park. This steels me, and I snatch the book resting on top of Hugh’s bag. “I need the book because my phone is acting weird because you threw it, so I can’t read my ebook. Thank you very much.”

Hugh’s mouth drops open. “Oh! Okay. Take it.”

As I storm away, I hear the voice say, “You threw her phone?”

Though I’d love to hear Hugh explain that one, I have more important things to do. I move beside Liam, and this time I do elbow him out of the way. “Melissa, Amanda...uh...here.”

My mouth has gone dry. I’m not one to schmooze, so further words evaporate in my mouth. I shove the chips forward in one hand and then the candy bars in the other.

“You’re um...” I stammer and don’t get out the most important part about them being busy and needing a little pick me up. “For you.”

“That’s so sweet of you. I could use a little chocolate.” Amanda snatches a candy bar.

“Me, too.” Melissa takes the other one.

“Something salty? Chips?” I manage.

Melissa shrugs and takes a bag. Amanda waves them off.

“My sweet tooth is my weakness.”

Jerry pops up from behind the desk, holding a wire. “Did someone say chips? Potatoes are my weakness. Mashed, fried, boiled, or baked. Probably why I love Spudderton so much.”

“Oh, here.” I hand him the bag.

Grinning ear to ear, he scoops it up. His joy relaxes me.

“And thank you for everything you’re doing. All three of you,” I say. Whew, I saved it at the end.

Jerry pops open the chip bag with a squeeze. “Let me tell you what, this is the most excitement this airport’s seen in a while.” He tosses a chip into his mouth and then disappears back behind the desk.

I almost walk off without offering the books, but I catch myself and blurt, “A book? You know, if you have downtime and can read. Sorry, I made it sound like I’m questioning whether you know how to read. I meant, if you have free time.” I show them Hugh’s and my books. Melissa’s face brightens.

“Oh, I’ve heard about that one!” She lifts Hugh’s book and flips it over to the blurb on the back. “Are you sure?”

“Of course, enjoy.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” She gives her shoulders a satisfied little shake.

Amanda bites her lip. “Have you finished this one?” The truth sits on the edge of my tongue, that I’m eager to continue reading the sex scene and daydream about some billion-

aire stopping in Spudderton to sweep me away in his private jet. But that's not happening, and the book is worth a seat out of here. "I did. It's very good." I double-raise my eyebrows to convey which parts are the best.

"Then I'll take your offer in case I'm stuck here tonight with nothing to do." But she looks at Liam as she says this, undressing him with her eyes. Damn it, this means she doesn't think Liam will stay here tonight. I gave away my book for nothing. He's too good. I shouldn't have even tried to outplay a player.

"Here you go." I place the book into her hands. "Well, I don't want to keep you from things. Thank you again for everything you're doing to get us home." I give a little wave and leave to return to my spot on the floor.

As I walk away, Liam hooks an arm in mine. "Well played."

"You don't have to rub it in that I'm not as good as you."

"Please. I see right through that bumbling sweet-girl act."

"Not an act. I'm truly this unsmooth." I jerk my arm free and glare at him, not wanting to sit because then he might too.

"Poor you." He takes a step closer and gives me a pitying pout.

"I'd rather that than be like you. You're so slimy you're... you're like a slug."

"Mean comeback. You must've been a terror on the playground."

"Ha-ha. Why are you following me? What do you want, Liam?"

"To win, of course."

“And you have. Amanda just implied you’re getting it.”

We glance at her, and she averts her gaze to her phone screen. She’s probably working her magic right now to get Liam on that flight.

He gives me a lopsided smile as he pulls a deck of cards from his pocket. “I’m not so sure. And I’m enjoying this too much to leave it to something as boring as miles. Play me for it.”

“What? No way. I’m not stupid enough to play a man who carries around his own deck.”

“They’re just something to fidget with.” He pulls out the deck and demonstrates his fidgeting with a one-handed shuffle. “Wouldn’t you rather play some poker for the seat?”

“That shuffle was way too practiced. All the more reason for me not to play.”

“No to poker, that’s okay. We can play any game you want.”

He’s like a carnival barker, so I put on my barker voice. “Young man. There with the cocky smile. You, yes, you.” I point at Liam. He plays along and looks from side to side to check that I’ve selected him. “A cool cat like you should be with the Big Bananas. So, I’ll tell you what, I got a game for you.”

“Gee whiz, really?”

I sweep the cards from his hand, ignoring the tingle of my fingers as they slide over his. I fan them before him. “Pick a card, any card.”

He grabs one from the middle of the deck. “Do I look at it?”

“Sure, why not?”

He looks at it and, like a seasoned poker player, keeps his face completely immobile.

“And now we’re going to play a game called honesty. To play this, you give me a reason, an honest reason, on why you need that seat.” I snatch his card, return it to the deck, and plop them in his hand.

“Hello, my grandpa’s funeral,” he says.

I return to my normal voice. “I said honest.”

“Fine. I’m in a poker tournament this weekend.” He frowns after saying this and puts the cards back in their box.

“It’s stupid, but I’m superstitious about my routine. If I fly tomorrow, it’s going to mess with how I do things. Or I may not even make it in time. Also, I don’t want to be stressed tonight, worrying about when I’ll arrive.”

“I’m supposed to be sympathetic to a poker game?”

“Not a game. A tournament. And don’t knock it, because this is my dream.” He puts the cards to his heart.

“Your dream? As in, you want to be a professional poker player?”

“I can see it in your face—you’re blowing it off like everyone does, but poker takes a lot of concentration and stamina and skill. It’s hard to keep your wits about you when you’ve been playing for hours and big money’s on the line.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “So, you’re trying to trick me out of the seat by being a card shark?”

“No, I’m trying to level the playing field. Give me a fighting chance. Look at your bag. Come on, we both know you have some serious miles.”

“So, you are scared.” I rather enjoy the thought that I’ve intimidated Liam with my lowly suitcase. “You should be.” I run my tongue over the bottom of my teeth as if I’m in full-on predator mode.

“See, I knew that sweet-girl routine was all an act. It’s very good, though. You’re like a slice of apple pie.” His gaze goes over me like he wouldn’t mind a bite, and I hate to admit my center gets as gooey as pie filling. How can I be falling for this? His moment of vulnerability about his dream seems genuine, but he’s been such a jokester I’m not sure what to believe.

Maybe it doesn’t matter whether he’s lying. I want to believe, and I want to help a fellow human on his journey to reaching his goals. Also, there’s not much of a price for me. My parents will already be in bed when I get home, and I’ll still have plenty of time to shop on Sunday. “You know what? Since we’re being honest, I don’t have a party this weekend. I’m just dress shopping for the party. Your tournament sounds like a big deal. I’ll tell Amanda that you’re getting the seat.”

“Seriously? You’re just going to hand it over?”

“Yep.”

“That’s seriously cool.” He opens his arms wide and steps toward me for a hug.

I give him a perfunctory embrace, keeping space between us as I pat his back, and then quickly pull away.

He rubs his hand behind his neck, looking embarrassed as if I’ve rebuffed him. I barely know the guy, so I’m not sure what response he was expecting. I open my mouth, but

nothing comes out. Finally, I land on pulling out the talkative carnival barker. "It's your lucky day, young man. You've won the coveted seat." I add in my normal voice, "Have a safe flight."

"This doesn't feel right." He motions his hands back and forth between us. "I feel like I'm suckering you for it, even though I'm not. I swear I have a tournament. But I'll feel better if you let me play for it."

"You're not suckering me. It's fine."

"But it'll be more fun if we play for it. And this way it's fair."

"Fair! You're a professional poker player or semi-pro or whatever. The game's not fair when you have mad skills, and I don't have any."

"Oh, you're being too hard on yourself." He gives my hand a little squeeze. "Look at how happy you made Amanda and Melissa. And Jerry by giving him a potato product. That's some mad skills."

"I'm talking about cards. I have other skills."

"Is that so?" He winks at me. "Any of them involve the bedroom?"

My breath catches, but I play it off with a toss of my hair. "Spare me. You're not my type."

His eyebrows shoot up. Score for me. Luscious Liam must not be used to rejection. And maybe I can pull off a poker face, because he bought that I'm immune to his charm, and how his shirt tightens around his muscular arms.

“Anyway, I saw how you had Amanda eating out of the palm of your hand. She’s obviously going to give you the seat.”

“Not if she finds out she has to stay here in small-potato town. You saw how she looked at me when she took your naughty book.” He wags his eyebrows at me. I guess he approves of my book choice. “She’s hoping I’ll fulfill some fantasy tonight. If she’s on the flight crew out of here, I’m good. And if not...”

He might be right. “Poor Liam, your good looks must be such a curse.”

“Clearly, you can appreciate the struggles we beautiful people endure.”

“Save your flattery. I’m not playing.”

“Come on, there must be some card game you played as a kid?”

“Sure. Old Maid. Go Fish. War.”

“I remember War. We’ll play that.” He gives me puppy-dog eyes, and I hate how my stomach flutters. I have nothing better to do since I’ve given my book away. And though I hate to admit it, playing with Liam is rather entertaining.

Chapter Three



We find an open spot on the floor near the empty car rental counter. I sit cross-legged on the unpadded, industrial carpet, which isn't the most comfortable, but it'll do for a quick game. Liam mirrors me, his knees a few inches from mine, leaving a cramped play space between us. The way he's leaning forward with a sideways grin reminds me of a cat studying prey, debating when to pounce and sink a sharp canine tooth into the tender flesh. But he's underestimated this little mouse—I have my own sharp chompers and before this game is over, he's going to wonder how he ended up the one bitten.

He removes the cards from the box, and I take them from him. They're regular playing cards with a swirly red design around mirror-image chubby cherubs on bicycles. This looks like the deck I played Go Fish with as a kid. I was expecting something slick and showy, but I guess poker isn't a game where you try to show off.

I fan out the cards, face side up. "Have you somehow stacked the deck?"

"Inspect away." He leans back onto his hands, but then pffts when he realizes I'm sorting them by suit to make sure

all fifty-two cards are there. Everything seems in order, so I do my best version of a shuffle. It's been a while and some cards spring free from the pile. He grimaces at my effort, but says nothing. I shuffle nine more times, probably overkill, but I'm not taking any chances.

As I straighten the cards, I think through the rules of War, trying to figure out if there's anything he can do to win. It's been so long since I've played that I'm fuzzy on the rules, but I remember the game could get drawn out, and I don't want to risk both of us losing the seat while we battle.

"Let's simplify things." I place the deck between our crossed legs. "Here's my suggestion—we'll each flip a card, and whoever has the highest wins. We'll play through the deck, so twenty-six rounds, and whoever wins the most hands wins."

"And how do we handle a tie?" he asks.

"Do you mean at the end if we each have thirteen? Or during the game if we both put down the same card?"

"Both."

I pause and run through a few scenarios. Liam pretends to be bored by waiting for my answer and whistles the Jeopardy tune.

"Okay, if we tie at the end, then we'll flip a coin." We haven't even started and I'm already nervous, so I'm not playing a second round. "And during gameplay, if we put down matching cards, then those cards won't count and we'll move them to the side."

“Okay. This isn’t War any longer, but let’s do this.” He rubs his hands together while he grins with devilish glee. “I’ll deal.”

“Absolutely not!” I move the deck closer to me. “In fact, I’m checking your sleeves to make sure there aren’t any aces hidden up there.”

“Are you serious?” he asks. “You’re giving me more credit than I deserve.”

“Come on, roll ’em up.”

He stares me down. “Nope. You have to check.” He moves closer, so our knees touch, and he rests his hands where my legs cross above the ankles, his fingers rather close to my lady parts. “Only way you can be sure.”

“Fine.” I run my fingers beneath the cuffs of his black button-down, intentionally tickling the hairs on his arm.

“Cut that out.” He jerks his arm away and rubs at his forearm.

I shrug my shoulders and drop my eyes innocently. “Sorry.”

When he presents his left arm, he’s more cautious. “No funny business this time.”

“Yet you’re asking me to undress you,” I say as I roll back his sleeve.

He cocks an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize I made that request, but I won’t argue if you need to do a full-body search.” His gaze smolders, sending a shiver across my entire body, but he’s not distracting me with his bedroom eyes. At this point, I care more about beating him at his own game than I do the seat.

“See. Nothing up my sleeves.” His skin is tanned, and the forearm muscle undulates as he twists his arm to show the bare skin of the underside. He pulls one of my arms toward him. “And now it’s my turn.”

My shirt has three-quarter sleeves, so I scoff, but he runs his fingers under the fabric, wrapping them around the bottom of my bicep, where he continues to caress me. His touch warms my cool skin, making my arm tingle. Never before has my breath hitched from a man teasing my elbow.

He releases me. “Nothing up your sleeves.”

“Obviously. But I’m still not sure I trust you.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Empty your pockets.”

“My pockets? You want me to empty my pockets?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You know the deal.” He leans back and shifts his pelvis in invitation.

“Well, that’s not proper.” I wave my hand toward the people a few feet away, resting against the wall. They’re all looking at their phones, but it doesn’t mean they won’t look over if I’m feeling up Liam. “Turn out your pockets and let’s get on with the game.”

“Oh, this is all part of the game. And there’s only one way to be certain I won’t cheat.” He pats the side of his pants. “Gotta check.”

I’m not falling for his silly dare. That he’s even suggesting it means he’s not hiding anything. His goal is to make me squirm, which he’s accomplishing.

But he thinks I won't check. He's winning the mental game. He thinks I embarrass easily. True. And this'll stop me from digging any further. False. I'm calling his bluff.

"You think I won't do it?" I ask.

"I'm a betting man, so I'd put money on you not doing it."

"Willing to bet the plane seat on that?"

"No, the odds aren't that good."

"If I check and I find a card, then I should get the seat out of principle."

"You sound so sure you're going to find something. What have I done to earn such distrust? Is it that hard to believe I'm good at poker without cheating? This may come as a shock, but I'm good at cards because I'm disciplined."

"You stole my phone and lied to me. How have you earned my trust?"

"No, I protected your phone, and I played a minor practical joke, but all for a good cause. I got your number, and I intend to ask you on a date."

This confession sends me for a loop, and I sit slack-jawed for a moment. I guess the fact that he wanted my number to ask me out isn't a surprise, but hearing him say it makes me blush.

He looks at his pockets. "You're stalling. These pockets won't check themselves."

I can't believe I'm considering groping around in his pants, but the mental challenge is part of the game. The floor dwellers continue to ignore us. Meanwhile, Amanda and Melissa are busy directing the Awesome Apples over to Jerry, who's collecting luggage.

Oh, no! If either of us is going to get our bag and our body on that plane, then we'd better get on with it. With a single deep breath, I roll onto my knees. Liam puts his hand behind his head as I kneel before him, but I don't let his smugness get under my skin. I take the plunge. His pants are loose enough that I can fit my entire hand into the pocket, but there's not much wiggle room. The pocket's empty, save for a lint ball in the bottom. I snatch my hand out.

"Why the rush? You missed something good in there."

"Trust me, I didn't."

He leans forward and whispers in my ear, "Trust me, you did."

I dig in the next pocket. "You tricked me. This one's empty, too."

He gently wraps his fingers around my wrist, stopping me from pulling my hand out. "No, check to the side, toward the middle. I think you might find something you like."

I can't believe this guy is trying to get me to feel him up. Yet I do it. I'd like to tell myself that I want to shock him, that the move is to get the upper hand, but the truth is he smells nice, his breath brushing over my skin is drawing me in, and the warmth of our bodies radiating between us holds me in place. My fingers push the pocket pouch along his pelvis to the bulge of his dick. He has a semi. I jerk my hand out and fall back onto my bottom.

"Find something?" he purrs.

"Can we play cards now?" I cover my face. I can't believe I poked Liam's dick while sitting in an airport terminal. And that he's partly aroused is all the worse. It's an invitation to

finish the job, which I can't believe I find tempting. "And no more tricking me into putting my hands down your pants."

He throws up his hands. "Hold on there! You're the one that came up with the whole ruse about hiding cards." He shifts closer to me to whisper, no, he *breathes* into my ear, his voice low and rumbly, "And I'm enjoying this game you invented."

I push backward, but I can't argue my role on how the start of the game unfolded. I could lie to myself and say it's all because I'm afraid he's up to no good, but the truth is I want to see where things go.

I deal.

"No looking at your cards," I say.

"You seem to know so much about cheating, makes me think I'd better keep an eye on you. I should get to check your pockets."

"Not happening. We're playing." And I flip over my first card. A lowly six.

He flips over a ten. "Ah, so close. I was hoping for a nine." He wags his eyebrows, and then I get his intent. Sixty-nine.

"That's the only way you'd be getting that today."

He bites his lip while looking me up and down. "Amanda might be game."

A spark of jealousy flashes, but I extinguish it. If Amanda is his preference, he wouldn't be sitting across from me. "Just flip over your next card." I slap my next card down in front of him. A jack. Take that.

He puts down a king.

"No freakin' way!" I shout. "You're cheating."

“Calm down. We’re just getting started. There were twelve cards available in the deck to beat that jack. I wasn’t cheating. It was luck, barely. It’s only a jack.”

“Oh, you don’t have to be so condescending about my very fine royal card. A jack’s a solid card.”

He shrugs. “Sure, but mine was better.”

This irks me to no end. “Ever play a game of fifty-two card pick up?” I lift my cards threateningly.

“Technically, that’d be twenty-four card pick up.” He throws his hands in front of me, all panicky, though his face is glowing with pure delight. “I’m kidding. I’m kidding. I’m so impressed with your jack.”

I’ve never tried to count cards before, but clearly Liam is keeping track of how many hands we’ve played and what cards are outstanding. I guess I should too.

“Flip over your card so we can get this stupid game over with.” I’m down two, so I need to make some progress. Which I do on the next hand.

Paranoia sharpens my mind, and I track not only all the aces and face cards, but every number card as well, making the game the most intense I’ve ever experienced. We get down to the final four hands, and we’re tied. The banter has dried up. Our gazes are glued on the unplayed cards before us. This is going to be close.

He flips over an eight. I can beat that. I grab my next card and flip it, but two cards fall down, a king and a three.

He lets out a fake gasp. “Whoa—who’s cheating now?”

“That was an accident. I didn’t mean to do that. My hands are sweating.” I wipe them on my pants. “But the king’s on

top, which means it was on the bottom before, right? Because I flipped them together. And that means you won this hand. Your eight beats my three.”

“I get that, but do you really want to risk this yourself? You know my next card could be that last ace.”

He’s right that there is one outstanding ace, but that doesn’t mean he has it. “I could have it,” I remind him.

“Yes, but think about it. If my next card is the ace, then my eight beats your three and my ace beats your king. I’ll win both hands,” he says. “I’ll be ahead by two, with only two hands to go. Which means there’s a good chance I’ll win or we’ll tie. But if you play your king, then you beat my eight. You win this hand. I win the next, obviously, because your three isn’t winning anything no matter when you play it. We’re still tied, with two hands to go, which means either of us could win.”

“Okay, but again. You don’t know that you have the ace. Right?” I cross my arms in question of whether he’s cheating. “Right?”

He shakes his head at me. “I don’t know who has the ace. I’m just saying the fairest and smartest thing you can do it start over.”

“Unless you let me pick whether I want to play the three or the king?” I suggest.

He scrunches up his face in distaste. “Hell no! Who’s the cheater now?” He places his remaining cards next to the discard pile.

I shove my own cards into my bra for safekeeping, then pluck his cards from the floor. “You’re playing these out,” I

say. There's no way I'm doing another round. The stress is too much, and tracking which cards we've played has fried my brain. I want to beat Liam, but not enough to count cards for a second game.

He pauses for a moment, staring at my chest where the edges of the cards peek out from my neckline, but then he lurches for his own cards. Instinctively, I shove them into the front of my pants to keep them away from him.

What's wrong with me? How is this my solution? Liam's eyes are enormous as he stares at my crotch. He smirks.

"You keep coming up with very inventive games. I like playing with you. Are they in the panties or out?"

The next obvious step will be for Liam to explore to find out, which subconsciously I must want badly, but conscious me takes back over, and I jerk the cards from my pants and throw them at him. I calm down as I remove the cards from my shirt and lay them in front of him. "Sorry about that."

"Only thing I'm sorry about is you didn't let me get them out."

He collects them, fans them out, and then holds them up in front of his face. Here it comes. He's going to piece together the end of the game and prove to me he's won. But instead, he sniffs deeply. "Very nice." His gaze is on my lady parts as he slides the cards into his breast pocket, where he gives them a pat. "For safekeeping."

My breath hitches. That did something for me. I've never felt so confused in all my life.

"Guess who had the ace?" he asks.

I throw back my head. The game continues. “Let’s see, was it you? Did you have the ace?”

“Nope, it was you. It was the card with the pube on it,” he says way too loudly.

“Shh!” I look around. Thankfully, no one’s staring at me. “There wasn’t a... a hair on anything.”

“Whatever you say.” He scoops up the cards off the floor and boxes them up. “Holding a king and an ace at the end. I should accuse you of cheating.”

“I wouldn’t even know how.” I pull my knees into my chest, suddenly remembering that there are lots of other passengers milling about. Thankfully, none of them seems to be paying attention to us.

“Yet you knew so many ways I could do it. And you were distracting me by making it all sexual.”

“That’s not... You’re so cocky. I just don’t... I’ve played enough. I was only trying to end the game.”

This causes him to pause. He draws the cards from his pocket and adds them to the box before closing it. “Come on, isn’t this fun for you?”

“This is nerve-racking for me.” I tuck my hair behind my ears.

“But you won.”

“The cards got all mixed up. Nobody won,” I say.

He taps the side of his head. “I know which ones were yours.”

“I know, I know—because of the hair.”

“I was teasing you. Remember, your cards were in your shirt. Unless it was a chest hair.” He shrugs. “You won. I

won't say fair and square because there is a lot to question about the end of this game. That whole double card flip was very suspicious. But I concede. You won. The seat is yours."

"You're letting me have the seat?"

He puts his hand on his heart. "I'm a man of my word."

"You're trying to trick me." And though I don't think he is, something about this feels very off.

"I'm not. You can have the seat."

"How's it possible that you're still messing with my head?" I ask. "You're trying to get me to play another game by being nice, but it won't work."

"Now I'm tricking you by being nice? And what's so horrible about playing another round? Didn't you have fun?" All the mirth has drained from his face. "I'm not trying to be a jerk."

And he looks sincere. And wounded. Maybe his only angle is that he's interested in me.

"I'm sorry. The game was fun. I guess with you pranking me on the plane and—"

"In my defense, I thought after everything with the phone, it'd be a funny way to pick you up. I figured you could use a laugh, and I thought it was pretty obvious I'm not any kind of law enforcement."

"It probably should have been. I don't know why, but I convinced myself you actually could be an undercover air marshal. Rather embarrassing." I cover my face with one of my hands.

He takes it and kisses it, but not the back, which would be sweet. No, he flips my hand, exposing the underside of my

wrist and drags his lips over the sensitive skin. "I'm sorry I didn't make it clearer that I was joking. With everything happening today, your jump wasn't so unreasonable." He kisses the back of my hand before letting it go.

I clutch my hand to my chest. "It's okay," I say in an embarrassingly dreamy voice.

"Good." He stands up and puts out his hand to me. "Come on, let's tell Amanda to put you on that plane."

I take his hand and he helps pull me up to standing with extra muscle put into it, so that I stumble close enough for the fronts of our shoes to bump. I can feel the heat of his body. "What about your tournament?" I ask.

"I won't miss the whole thing. Anyway, I lost. If I want to be a pro, then I need to accept my losses." He takes my hand and leads me to the attendant's desk.

Amanda's face lights up when she sees Liam approaching. "Just the man I was looking for. I have news on the miles."

"About that." Liam puts a forearm on the counter and leans sideways toward Amanda. He places a hand on my shoulder. "Serena and I came to an agreement. She's going to take the last seat."

"Are you sure? Because you have more miles." She flashes us her phone screen, but everything's a garble of numbers. "Serena's miles are significantly lower. I'm sure there are quite a few other passengers with more status."

He doesn't even pause. "I'm sure."

"No, you take it, Liam. I insist. There's no way I'd be comfortable taking it." I'm already feeling bad about his tour-

nement, and the wide gap between our miles takes my guilt level too high.

“An agreement’s an agreement.” He shakes my hand. “Take the seat.”

“You heard her—I don’t have the miles. It wouldn’t be right for me to get it. If anything, someone else should.” I give his hand a quick squeeze. “Have a safe flight.”

He holds onto my hand as I step away so that our arms extend between us as if we’re lovers about to be separated by war. I jerk my fingers free and spin around to return to a spot on the floor. Though it’s silly to be getting attached after less than an hour, my heart’s sad to be alone in Spudderton.

I sit cross-legged and stare at my bag. With my book gone and Liam leaving, I have no distractions except my phone. I’ll have to make do with reading an ebook on my phone. Before I even finish typing the title of the book in my browser, Liam plops down beside me.

“Come to rub it in?” I ask.

“Nope. I came to hang out with you.”

“Same difference. Go ahead, rub it in that I’ll be here for the night while you’ll be waking up in Atlanta.”

“I turned down the flight. I’d rather spend more time getting to know you.”

“No way.” I lean back, mouth agape. He can’t be serious.

He bumps his shoulder against mine. “It’s true.”

“Really? You want to hang out with me?” I point to my chest. I want to tackle him in a bear hug, but I’m playing this hand cool.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Wait, if you didn’t take the seat, then that means it’s still open?” I pretend to wave at Amanda, and say in jest, “Wait here a moment. I need to look into a possible open seat...”

He pats my knee and then leaves his hand there. “Sorry, but she already gave the seat to the best Cherry.”

I put my hand on his. “That’s too bad. I guess I’m stuck here hanging out with you.”

“Guess you are.” He leans into me in invitation.

I inhale the warm scent of his skin, then follow my impulse, and press my lips to his.

Chapter Four



Liam's lips are feather-soft as he teases me, brushing them slowly over mine. He runs his tongue over my upper lip—a promise of more to come. I shift closer to him until the sides of our thighs press against one another. This is as close as I dare when making out on the floor of an airport. For me, the P of PDA stands for Private, but this is a situation that demands an exception.

As our kisses deepen, I long to be somewhere secluded so every part of us can touch—to have his chest rubbing over my breasts, his pelvis rocking between my legs, his hands roaming over my bare skin. The heat of his thigh will have to suffice until we check into a local hotel. Then it's so on. I've never had a one-night stand before, haven't ever even been interested in one, but what happens in Spudderton stays in Spudderton.

He grasps my hips and tugs. "Sit on my lap."

"With everyone around? No way."

He nibbles on the side of my neck, but I pull away from him. That's too low for me. Public kissing stays above the chin and really tongues should not be involved, but I'm allowing one exception. I wish I could sit on him with my legs

wrapped around his waist, but this would look much too explicit.

Perhaps it's time to improvise, to find a more secluded spot. Amanda and Melissa continue to be busy with their top crop of Apples and Bananas, so I don't think we're going anywhere soon.

Another thing I've never done—had sex in a bathroom. I can't believe this popped into my head. Such a scandalous thought, and too far for me, though I'd be up for some heavy petting. I wonder if they have a family bathroom.

"Want to get in the family way?" I ask.

"What?" He jerks back, his eyes bulging with shock and fear.

His reaction makes me giggle. "Sorry. That was a horrible line. I meant find a family bathroom."

He slumps in relief. "That was the worst line ever, but I won't hold it against you because the idea is brilliant."

"Good." I rest a hand on his chest. "To be clear, this is not to do the deed. That's a little too far for me. I'd just rather not make out on display."

He kisses my cheek. "Noted. Let's go see what we can find. I don't see this place having a family bathroom. It doesn't look like they've changed a thing in over a half-century. But maybe there's a closet."

"Oh, I saw one by the bathrooms," I blurt out. I'm a little too excited to get Liam alone.

"Let's go check it out." He climbs up and puts out a hand to help me off the floor.

I pause for a moment, questioning my judgement.

He nods toward the hallway. I take his hand. Given that I almost died today, I've earned a moment of impulsiveness. We hurry with our bags in tow to the supply closet.

It's unlocked, but once inside, we realize this is because the locking mechanism is broken. The door naturally falls open to a thin crack. Also, it's tiny and cluttered, leaving little room for us. The floor-to-ceiling shelves on all three sides are crammed with cleaning and maintenance supplies covered in a fuzzy blanket of dust. A large yellow bucket on wheels with a mop inside takes up most of the floor. Add in our wheelie bags, and there's enough room for us to stand, but we don't need a lot of room to kiss.

And so we can fully appreciate the grimy ambiance, Spuderton has updated one item in the last half-century—an LED ceiling light with a bulb bright enough for a stadium. I squint as I take in our humble option. "I don't know. This isn't great, and the door's a problem."

"Beats the floor."

Not really, but we're alone, so I'll go with it.

"And I know how to improve things." I'm expecting him to pull me in for a kiss, but instead he hooks his luggage handle around the door handle. Okay, the door is closed now, so this is an improvement. Next, he pulls out his phone to play some smooth jazz.

"And last, I have a little mood lighting." He turns on his phone's flashlight and places it on top of some bleach bottles before flicking off the overhead light. An arc of phone light highlights the side of his body, accentuating the muscular

tone of his bicep through his shirt. Okay, I'm sold. We're staying.

He kisses along my jawline and down my neck. As I snake my hands under his shirt to fondle his toned body, the background noise of people grumbling and fussing in the terminal fades away. I run my hands along his torso, taking in the contrast of the softness of his skin versus the hardness of the muscles below, while his own hands go to my back and under my shirt. The warmth of his touch is delicious, and I want him to caress every inch of me.

While kissing me, he reaches behind me to unfasten my bra in one deft move. Seems cards aren't the only way he's good with his hands.

"Putting your dexterity to work, I see."

"I know a trick or two." He caresses the sides of my waist as his hands travel upward to cup my breasts. He squeezes them in a firm massage, ending with a gentle pinch on my nipples. They perk to attention, and a pleasurable shock courses through me.

He pushes my shirt up over my breasts. My bra straps have slipped off my shoulders, so the cups hang below my boobs. He kisses along the top contours, then sucks hard on my breast and nipple, ending with a playful nibble. I gasp, but shift closer, wanting more. I grip his back, broad and well-defined.

From outside, I hear Jerry calling out something, but I can't make out what. "Should we find out what's happening?" I mumble.

“They’re probably loading the plane,” he says. This is nothing that concerns us, so our kissing resumes.

Liam slides his hand over the front of my jeans. I mirror him and grip the outline of his hard cock. It’s girthy and my pussy throbs from the thought of stretching around his thick dick. We’ll be leaving for a hotel soon enough. I should have self-control and wait for a bed, but this is too exciting.

“Do you have a condom?” I whisper as I undo his belt buckle.

“Yes. And no STIs,” he says. “But why do you ask?”

He watches me as I unbutton and unzip his slacks.

“I’m just thinking I’d like to know how you feel.”

“Sweet little Serena’s horny for me.”

I pull my hands back. “Never mind. I’m good.”

“No, you’re not. You’re bad. You want to fuck me in this closet, where anyone could catch us.” He grips my hips and pulls me against him. “But I like a bad girl. And I want to know how you feel too.” With a flick of his hands, he pushes his pants off his hips, and they flop to the ground, revealing his card-themed boxers. They’re white silk with queen of hearts cards marching in vertical lines up and down the fabric.

He catches my smirk as I take in the print. “Before you say anything, they bring me good luck.”

“Well, they went to some extremes today for you to get lucky.”

He lifts my chin and kisses me. “Worth it.”

There's an entire plane full of people who would disagree, but I'm not one of them. His words tickle me so much that I can't stop grinning even as his lips press to mine.

"Your turn." He struggles to undo my jean button, but they're super tight.

I take over. "I've got this." Except, I don't. My jeans cling to me, so even undoing the top button is a battle. I have to shove them down inch by inch, and the cramped room doesn't give me much space for maneuvering, so my face lands in Liam's crotch as I fight to get the jeans over my calves.

He grabs my head as though I'm giving him head. "Hmm, this is sexy."

We both laugh as I smack his hands away. In my struggle, my ass bumps into a bottle, knocking it into the mop bucket. Dirty water splashes on our legs. The mop handle dives, whapping Liam on the side of his face.

"Are you okay?" I ask with a giggle.

"Minor setback." He rubs his jaw as he props the mop handle against the shelving. My leg is dripping with dirty water, and the room now smells of pine cleaner. Worst of all, the bag holding the door closed has tipped over, pushing the door wide open. I cover my naked breasts with my arm, as a woman with her white hair pulled into a bun peers at us from the hallway. Her mouth falls open, but then she recovers, looks from side to side, and gives us a thumbs-up. Liam gives her a little bow before jerking the door shut.

My face is blazing. "Do you think she's going to tell on us? Is Jerry going to put on a badge and come arrest us?"

“You saw the thumbs-up. I think she’s going to stand by the door and listen.”

He bumps my arm in jest when I frown.

“Hey, we have our own personal guard. Make sure you put on a good show to thank her.”

“You’re joking, but you never know.” I can’t continue if someone’s creeping around outside. Peeking out the door requires a game of Tetris with the bags, and thankfully, I find the hall empty. Then I rig a better way to keep the door closed by laying my bag on its side and using my jeans to tie it to the handle of the door. I’d prefer a lock, but Liam kissing along the nape of my neck convinces me that this is good enough.

He bites my neck, sending chills through me. I lean against him, and his chest warms my back. One of his hands goes between my legs, circling over my panties, heating my clit while his other hand fondles my breasts. I sway my hips from side to side, teasing his dick with my ass, but end up taunting myself just as much because I can’t wait to have his hard cock inside me.

He spins me around, pushes down my underwear, and slides two fingers inside me. My pussy is wet and welcoming, allowing his fingers to slide in and out with ease. He presses into my g-spot, and I moan—all concerns of someone in the hallway might overhearing have disappeared. The pressure is a ticklish heat, sweet and intense, making my kitty squeeze in delight.

He groans, “You’re so tight.”

I shove his boxers off and take his dick in my hand. Damn, he's so hard and it's such a turn-on. He fingers me. I pump his dick. We find a rhythm as we work each other.

"I want to fuck you." Then he flashes a gold-wrapped condom. I don't even question how he managed to get the condom out without me noticing. At this moment, there's only one reason why I'm glad that he's good with his hands.

I turn around and brace myself against the sliver of wall next to the door, angling forward in invitation. He rushes to put on the condom. My breath hitches as he slides into me. We start slowly, not wanting to bang into the shelving and send a shower of cleaners onto our heads. His hands continue to rub, squeeze, and work my sensitive spots. The ribs of the condom tease me as he slides in and out in long strokes. I rub my clit in time with his pushes. The sensations leave me breathless and panting. I wish I could be more vocal, could roar with pleasure.

He grabs my hips, repositioning me so that the head of his hard dick hits my G-spot, sending shocks of warmth. The sudden intensity surprises me and pushes me toward a climax. "Shit, your dick feels so good. Don't stop."

"Come for me, baby." He pounds into my G-spot over and over, in a steady rhythm, and I clench against him, coiling up as the sensations intensify, until I'm rocketed over the edge.

I cry out as my orgasm ricochets through my body. Liam continues his rhythm until I'm limp and then pulls me tight against him, resting his forehead against the back of my head. His breath is hot and heavy, blowing my hair from side to side.

“You almost took me with you,” Liam says. “Turn around.”

I press myself against him, letting my body slide against his as I turn. When we face one another, he kisses me deeply, his tongue dancing against mine. Our chests are slick with perspiration, which should be disgusting, but feels amazing. I hook one arm behind his head and lift a leg, looping it around his, opening myself to him. He rocks into me hard. The wire ribs of the shelf dig into my forearm, but the press of the cool metal is tantalizing. Our breath deepens as we slap against one another. Bottles rattle, but we’re beyond the point of concern. His fingers claw into my ass with each thrust. Everything about him is so hard that he once again brings me to the apex, and this time I pull him over the edge with me.

Afterward, I grab for my shirt, but he stops me. “Wait, I want to hold you.”

We sway to the jazz, naked, reveling in our closeness, extending the afterglow in the dim light of his phone.

Chapter Five



With our clothes straightened and our bags pulled behind us, we brave leaving the closet. The hall is oddly quiet, and the break room's empty. The main terminal is empty too—not even Jerry's shuffling about.

“Hello,” I call out. The word echoes in the empty room. “Hello,” I yell.

There's no response.

I turn to Liam. “Oh my gosh, where'd everybody go?”

“Probably to a hotel. I'm guessing that's the announcement we ignored.”

“Oh, no. We messed up. What do we do now? What if we're locked in here?”

“I'm sure we can amuse ourselves.” He pulls me in for a kiss.

This calms the panic spreading through my stomach. He holds me tight and kisses me again, distracting me from our predicament. Staying in the terminal could make for an interesting night. If I'm with Liam, I won't care that dinner will be candy bars and potato chips.

The sound of a door clicking separates us. Jerry's voice calls out from the hallway, “I'm coming.” He shuffles into the

terminal, buttoning the cuffs of his blue-striped pajamas. “Oh! So, I did hear voices. How are you two here?”

“Interesting outfit. You live here?” Liam asks.

“Today’s been an odd day.” Jerry kicks out a leg, and his pajama pants sway around his ankle. “I should’ve known better than to do my usual evening routine.”

He points at Liam. “But to answer your question, I converted the administrative office into a studio apartment, or as I like to call it, my city cottage. I spend more time in my woodland cottage since Spudderton Regional is only open a few days a week. But this doesn’t answer how you two are here after closing time.”

Tongue-tied, I look at Liam, but he doesn’t have a response either. Jerry looks at our bags. “Is there something wrong with the commuter plane? Didn’t have room for you?”

“We’re not taking it. We actually need to go to the hotel,” Liam says.

“Weren’t you two the ones fighting for a seat?” Jerry asks.

“Oh, well, I gave up my seat to Serena here, but then she was hit with a nasty stomach bug.” Liam flashes me a devilish grin while he rubs his belly and then pinches his nose. “Poor thing. I hung around to make sure she’d be okay.”

“Quite the gentleman of you.” Jerry nods at Liam.

“Yes, such a gentleman,” I say with lots of snark for Liam.

Jerry studies both of us for a moment and then shakes his finger. “Stomach bug, huh? Well, I guess that explains the moaning I heard from the supply closet.”

I duck my head, which is turning as pink as a red bliss potato. “Anyway... do you know which hotel everyone went to?”

“A couple of buses picked them up. They’re dropping people off at a few of the local hotels. You’ll have to call a taxi.”

Doomsday scenarios race through my head, and my stomach truly becomes queasy. If we don’t figure out the hotel, then we won’t know anything about the flight. Then we’ll have to figure our own way out of here. What if there aren’t even any weekend flights? We could end up stuck in Spuderton for days...and I’d have nothing to do except Liam all weekend long. No, this wouldn’t be bad at all. In fact, this could be the best possible outcome.

We’re interrupted by muffled shouting from outside. Jerry’s head cocks to the side. “Now, what’s that about?”

We follow behind as he walks to the door of the runway. Jerry unlocks it and pushes it open.

Wendy rushes into the building. “I’m not doing it,” she yells.

“Wendy, come on. You’re being ridiculous.” Hugh trails in behind her.

“It’s bad luck. You know I’m not superstitious, but this is my thing. Thirteen and the triple sixes—I don’t mess with either of them. I don’t stay on the thirteenth floor. I don’t go out on Friday the thirteenth. I don’t even do a baker’s dozen—if they try to give me that extra bagel, I say no thank you. And I most definitely won’t sit in seat thirteen.”

“I’ll take it. You know I don’t care,” Hugh says.

“But it’s my seat. If the devil comes, do you think he’ll care that you swapped seats with me?”

“Hold on a second now—in this scenario, are you throwing me to the devil?”

Amanda hurries into the terminal. She sees Jerry and rushes over to him. “Oh, good! There you are.” She does a quick scan of his PJs, but remains all business. “This day just won’t end. I need to call back to corporate. And we need to get Hugh and Wendy over to the hotel.”

“No, we need a rental car.” Wendy puts her hands on her hips.

Hugh’s mouth drops open. “We’re driving back to Florida?”

“Yes, we are. We’ve always wanted to see this great country of ours, and we’re doing it.”

For a moment, Hugh stands there stunned, but then he snaps upright and shoots a finger into the air. “Sounds like we’re going to need a convertible.”

Jerry bounces on the balls of his feet. “Lucky for you, I know the guy who runs the rental counter.” He points his thumbs back at himself.

Amanda leaves Jerry to deal with Hugh and Wendy and beelines for the flight attendant’s desk, but Liam cuts her off. He throws open his arms. “Amanda!” He grabs my hand and pulls me next to him. “Looks like there’s room for us now.”

“Oh, geez, how are you two still here?” She throws up her hands. “Doesn’t even matter. I guess it’s your lucky day. Let’s get you on this flight.”

Liam throws an arm around my shoulders with a triumphant smile, not noticing that I'm hanging my head. So much for a whirlwind weekend romance. Reality has arrived, and it's off to a tournament for him and home to my parents' basement for me.

Soon we're rushed out to the commuter plane, which is so small that the overhead compartments aren't even big enough for our roller bags, so they're shoved into cargo in the plane's belly. But inside there are side-by-side seats for Liam and me, and that's all that matters. He sacrifices himself and takes seat thirteen, so I swoon over how chivalrous and brave he is.

After I buckle, I give Liam's hand a squeeze. "I almost wish we hadn't gotten the flight. Would've been fun staying in a hotel with you."

He doesn't respond and instead pulls out his phone. I guess I'm alone in that thought. Though I can't blame him for being happy to be leaving Spudderton, my heart hurts a little that he doesn't share even a sliver of my regret. I guess it confirms this was only a quick fling for him, and that he's ready to move on to whoever is next.

While he taps away at his phone, he turns from me so I can't see his screen. His secretiveness raises the hairs on my arm—he could have a girlfriend.

I don't want to think about that or anything else that his coldness implies, so I grab my phone to send out some texts of my own. The first will be to let my parents know I'll be home later tonight. When I pick up my phone, my text noti-

fication beeps. It's from an unknown number and starts with "Hey Sexy."

I hate spam. Most of them seem to fall into porn, like this one, or political. I get way too many crap messages. This one will likely move onto something like, "Join my profile and see what I have for you." They all end with a link that I'd never dare click.

I hit the spam button.

Liam gasps. "You're sending me to spam?"

"What? That was you? Why are you texting me when I'm next to you?" I click over to my spam folder, where his text sits at the top.

Hey Sexy

Can I make you breakfast? (This is a request for an official date not a hookup)

I tingle from head to toe. I twist in my seat so I can wrap my arms around him. "Can it be a hookup and a date?"

"I think that can be arranged." He tucks my hair behind my ear. "And I'll cook for you on our first official date—breakfast in bed. I make a mean omelet."

"I'd love that, but how are you going to manage making me breakfast if we're in your hotel room?"

"I'm staying at my apartment tonight."

"Hold on, you said you were going to Atlanta for the tournament?"

"Oh, no, the tournament is at a casino in North Carolina. I live in Atlanta."

A tickly warmth spreads from my roots and runs to my toes at the thought of him living near me. Even so, I've caught

him in a lie. I pull back. “I’m calling this bluff. There’s no tournament. You made up that whole thing to get the seat, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. The casino’s only a few hours away. I always planned to leave in the morning to arrive at lunchtime, which will give me half a day to unwind before the tournament starts on Saturday evening. But I must confess I’d rather spend the weekend in Atlanta.” He kisses the back of my hand.

This makes me all squishy inside. “Would it be too distracting if I went with you? I could play the slots, entertain myself, and then we can celebrate when you win.”

“I love that. You’d be the best good-luck charm ever.” He runs his hands over my hair and kisses my forehead.

“The way the flight started, I was sure I had the worst luck, but now I know otherwise. And I want to test it out. When we get to Atlanta, I want to play strip poker.”

“You have yourself a deal.”

And the great thing about strip poker is win or lose, I’ll be getting lucky.

