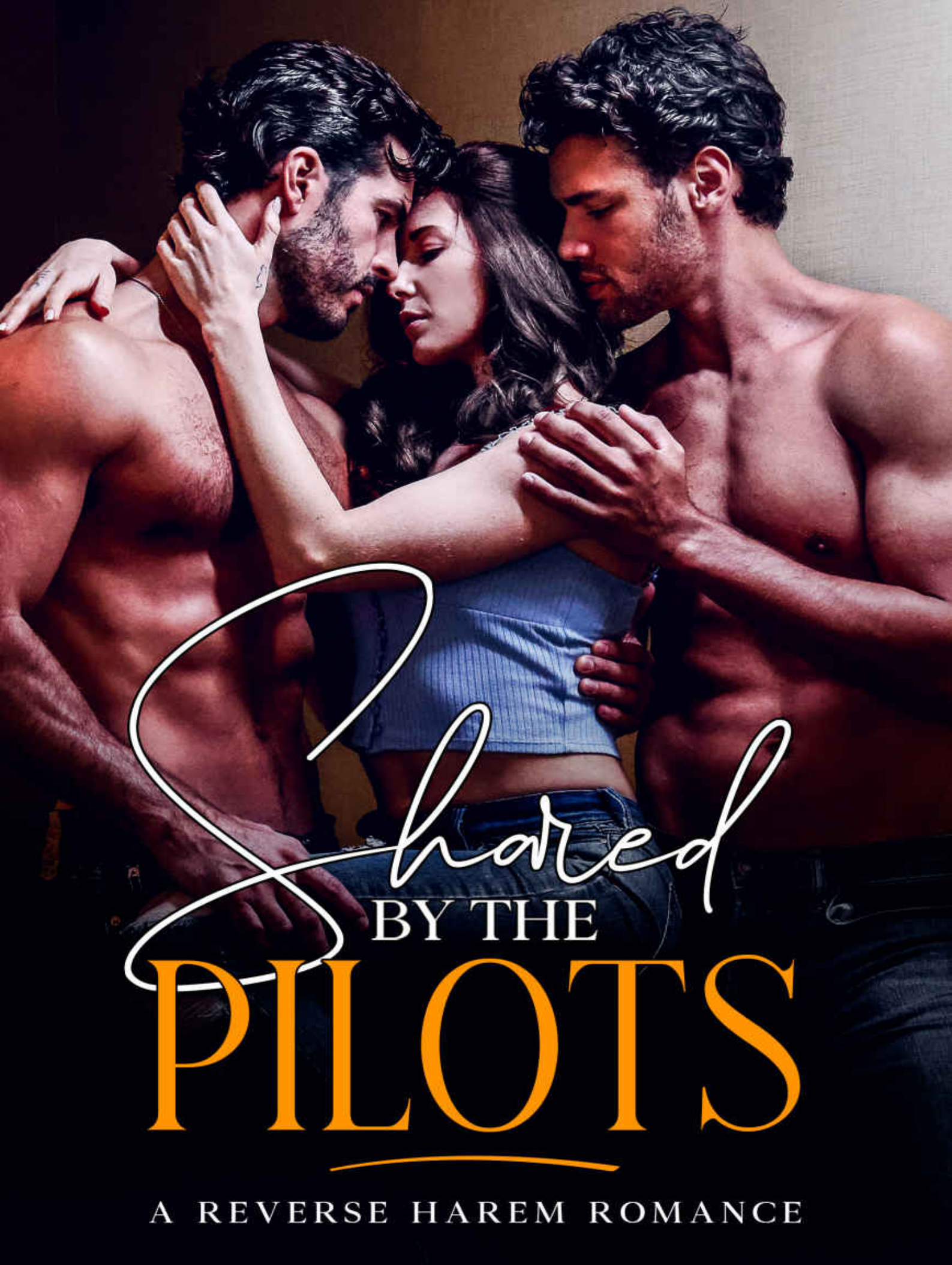


CASSIE COLE



Shared
BY THE
PILOTS

A REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

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Shared by the Pilots



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1



Veronica

“I hope the new member of our crew isn’t a total jerk,” Dex said while we stood outside of Gate 35 at George Bush Intercontinental Airport. “If it’s another Angela type, I might open the door at thirty-five thousand feet.”

I laughed, but glanced around. “Don’t say that too loud. Flight crew aren’t supposed to make jokes like that.”

Dexter—affectionately known as *Dex* to me and the other members of the crew—gave me a level stare. “Who’s joking? Do you not remember the way she picked her nails?”

“Don’t remind me.” I shivered, then instinctively smoothed out my Gulf Airlines uniform.

Dex suddenly gave a start and looked around the ground. “Where’s your carry-on?”

“I checked a bag this trip,” I replied. “There’s a Miami distillery that sells a specialty bottle of Mezcal, and I want to bring a dozen bottles home with me.”

“Angela used to go on and on about the Mezcal in Mexico City,” Dex said. “I swear she told me that story about her one-night stand with the head distiller a hundred times.”

“The one she claimed looked like Pierce Brosnan? I think I heard that story *two* hundred times.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to think about Angela. How was your date last night with Mr. First Class?”

Dex grinned. “Oh, you mean the hunk in 2D? Well, let’s just say our two Ds...”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” I said with a laugh. “All you had to say was it went well.”

“It went *very* well last night.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “And again this morning. I don’t even care if he’s an executive for an evil oil company. He can call me for a good *drilling* anytime.”

I covered my mouth to keep from laughing like a hyena around the passengers who were waiting for their flight. One teenage boy with a pair of headphones around his neck kept glancing up at me like he was listening in on our conversation.

“I’m happy for you,” I said. “It’s been a long time since I went on a date that I could call *great*.”

“That’s because you’re too picky,” Dex said without hesitation.

I scowled at him. “I’m not too picky!”

“Honey. Do I need to show you the receipts? Because I brought the receipts.”

“You’re exaggerating,” I replied.

Dex began counting off names on his fingers. “Bryce, the investment adviser.”

“He was too arrogant. Like he was God’s gift to women just because he earns six figures.”

Dex ticked another finger. “Angelo from the bar.”

“His name reminded me of Angela, who was on our crew at the time. And he wore socks with sandals. Pass.”

“What about Captain Markson?”

“You know I don’t date pilots,” I replied. “Plus, he had a stupid chin.”

“Stupid chin?” Dex let his hand fall back to his side. “Do you hear yourself, Veronica?”

“Okay, maybe I’m *selective* about the men I date,” I admitted. “But that’s because life is too short to settle for

someone who isn't perfect. I don't want a fling—I want to find my soulmate. I'm holding out for that man.”

“Life is too short,” Dex argued, “to hold out for someone with zero flaws! Nobody is perfect, honey. Real romance is all about falling in love with the real person beneath their stupid chin.”

“And I suppose you're an expert in this?” I replied. Dex was in his mid-thirties too and still hadn't settled down.

“I have done a lot of research on the subject,” he said curtly.

“Reading cheesy romance novels doesn't count as research.”

He rolled his eyes. “The point is you could be missing out on *the one* because you're too picky. Rejecting a really cute guy because his name is similar to someone you hate? You can't keep doing that. You need to start taking chances.”

“You might be right,” I said, hoping the admission would end the discussion.

“I want you to do something,” Dex said, a glimmer of mischief shining in his eyes. “Say yes to the next five guys who ask you out. See what happens.”

“Five? No way. Two.”

“Three,” he replied. “That's a good sample size.”

“Will it get you off my back?”

“Of course not,” Dex said. “But it will be good for you. And if all three of them are terrible, then you can hold it over me for the rest of our lives.”

I was sick of talking about my love life, so I stuck out my palm. “You have a deal. I will say yes to the next three guys who ask me out.”

“With no exceptions,” Dex clarified.

“Fine. No exceptions.”

The teenage boy with the headphones stood up and awkwardly approached us. “Hi, um, do you want to go on a date? With me?”

I turned to Dex. “One exception.”

“You have to say yes to any *realistic* advance,” Dex agreed before turning to the kid. “Sorry, sweetie, but... come on. You’re going on vacation with your parents.”

“It’s an all-inclusive resort on South Beach,” he argued, face turning red. “I’m totally doing my own thing the whole time.”

“And you’re going to have fun with some girls your own age,” I said.

He returned to his seat. I lowered my voice and said, “Thank you for not making me say yes to him.”

But Dex wasn’t paying attention to me. He was staring down the terminal concourse. “Oh, lordy.”

“What?” I asked, following his gaze. “What am I supposed to be looking at?”

Dex pointed. “I think *that* is the new member of our crew.”

2



Veronica

Everyone looked good in a Gulf Airlines uniform. It was impossible not to in the navy pants that hugged our thighs and butt, and the matching vest and tie. Especially when paired with the silver shirt and flash of silver scrollwork on the cuff and lapel of the jacket. I always stood a little prouder when I wore the uniform, and strutted my stuff when I walked down a terminal.

But the man who approached us took it to another level. His clothes were so well-tailored that it almost looked like a different uniform altogether. He was a lean man, with thick chestnut hair and an oval face that wore a grin that was on the charming side of cocky. He seemed to smile at everyone he passed—in a genuine way, rather than the I’m-being-forced-to-smile way that a lot of flight attendants did.

My heart fluttered a little bit when he turned that smile onto me and Dex. “Are you my new cabin family?” he asked, bringing his rolling luggage to a stop in front of us.

“Actually, we’re going to a cosplay convention,” I joked. “We’re dressed as extremely attractive flight attendants from the fifties.”

“You fooled me.” That grin somehow grew warmer. “I’m Adam Mandalay.”

Dex and I introduced ourselves. Adam shook my hand in a polite, quick manner. But his handshake with Dex was different; their fingers seemed to linger together a heartbeat longer.

Just my luck, I thought.

“I’m going to snag a Mentos before the flight,” Adam said, glancing at his watch. It was an expensive Fossil watch with a brown leather strap, and a blue face that matched his uniform. “Back in a second.”

The two of us watched him hurry away.

“Adam Mandalay,” Dex said, drawing out every syllable. “Which, I can only assume, is a shortened version of *mandatory lay*.”

I giggled at the silly joke. “It’s too bad your date with 2D went so well, or I would suggest you ask Adam out.”

Dex gave me a look. “Adam is straight.”

I scoffed. “No he’s not.”

“Are you,” Dex asked slowly, “questioning *my* gaydar, sweetie?”

“Good point. But I’m not convinced.”

“You should ask him out,” he suggested. “Prove me wrong.”

“He seemed more interested in you than me. Also, my deal with you involved saying yes to men who asked *me* out. Not the other way around.”

Dex waved a dismissive hand. “This is a suggestion outside of our deal. Did you see that man? There’s no ring on that finger, but I doubt that will last long. Ask him out!”

“Exactly,” I said, changing my strategy. “A guy like that is in his thirties, and he’s not married yet? What’s wrong with him?”

Dex raised an eyebrow. “I could say the same of you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t date coworkers.”

“You don’t date coworkers. You don’t date pilots. You don’t date men with stupid chins. You have too many rules. That’s why you’re so unhappy, and I’m living my best life.”

“Shut up,” I whispered. “He’s coming back.”

Adam walked up with that charming smile plastered on his face. “I also got a pack of M&Ms and a pack of Skittles, as gifts for welcoming me into your flight crew. You get to pick who gets what.”

“Dibs on the chocolate!” I said, snagging the M&Ms.

Dex took his bag of Skittles. “I think you’re going to fit in just fine, Adam.”

The jetway opened up and we boarded the plane so we could prepare everything for the flight. Checking the beverage cart, making sure everything had been restocked. Reviewing the passenger list for any special needs requests. Dex and Adam seemed to immediately hit it off like they were best friends, rather than two men who had met five minutes ago. Adam wasn’t rude to me, but he wasn’t as friendly as he was with Dex.

I stole a few glances in his direction as we went through our routine. He was fit, and lean. His brown hair, the color of rich soil you wanted to dig your fingers into, was perfectly groomed—not a strand was out of place. His eyebrows even looked freshly plucked.

There’s no way he’s straight.

Then the passengers began boarding, and I turned my attention away from our new crewmember. The flight was a nonstop from Houston to Miami. Every flight crew had a different way of handling duties, but our crew typically rotated who handled which section of the aircraft. Today, I was in charge of business class since Dex had it yesterday. That meant Dex and Adam were handling the economy passengers.

Ever since I took my first plane ride at six years old, I’ve wanted to be a flight attendant. It wasn’t glamorous; I was part waitress, part concierge, and part traffic cop. But I loved traveling, and this was a job that allowed me to do it daily. For free. We were under-paid (who wasn’t these days?) but I considered myself incredibly lucky.

Business class passengers got free alcohol, and most of my flight was taking advantage of it today. That took up the first

half hour after we reached our cruising altitude. Although it was an afternoon flight, we were also serving a light meal. I took each business class passenger's order, then prepped the self-contained meal trays in the cabin oven before delivering them to their respective seats. On international flights, I would then have the option of sneaking in a meal for myself, but there just wasn't enough time on a domestic flight this short.

One of the pilots had also put in a meal request. I prepped the food, then used the cabin phone to call the cockpit and let them know it was ready. Then I did a part of my job that had been standard on all flights since 9/11: I positioned the drink cart in the aisle, blocking all access to the forward cabin. A moment later, the cockpit door opened and one of the pilots stepped out.

"Garlic crusted chicken waiting for you on the counter, Captain Hendricks." I had flown with him about a dozen times in the past few years. He was tall and darkly handsome, with an aura of quiet competence.

"Call me Luke, please and thank you," he replied in a deep, but soft-spoken, voice. Like distant thunder. "And this is for my co-pilot, not for me."

"Do you want anything?" I asked. "I only saw the one request on the sheet."

He shook his head. "I'll grab a snack in a minute, but I'd rather save my appetite for fresh Miami seafood when we land."

I let out a hungry groan. "Me too. I've been thinking about fresh clams since this morning."

"I'm a sucker for Cuban shrimp. I can eat an entire plate of them without slowing down."

He picked up the tray of food and went back into the cockpit. Captain Hendricks was a nice man; hard to read sometimes, but then again, most pilots were. He returned a moment later.

"Are there any of those fresh baked cookies left? I've got a sweet tooth."

I smiled. “I have two still sitting in the warming tray. But you’d better leave one for me. Need a drink with that?”

“Two double scotches,” he replied.

It took me a moment to realize he was joking.

“Just kidding,” he said with the barest hint of a smile. “I don’t drink on the job.” A pause. “Anymore.” Another pause. “Not since the *incident*.”

The deadpan delivery had me cackling by the end. “Careful making jokes like that,” I whispered. “Or the passengers will think you’re serious.”

“A ginger ale, just the can, if you don’t mind,” he said. I handed it to him, and he lingered there in the forward cabin a few moments longer. “If you’ve got a craving for clams, I got a tip about the best raw bar in Miami. I’m heading there an hour or two after we land, if you want to join me.”

Reflexively, I said, “Sorry, I’ve already got plans. But you’ll have to let me know how it is on the return flight tomorrow.”

He nodded politely. “I’ll be sure to take notes.” And then he ducked back into the cockpit and locked the door.

As I returned the drink cart to its normal position, I thought about what had just happened. I had already broken my deal with Dex without even thinking about it. But I had a strict policy about not dating pilots. There were plenty of flight attendants who did, and let’s just say they got a reputation around the airlines.

I’ll say yes to the first three non-pilots who ask me out, I thought as I began collecting meal trays from the business class passengers.

The rest of the flight was smooth, aside from a little turbulence on our descent to Miami. We stood in the forward cabin and said goodbye to every passenger as they left the plane. Captain Hendricks and his co-pilot hung in the cockpit door and did the same.

When everyone was gone, he turned to me and said, “If you change your mind about the invite, the raw bar is called

Benicio's." He tipped his pilot cap to me, then headed up the
bridgeway to the terminal.

"Excuse me?" Dex hissed. "Did Luke ask you out?"

"Captain Hendricks mentioned a seafood place," I replied. "I
don't think it was a date invitation."

He glared at me until I relented.

"I don't date pilots!" I said defensively. I glanced down the
plane aisle; Adam was tidying up in the cabin, out of hearing
range. "I don't want to get a reputation."

"I don't believe you," he said.

"Come on," I argued. "I told you my rule about pilots."

"You just want to be unhappy forever," Dex said, retrieving
his carry-on from storage. "Well, if you won't at least *try* to
find your soulmate, then I don't care. But you can find
someone else to complain to about it."

He stormed away, leaving me standing there.

3



Veronica

I walked to the baggage claim alone with my thoughts. Usually I only brought a carry-on unless I was going somewhere for an extended stay, but I had checked a larger bag today so I could bring back that special Miami Mezcal. While I waited in the baggage area, I glanced through the windows into the pick-up area outside. Dex and Adam were in the pickup zone, waiting for an Uber to our hotel. Usually we shared one together, but I guess he didn't want to wait for me.

I've never seen him that mad. Not even after watching the CATS movie.

As the bags moved around the carousel, the number of waiting passengers from my flight dwindled. Eventually, I was the only one left and my bag was nowhere to be found. Just my luck.

After a ten minute wait at the lost baggage counter, I learned that my bag had been mistakenly delivered to the private aircraft terminal. "I don't know how that could have happened!" the flustered airport employee told me.

A shuttle ride later and I was standing in the tiny terminal where all the private planes arrived into Miami. Compared to the bustle and activity of the main terminals, it was strangely calm here. Through the window I could see the tarmac, where a vintage looking seaplane stood ready to depart.

"They said it was delivered here?" the agent behind the service desk said with a frown. "Let me check the loading dock. Back in a jiffy."

I glanced at my watch. It had been an hour since we landed. By the time I got checked into my hotel, it would be time for dinner. I needed to find a good place.

I thought about Captain Hendricks' dinner invitation, and Dex's reaction to learning I had turned him down. He was totally off-base about me. I didn't *want* to be unhappy forever. I just knew what I wanted—and, more importantly, what I *didn't* want. Having standards didn't mean I was destined to be single forever.

I thought I would be married by now. With a baby on the way.

I shook off the thought as the door to the tarmac opened and a pilot walked in. I knew he was a pilot because he was wearing a stereotypical tan bomber jacket and aviator sunglasses. With his swept-back sun-bleached hair, he looked like Matthew McConaughey auditioning for the new Top Gun movie.

His handsome face broke into a smile when he saw me. "Where's Freddy?" he asked in a smooth Texas drawl. "Let me guess. Another smoke break?"

"He's looking for my bag," I replied.

The unknown pilot gave me a long look, down and then up. "I don't want to sound rude, ma'am, but I think you're in the wrong place."

"No kidding," I muttered. "I came in on a 737 from Houston and somehow my bag was sent over here."

The man leaned on the service counter and let out a slow whistle. "I'd be raisin' all kinds of hell if they did that to me," he said in that drawl.

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm a pushover."

He grinned. "You don't look like a pushover, if you don't mind me sayin' so."

I shrugged, and steeled myself for what was going to come next. This guy was going to ask me out. I could feel it coming.

All pilots were cocky, and this guy seemed more full of himself than most.

Then he leaned over the counter and snatched up a brown paper bag. “Here we go. The reason I’m here.” He turned back and gave me a half-salute with the hand holding the bag. “Hope the rest of your evening turns out better.”

He started to walk away.

“Hey,” I protested. “You can’t just take that.”

He flashed me a grin over his shoulder. “If Freddy asks, tell him Taylor stole it.”

I watched as the man—Taylor?—walked out to the seaplane on the tarmac. He tossed the bag up into the cockpit before climbing up himself.

“Yup, your bag got sent here all right,” Freddy said as he returned from the back area. “Real sorry about that. I’d love to blame it on the computer system, but truth is the guys we have unloading bags aren’t the brightest bunch.”

I pointed out to the tarmac. “That pilot just came in here and took a bag off your desk. He said his name was Taylor.”

Freddy chuckled. “That sonofabitch was supposed to pick it up two days ago. About time he took it off my hands.” He wheeled my bag around the side of the counter. “Here you go.”

“Who is he?” I asked, still staring out at the seaplane. It was beginning to taxi out to the runway for takeoff. “I’ve never seen anyone fly one of those outside of Alaska.”

“Taylor Hawkins?” He gave me a wry smile. “He’s trouble. He’s also a great sonofabitch to have as a friend. Saved my ass more times than I’ve got fingers.”

I watched the seaplane taxi out of sight.

Half an hour later, I was checking into my hotel. The airline usually booked the entire flight crew together, but I didn’t see Dex or Adam or anyone else. As I took the elevator up to my room, I prayed that I wouldn’t run into Luke.

I took a shower and changed into more appropriate clothes for the Miami heat; a pair of baggy linen pants and a thick-strap tank top. As I perused Google Maps for a place to eat, I thought more about what Dex had said. Was I sabotaging myself to stay unhappy?

At thirty-three years old, I had been on countless bad dates in my life. I spent ten years navigating Tinder, I didn't want to subject myself to that grind again. I didn't have the emotional energy for it. And I certainly didn't want to settle.

Deep down, I was happy alone. Comfortable in my own skin, alone with my thoughts. I didn't mind taking a book to a bar or restaurant and eating by myself while reading. Some people called that pathetic, but it made me feel independent.

Yet no matter how happy I was now, I sometimes wondered if I was missing out on something deeper...

I thought about Taylor Hawkins, wearing that stupid bomber jacket and grinning like the world was all a big joke—and he was the only one who knew the punchline. Something about him stuck in my head, like the smell of fresh pizza in a car after picking it up from the store. The sight of him made me *hungry* again, hungry for more than just a meal by myself. Even though we had only spoken for barely a minute, the interaction had ignited something inside of me that was now blazing like a bonfire.

Benicio's Raw Bar appeared on my Google Maps search. The place Luke had recommended. I started to continue scrolling, but then went back to it. The reviews were good. And it wasn't too far away.

If it will make Dex happy...

4



Taylor

Even though I was barely scratching my mid-thirties, I had one hell of a pilot's resume.

I was admitted into Naval Flight School as a Student Naval Aviator on my nineteenth birthday, despite not having the required bachelor's degree. It's widely believed they waived the requirement after learning that I'd been crop-dusting in Iowa since my family moved there when I was twelve, and was barely tall enough to see over the cockpit instruments. My first week at flight school, I overheard two of my instructors talking about how I was the most promising pilot they had ever received.

But I was bad at taking orders, and washed out before my twentieth birthday. Went back to the Farmer's Air Force—crop-dusting—for a few years, although they changed the name to *aerial application* for some reason I don't understand. After that, I found my way to Alaska, where I became a bush pilot. Spent most of my time flying rich fishermen to remote areas inaccessible except by aircraft. Nobody around for hundreds of miles.

Spent half a decade up there flirting with the Arctic Circle before finding my way down to warmer climates. Now I bounced around the Caribbean islands. If someone wants to visit Samana Bay down in the Dominican Republic, they can fly commercial into Santo Domingo and take a three hour bus ride... or they can hire me to fly them straight to the bay and taxi right on up to their waterfront hotel. It was good work, if you could get it.

It helped that I had a lot of charm with tourists. I dressed the part of an eccentric pilot, dialed up my Texas twang, and gave them the full experience. Tourists ate it up.

Women did, too.

That was my biggest problem, I had come to realize after thirty-four years on this watery marble of a planet. I let women tug me around by the collar. I was impulsive, and made mistakes. That's why I went back to Iowa after the Navy: I was chasing my high school sweetheart, who was getting her degree in Ames. After we crashed and burned, I followed a marine biologist named Holly up to Alaska. That was two of the best—and worst—years of my life. And hell, the only reason I ended up down in the gulf was because I fell madly in lust with a waitress named Eloise who was on a bachelorette party in Vegas. We eloped after two days, and I gave her a private flight back home to Miami. Somehow, we lasted six months.

But I liked the warmer climate, and had been here six years now.

The good news? I had learned from my Odyssey-like trials and tribulations. I didn't have a bachelor's degree from Iowa State, but I did have a degree from the College of Falling For The Wrong Women. I'd come out the other side wiser than most men my age.

Women were trouble. At least, they were trouble for me. Aside from the occasional warm bedmate, I stayed away.

But sometimes it was hard.

Take the woman who was standing in the private terminal at Miami International. These days, flight attendant uniforms weren't designed to make men's dicks hard—but she wore her Gulf Airlines uniform like she was the star of an airplane-themed pornographic movie. I'm talkin' the kind of curves that make a man stop in his tracks and *take notice*.

I couldn't help but dial up my Texas twang when I told her, "I don't want to sound rude, ma'am, but I think you're in the wrong place."

It felt good to flirt a little. Like flexing muscles I hadn't used in a long time. Besides, it's not like it meant anything. I was supposed to be wheels-up in fifteen minutes, and she was probably based somewhere far away from Miami.

I grabbed the brown paper bag Freddie had been holding for me and said my goodbye to the fine lady. That just about surprised the pants off her. Clearly she wasn't used to being flirted with and then *not* asked out.

Good to know I can still keep a pretty woman on her toes.

I hopped into my Cessna 172 and headed down to Puerto Rico. It was after dark when I landed. I took a bus into town to my favorite bar, which served the best street tacos in the western hemisphere. It was the kind of place where most of the lights didn't work, and they advertised three different beers on tap, but I knew they were all hooked up to the same kegs of Medalla Light.

I pulled the wrinkled brown paper bag out of my backpack and set it on the table, then started digging into my plate of tacos.

Ten minutes went by before I heard the rumblings of an old motorbike pull up out front. The front door opened, and a big guy walked in. The kind of guy that looked like he would have been an NFL linebacker if he had been born a thousand miles to the north. By the time he reached the bar, the bartender had already poured him three shots of tequila. He threw back one of them, then carried the other two over to my table.

He sat down and placed one of the shots in front of me.

"Only beer tonight, amigo," I said. "I'm wheels-up in an hour."

The man used a sausage-like finger to push the shot a few inches closer to me. His stare was as hard as old leather, his eyes more red than white. Refusing the shot felt like the more dangerous choice.

"What the hell. It's only my life I'm endangering. I'll be sober by the time I land in Miami." I threw back the shot and set the glass down on the table with a *click*.

Only then did he pick up the wrinkled paper bag and stand up.

“Hey,” I said, reaching across the table to grab his wrist. “We’re even now. Right?”

He looked down at me and sneered.

I didn’t relax until I heard his motorbike rumble away into the distance.

5



Luke

The warm Miami sun cast a golden hue over the outdoor terrace of the seaside restaurant. A gentle breeze rustled the crisp white tablecloths, and the rhythmic sound of waves crashing against the shore provided a soothing backdrop while I nursed my drink. The azure waters sparkled under the relentless Florida sun, creating a dazzling display of diamonds on the water's surface.

At one of the elegant wrought-iron tables, a woman sat, completely immersed by the ocean view. Dressed in casual yet stylish attire, she leaned back in a comfortable wicker chair, her eyes fixed on the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean stretching out before her. She wore an expression of peaceful contemplation, eyes half-lidded, as if lost in a memory. She occasionally took a leisurely sip from a glass of chilled white wine, savoring the crisp taste like she had all the time in the world.

Normally, I would have offered to buy the woman a drink. I had traded my pilot's uniform for more comfortable clothes, but I had enough confidence without it that I did fine with members of the finer sex. And when they *did* learn I was a pilot? Well, it almost wasn't fair. Life as a bachelor was good.

But something stopped me tonight. The woman was beautiful, her ring finger was bare, and she was nursing her drink with the kind of patience that made me suspect she wanted someone to come up and buy her another. I had nothing but green lights. Yet something stopped me. My heart wasn't in it.

Am I getting bored of the game?

I picked up the seafood menu and gave it a long examination. I already knew what I was getting—the shrimp platter—but I skimmed the page anyway because it gave me something to do other than wonder about the woman at the other table.

And then I realized what it was. Veronica.

I'd been on plenty of flights with the gorgeous brunette. She had a reputation for being picky with who she dated; no coworkers, and especially no pilots. Her adherence to those rules had even caused some to speculate that she didn't care for men at all.

Some pilots saw that as a challenge. Me, I respected it. Until today. Something about the woman's demeanor on our flight from Houston made me ask her out. And of course, she had declined.

I didn't like it when women felt pressured to say yes. There was an inherent power imbalance when a pilot asked out a member of the crew. I wasn't technically her superior, but pilots carried a lot more weight in the airline industry. It could get messy.

But hell, how else were two single people supposed to meet in this world other than at work? Dating apps? Hard pass.

Regardless, Veronica was now stuck in my head even more than Cuban shrimp.

“Excuse me.”

I blinked and the woman from the other table was twisted around in her seat, staring at me. “Yes?”

“Weren't you the pilot of my flight?” she asked. “From Houston?”

My winning smile fell into place automatically. “I probably was.”

“Small world.” She let out a playful giggle. “I feel like I should buy you a drink. For getting me here safely.”

“That’s awfully nice, but I’m just having the one drink.” I raised my glass. “Got a return flight in the morning. You have a nice evening.”

A look of annoyance flashed across her eyes, and then she put some cash down on the table and left the restaurant. I stared out at the ocean; the sun had set, and twilight was descending on the water.

“You look pathetic sitting there, all alone.”

I turned to see none other than Veronica standing next to my table, a wry smile touching her full lips. She had changed into baggy pants and a nice tank top that accentuated the curves of her upper body even better than the Gulf Airlines uniform I typically saw her in, and her hair flowed down her back like a waterfall as dark as the night.

“Nothing pathetic about eating by yourself,” I replied with a smile. “I’m perfectly comfortable alone with my thoughts. I suspect few people would say the same.”

She took the seat at my table and cocked her head thoughtfully, like the comment resonated with her.

“Of course,” I added, “I always prefer good company. I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“When I Googled seafood places, this restaurant popped up at the top of every list,” she explained.

“And the line to get in is over an hour long,” I added. “Which is why I made a reservation two weeks ago.”

“That may or may not have factored into my decision to sit with you,” she admitted.

Our server arrived and took her drink order. I asked for a refill on my drink, and ordered an appetizer for us to share.

“Why *did* you change your mind?” I asked.

Veronica blinked long eyelashes at me. “Are you surprised that a woman said yes to you?”

“No,” I replied. “But I’m surprised *you* said yes.”

“You’ve never asked me out before.”

“Because I knew the answer would be no.”

“Then why did you invite me to dinner tonight?” she asked.

I shrugged. “No matter how low the odds, sometimes the roulette wheel lands on your number.”

“Maybe that’s why I came here,” Veronica said coyly. “Because the roulette wheel in my mind landed on your number.”

“Is that the reason?” I asked.

She hesitated as the server returned with our drinks. When he was gone, she admitted, “I have a best friend. We’re usually on the same crew.”

“Dexter? The one who always winks at me?”

“That’s him,” she replied. “He’s gay.”

“I surmised as much based on the winking.”

“Well, he thinks I’m too picky,” she explained. “I’m always finding a reason not to go out with a guy. They have a stupid chin, or a name that sounds similar to someone I dislike. So he convinced me to say *yes* to the first three men who ask me out.”

“Huh.” I swirled my bourbon around in the glass. “That’s an interesting situation.”

“You’re not offended, are you?”

“That depends,” I said carefully. “Do you think my chin is stupid?”

Veronica’s laugh was sudden and carefree. “You have a strong jawline. Very attractive.”

“Then what’s your reason for not saying yes to me immediately?”

“I don’t date pilots. And I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but you happen to be a pilot.”

“I am indeed.” I sipped my bourbon, sending a warm burn down my throat. “That’s a good rule. Most pilots are cocky assholes.”

She raised a dark eyebrow. “You’re not cocky?”

“Oh, I’m as cocky as a pilot should be,” I replied. “But I’m *not* an asshole. Unless the situation calls for assholery.”

“So you’re not mad I agreed to meet you because of a deal I made with my friend?”

“When I was a teenager, I got a job working for the same hotel as my mom,” I said.

“Do you think this is a situation that calls for assholery?” Veronica asked. “Because ignoring my question and changing the subject is kind of an asshole move.”

“My mom was the regional manager for this hotel chain,” I continued. “She got me an interview with the manager at one of the hotels. I did well in the interview, and was hired to work behind the front desk after school. Checking people in, giving them extra coffee pods, all of that. My supervisor was a tough nut, and hated me from the start. He expected me to slouch off all day. But I worked hard, and got a promotion after a month. A few months later, I was promoted again.

“The point is that I don’t care how I get my foot in the door,” I explained. “It’s how I act once I get there that matters.”

Veronica nodded along. “Except you probably got those promotions because of who your mother was.”

I laughed. “You don’t know my mom. If anything, it was the opposite. So, how many other guys have you had to say yes to because of your deal with Dexter?”

“Actually, you’re the first. Well, aside from an ambitious teenage boy who overheard us at the gate and asked me out.”

“Good for him for shooting his shot,” I said.

“Do you feel any pressure?” She leaned forward on the table, showing a bit of cleavage that made my heart speed up. “Being the first?”

“I can handle the pressure. I’m a pilot, after all. Besides, I was in the Air Force before this.”

“Really? How does one go from working in hotels to joining the Air Force?”

“I wanted to fly jet aircraft at ludicrously high speeds,” I said. “There aren’t many opportunities to do that in the hotel industry.”

“Not unless you’re the pilot for the Hilton family’s private jet,” Veronica joked.

She sipped her drink to cover a smile while I laughed. Veronica was a lot funnier than I expected. A few minutes together and my cheeks already ached from smiling so much.

I wonder how else she’ll surprise me tonight.

6



Veronica

When I left my hotel to get dinner with Luke, I was doing so mostly out of a sense of obligation. Dex was my best friend, and I had made a promise to him. I didn't want him to be angry with me over something this silly. And I *did* want to eat some delicious seafood.

But after a few minutes with Luke, I realized something: we were hitting it off. The two of us had a surprising amount of chemistry, and he was nothing like the other pilots I knew. Or, at least, the stereotype of pilots that I had in my head.

"Only eight years in the Air Force," he explained while we waited for our food to arrive. "Was an O2, and easily could've made O3, but by then I didn't have the drive."

"O2? Something tells me you don't mean the stadium in London."

"O2 is the second rank of officer. First Lieutenant, technically. O3 is Captain."

"And now you're a *literal* captain."

"I do like calling myself Captain Hendricks," he admitted with a smile. "And although flying commercial aircraft isn't as fun as flying an F-22 Raptor, I still love my job. What about you? What did you want to be when you grew up?"

"Astronaut," I replied without hesitation.

He blinked. "Really?"

"Sally Ride came and spoke at my school when I was ten years old. The way she spoke about going to space, I became

obsessed overnight. I asked Santa for NASA bedsheets and toys and clothes that year. I wore the same pair of Space Shuttle underwear until I was in high school.”

“Washed regularly, I would hope.”

I gave him a glare.

“What stopped you from visiting the space station, then?” Luke asked.

“I was bad at math and science,” I replied. “And it turns out, those are very important skills when going to space. I think my parents were relieved when I finally gave up the dream.”

“Being a flight attendant is *almost* like being an astronaut. You go up close to space, complete trips with very specific mission parameters, and then land safely when you’re done.”

“I don’t even care if you’re being facetious,” I said. “I *love* my job. Being a flight attendant allows me to travel, which is my favorite thing in the world. I would do it for free.”

“You love it, even when you deal with annoying passengers?” he asked quizzically. “Or crying babies?”

“I would have to deal with all of that if I were a regular passenger. At least as a flight attendant I have some control over the situation. One time, a guy got in my face and called me a cunt because I wouldn’t serve him a sixth bottle of whiskey. I got his ass thrown onto the no-fly list.”

Luke chuckled and bit off the head of another shrimp. He had ordered an entire plate of them, and was almost done polishing them off. “I’m beginning to see why you enjoy being alone.”

“Being alone is great! It takes a lot of confidence to do an activity by yourself.”

“That’s more or less what I said when you first sat down and said I looked pathetic by myself.”

“It’s different for men and women,” I argued. “If a woman is by herself, people think she’s sad and lonely. If a man is by himself, he’s a cool bachelor.”

“This is true,” he admitted.

“I love eating dinner alone. If Dex has a date, I’ll find a nice restaurant and order the tasting menu all for myself. One of my favorite things to do is take a book to a brewery and read while nursing my beer.”

“Movies are my activity of choice,” Luke said. “When did society decide you *had* to go to the movies with a date? It’s quiet and dark. By definition, that is an ideal activity to partake without company.”

I snapped my fingers. “And concerts! You can relax and enjoy the music without looking over and making sure the person you’re with is having a good time.”

“You sound like you’re referencing a specific event.”

“It was two months ago, and I’m still annoyed,” I said with a groan. “I took a guy to see Tenacious D.”

“Jack Black’s band?”

“YES! They’re amazing! But the guy I brought didn’t really *get it*. He just stood there, watching the show while everyone around him sang along and cheered. He was the perfect guy otherwise, but I couldn’t get over it.” I lowered my voice and muttered, “Dex thought I was being too picky.”

“I don’t know how someone can listen to *Fuck Her Gently* and not be moved to tears,” Luke said.

“Right?”

“Going to a concert by yourself also means you can bail early if you want,” he added. “Fifteen years ago, I went to a show with a bunch of friends. It was *bad*. Genuinely cringe-worthy. As in, my face was contorted in a painful cringe the entire show. I wanted to leave, but my buddy drove, so I was stuck there.”

“What show?” I asked.

“My Chemical Romance.”

I almost spat out my drink. “You went to an MCR show?”

“I was a rebellious teenager,” he said defensively. “Hence the reason I joined the Air Force rather than climb the corporate ladder in the hospitality industry.”

“So you’re happy being alone. Does that mean you’ll never settle down?”

Luke shook his head. “Never is a very long time. I’ll settle down if the right person comes along. But it’s nice knowing that even if they don’t, I’ll live a happy life.”

“And who is the *right* person?”

“Hell if I know,” he said. “I’ll let you know if I find them.”

“Are you worried about being unfulfilled?”

“Not really. Are you?”

I hesitated. “Maybe?”

“Maybe?” he repeated.

“I don’t know. From a young age, women are told what they’re supposed to want. A husband. A big house with a white picket fence. Two-point-five children.”

“The point-five part is tough,” Luke said. “Top half, or bottom half?”

“Easy. Top half. My college roommate has two boys, and they’re always running off whenever she turns her back. If I ever had kids, I would want them to be stationary for as long as possible. Not to mention: top half means no diapers to change.”

“You make a very compelling point.”

“But yeah, I’ve been told all my life that I should want these things. And even though my parents were supportive of me doing whatever I wanted, *society* tells me to want these things. It’s constantly reinforced in movies and on TV shows. And maybe I do want those things. But not because I’m *supposed* to. So, my natural response is to push back against those things. But I do wonder if I’m going to wake up one morning and realize I’m living a life without any deeper fulfillment.”

Luke nodded along thoughtfully. “Men have their own kinds of societal pressures. We’re supposed to get a job that pays well, even if it makes us miserable. We have to climb the ladder, or else we’re called lazy. We’re supposed to be the provider of a family. If we don’t settle down, people think we’re selfish bachelors—which is *sometimes* perceived as cool, but usually just seems creepy. If you’re not settled down with a family by the time you’re thirty, people start wondering if there’s something wrong with you.”

I took a sip of my drink to cover a grimace. I’d had that same thought about single guys before.

“Not to mention all the pressures about money,” Luke went on. “I once worked with another pilot whose wife was a pharmaceutical rep. She made twice as much as he did. Which is objectively awesome. But all the other guys ridiculed him for it, constantly making fun of the fact that *she* is the so-called breadwinner. They took one of the biggest strengths of his relationship and turned it into a weakness, all because of toxic masculinity.”

“You wouldn’t feel emasculated being with a woman who makes more money than you?” I asked.

“Hell no. That’s the dream. When they’re successful, I’m successful. What’s the point of finding a partner in life if you don’t treat it like a real partnership?”

I cocked my head. “I have to admit. I’ve never heard a commercial airline pilot rant about toxic masculinity.”

“There’s plenty of ways to be masculine without it being toxic. It’s called being a good person who doesn’t care what others think.”

The server brought the check. I reached for it quickly, but Luke’s wide palm covered my hand. “I had two drinks before you got here. Plus, I’m the one who invited you out. You can pay next time.”

“You’re assuming there will be a next time.”

He shrugged while signing the bill. “If there isn’t, then you got a free meal, and I got a meal with some lovely company.”

And I will happily eat alone next time.”

“One thing you can’t do alone?” I said as we left. “Salsa dancing.”

Luke chuckled. “I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Then I’ll have to show you.” We walked outside and I pointed down the street. “There’s a salsa club two blocks that way. It was my backup plan if dinner turned out to be a bust.”

“So my punishment for being a good date is that now I have to go dancing?”

“It’s your *reward!*” I replied, taking his arm. “It’s okay if you’re not a good dancer. I can teach you.”

“Why do you assume I can’t dance?”

“Because you’re a white man in his early thirties.”

“You make a good point.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. I’ll buy the drinks.”

Luke grinned sideways at me. “Well, now we’re talking.”

There was a line to get into the club, but it was moving quickly. When we got close to the front, Luke pulled out his phone and said, “Smile.” He held out the phone and took a selfie of the two of us.

“Takes selfies on a first date,” I said, pretending to write notes on an invisible notepad. “I think I just found your dumb chin equivalent.”

“It’s proof that you went on a date with me.”

I gave him a weird look. “Why, so you can brag to the other pilots that you finally got me to break my rule?”

He gave me a level stare. “Proof for your friend Dexter. To show that you’re abiding by the terms of your deal.”

“Oh. Ohhh.” I closed my eyes and sighed. “Sorry about jumping to assumptions like that.”

When I opened my eyes, Luke was writing a note in his own invisible notepad.

“Hey! What are you writing?”

“Just updating your file.”

“My *file*?”

“I don’t ghost people based on one negative characteristic. That’s incredibly shallow.” He paused, then said, “I ghost them based on *three* negative characteristics.”

“Shoot,” I said. “I guess I’d better play it safe the rest of the evening if I only have two strikes left.”

“You have one strike left,” Luke replied. “Your first strike was not wanting a house and a white picket fence and two-point-five kids. That’s very suspicious.”

I gave him a playful shove.

“What’s your number?” he asked. “I’ll text you the selfie so you can show Dexter.”

“Ohh, that’s a smooth way of getting my number.”

“I have to admit I was proud when I thought of it. But you don’t have to give me your number if you don’t want to. My feelings won’t be hurt, I promise.”

I gave him my number, and then we went inside.



Veronica

Luke acted relaxed and comfortable, but I could tell he wasn't used to being in a place like this. Most of the other guys were Latino, and were gyrating and twisting expertly in time with the thumping music. We got some drinks at the bar and watched the crowd for a little bit.

"Come on," I said when our drinks were finished. "Let's dance."

"Ehh," he said.

"Come on, I'll show you how."

"All right."

I led him by the hand through the crowd until we reached the dance floor. Unlike the rest of the club, it was brightly illuminated here, with lights that spun and instantly raised the temperature a few degrees.

"Follow my movements," I said. "We'll keep it simple."

I showed him a few salsa steps. Nothing fancy; something most guys could follow. He watched and tried mimicking me. *Tried* being the key word. His movements were stiff and unnatural, like watching a robot AI try to learn to dance.

"You'll get the hang of it," I told him encouragingly. "Just keep trying."

"You sound like a kindergarten teacher helping a kid learn how to finger paint," he said over the music.

"Just focus on your footwork!" I said. "The rest of the body will follow."

“I didn’t realize dancing involved the feet,” he said with a sarcastic grin. “Let me try that...”

Suddenly, his jerky movements synced up with the music. It was like I had blinked and Luke was replaced with another, more skillful dancer. I stopped dancing and watched him for a few seconds, confused by what I saw.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with a playful smile.

“You were hustling me!”

“Hustling involves money.” He stepped forward and wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me back into motion. “I was playing off your assumption that I couldn’t dance.”

“You were resistant about coming here!”

“Because the club over on Brickell has a better vibe. But this place is fine.”

I laughed as he swept me up in the dance. For the next half hour, we lost ourselves in the music. The thing about salsa dancing was that it required close physical contact. I could feel Luke’s body heat, and his energy, as we moved around the dance floor. Our breath and sweat and hair mingled until we were practically the same person.

Luke and I had an incredible amount of chemistry. Far more than I thought we had at dinner.

“Just admit it,” he said as we took an Uber back to the hotel.

“Fine,” I replied with an exasperated sigh. “I assumed you couldn’t dance because you’re a white guy.”

“And what did you learn tonight?”

“That there’s at least *one* white guy who can dance. I can’t speak for the rest of you.”

The Uber driver chuckled to himself in the front seat.

As we walked into the hotel arm-in-arm, I said, “Do you think about hotels differently since you worked in one as a teenager?”

“That’s right,” he replied. “Some men have flashbacks about Afghanistan. I have flashbacks about creepy guys asking the front desk for way too many bottles of hand lotion.” He shivered.

“Poor teenage Luke, giving random hotel guests masturbatory aids. I bet you’re still traumatized.”

“Traumatized might be the funniest thing anyone has ever called me,” he said.

“The funniest thing anyone has ever called me is fragile.”

He turned to look at me. “It seems very unlikely that anyone would call you fragile.”

“Not fragile like a flower,” I said. “Fragile like a bomb. As in, I blow up a relationship at the smallest excuse.”

“Right. Like dumb chins.”

“Okay, but seriously. You should have seen this guy’s chin. Or lack thereof. It was practically nonexistent.”

“You haven’t discovered anything about me that makes you want to blow up this date?” he asked.

I made a show of thinking about it. “Hmm. Not yet. But maybe I’ll find something in your hotel room.”

The smile disappeared from Luke’s face. We walked along, still arm-in-arm, but it felt like everything had changed. He was stiff, like when we first started dancing at the club.

“I, uh, actually have a rule of my own,” he said. “I don’t sleep with women on the first date.”

“Just men, then?” I said, hoping a joke would lighten the mood.

That got a chuckle out of him. “Even if I were bi, I would have the same rule. I don’t sleep with someone too quickly. It’s served me well over the years.”

I suppressed my wince. We’d just had what I considered the perfect date. I couldn’t imagine *not* going up to his hotel room after tonight. And I really, really wanted to see if we had the same chemistry in bed as we did on the dance floor.

I made myself smile. “Well, now I really want a second date.”

“Good thing I tricked you into giving me your number earlier.”

We got in the elevator together. He pressed the 12 button, and I pressed 11. There was an uncomfortable silence as the elevator rose up into the hotel tower.

“This is me, 1105,” I said as the doors opened. I held out my hand. “Thanks for a great evening, Luke.”

Rather than shake my hand, he braced me by the shoulders and threw me up against the wall of the elevator, crushing his lips against mine and smothering me with his hard body. The world seemed to fade away, leaving only the soft hum of the elevator lights and the electricity of our shared attraction. It was a spark that sent shivers down my spine, a moment that held the promise of endless possibilities and the beginning of an unforgettable evening together.

Except it wasn't the beginning of the night. It was the end. Luke pulled away slightly and rumbled, “I never said I don't kiss on the first date.”

“I can see that,” I purred back at him. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay there in his arms, to follow him to the twelfth floor and *demand* to see what else would happen. I wanted to thrash and rage against his stupid rule, because a second date—even if it magically happened tomorrow night—felt like an eternity away.

“Good night, Veronica,” he said, stepping back so I could exit the elevator.

I felt his eyes on me as I walked down the hall. I gazed over my shoulder and saw that he was holding the “Door Open” button so he could watch me. It made me wonder if he was going to change his mind.

But then he let go, and the doors closed.

Alone in my hotel room, I felt unfulfilled. I was full of sexual energy, an energy that had steadily built all night, and now had no way to relieve it. I briefly considered crawling

into the sheets and *taking care of myself*, so to speak, but that wasn't going to cut it. Especially since I hadn't brought my vibrator on this trip.

“Damn you Dex for making me agree to this,” I muttered. “And damn you Luke for giving me the female equivalent of blue balls. Blue ovaries.”

I decided the best course of action was to drown my sexual frustration with chocolate. There was a vending machine by the elevator. I grabbed my clutch and opened the door.

And nearly ran right into Luke, who was standing in front of my door with a fist raised, preparing to knock. He took a nervous step back, then hefted the bottle in his other hand.

“I bought this Mezcal earlier. If you wanted to...”

I threw myself into his arms.

8



Veronica

The bottle of Mezcal hit the carpeted hotel floor with a thud, then rolled a few feet down the hall. Suddenly locked in a desperate kiss, neither of us noticed—or cared. I was held in the air in Luke’s arms, squeezing my legs around him tightly. His fingers dug into my ass where he held me, holding me more possessively than he had on the dance floor.

“I had to have you,” he breathed.

“Not as badly as I need you.”

He carried me into the room and kicked the door closed behind us. His kisses were tender, but I could sense his deeper desire underneath the surface. Waiting to be unleashed.

Luke dumped me onto the edge of the bed, then pulled my baggy pants off in one smooth motion. I arched my back as he ran his hands over my thighs, kissing the skin around my knee and working his way up.

Glad I got that wax last week, I thought as he pulled my panties aside. Then all thoughts of modesty disappeared as he kissed my drenched lips, his nose brushing against my clit in the process. Another kiss, then another—he was worshiping my pussy rather than eating me out properly. Like he was savoring the way I tasted.

And it drove me wild.

I squirmed on the edge of the bed while he teased me, gripping my thighs in his strong arms while burying his face into my wet folds. Then he began truly going down on me, his tongue licking in all the right ways.

I gazed down at the beautiful sight: this darkly handsome airline pilot spreading my legs wide while his head moved between my legs, eating me out. He took my outer lips in his mouth and sucked on them gently, then did the same with my clit. Then his tongue was swirling, up and down and all around, touching every nerve ending I had.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Yes, yes...”

His tongue went rigid and he fucked me with it, shoving my lips apart and pressing as deep as he could inside my pussy. Back and forth he moved like that, a steady fucking with his long tongue, and I wanted to press my hips into his face but his grip on my legs wouldn't let me move.

I melted into the comforter while my pleasure rose with his steady strokes. Soon he was adding a tongue flick to the end of his thrust, licking deep within my inner walls. All the while his nose rubbed against my clit, the tiniest amount of friction each time he buried his tongue inside me. It drove me insane. The good kind of insane. The kind that wipes away all other thought until the world narrows to this man's chiseled face and what it was doing to me.

Abruptly he switched his focus to my clit, long tongue strokes up and down the surface and then increasing speed until they were rapid little flutters, like a drumroll of pleasure across my sensitive little nub. My breathing became shallow and his grip on my legs tightened as if he was afraid I would run away.

I came suddenly and without warning; the pleasure grabbed me like a giant fist and threw me into the air, weightless and screaming as everything swirled and glowed and pulsed. I grabbed a handful of Luke's hair, holding on for dear life while everything went bright and hummed, temporarily blocking out most of my senses.

When I opened my eyes, Luke was looking up at me, grinning with satisfaction. “I thoroughly enjoyed making you come.”

“Not as much as I enjoyed it,” I purred.

“Now for what I really want,” he said, climbing up on top of me. His kiss gave me a hint of my own scent, a reminder of what he had just been doing.

I want you too. I want you so badly.

But I wasn't ready for it yet, so I rolled Luke over until he was on his back. I wanted to drag it out, extend the night.

“I know what you want,” I said, pulling off his shirt and tossing it aside. I paused at the sight; Luke might have left the Air Force years ago, but he still had the body of a man right out of Basic Training. His torso was lined with taut muscle, from his broad shoulders down to a perfect six-pack of abs. He even had those delicious pelvic lines, like runways pointing toward his crotch.

I kissed along his sternum, tickling the soft strands of dark hair that were there, and let my hands drift down to his thighs. He was rock-hard inside his jeans, and I considered teasing him, drawing things out until he squirmed, but I didn't have as much patience as I originally thought. While my lips drifted to his abs, my fingers removed his belt and unclasped the button of his jeans, and with a quick yank he was down to his boxer-briefs. They clung to his thighs like another layer of skin, a hard cylinder of cock pushing against the fabric eagerly.

As I tugged down the elastic of his boxer-briefs, his hard length slid out. He sighed into my hair.

Running my hand along his shaft, caressing its hardness, I let my lips slowly move down his abs. He trembled and ran his fingers into my hair, not guiding or tugging, but simply feeling me. My fingers tightened around his base and he exhaled as I began stroking him, up and down, his skin hot in my palm.

I gazed up at him. The look he gave me was one of pure, unfiltered desire.

My lips brushed past his tip. A polite acknowledgement. And then I tilted my head and opened my lips wide and took him into my mouth, not just the head but the entire thing, as deep as I could go, almost feeling my gag reflex kicking in. But I didn't care because I wanted to feel all of him, needed it

to feel as good as possible after the way he had expertly guided me into an orgasm. He groaned with surprise and bliss, and then I pulled back, keeping my lips as tight around his circumference as I could.

“You feel amazing,” he said.

I gripped the base of his shaft with one hand and caressed my sex with the other as I went down on him, slowly bobbing my head on his hard cock. His pleasure only added to mine, every groan and gasp adding fuel to my ecstasy.

His breathing grew faster as I worked, each gasp sending shockwaves of pleasure into my ears. I wanted to make him come, to pull every ounce of his load from his body, to feel the evidence of his ecstasy. My desire urged me on, faster and faster, until I was moaning into his cock as I worked, my spare fingers rubbing my clit in a broad circle.

“I want you,” he breathed, hands clenching into my hair.

“Then take me,” I said, abandoning my plan of getting him off first. “I promise I’m not fragile.”

I paused, waiting to see if he knew what I was asking. I liked it when a man took charge in the bedroom. Especially a man like Luke who was used to giving orders. I wanted to surrender to him, to let him do whatever he wanted with me.

The smile on his face twisted with lust as he understood the assignment. He rolled me over, grabbing both of my wrists and pulling them over my head. He gripped them both in one large hand, pinning my arms to the bed.

Being held down on the bed, not just with his hand but with his entire bare chest covering mine, was a freeing sensation. Luke was in charge, now. He kissed me deeply while grinding back and forth, the underside of his stiff length rubbing against my clit again and again.

And on one of the strokes, his crown slid down and into my soaking lips. Lubricated from my blowjob, he could have slid inside with ease. But he gave me just the tip, moving back and forth a few millimeters at a time. Taunting me with what I really wanted. I already knew he was big, but now I could

sense it between my legs. A weight that was full of potential, yet was being withheld for some reason.

“I like watching you squirm,” he rumbled.

“I bet you do. But what I *really* want...”

I trailed off as he drove his cock into me in one long stroke. Inch after inch of it filled me until I thought I couldn't handle any more. And all the while he continued pinning my hands above my head with wonderful pressure.

“*That's* what you really wanted?” he said, groaning.

I tried to say yes, but I didn't have the words. I closed my eyes and kissed him again as he began to move, fucking me steadily into the impossibly-soft comforter.

Maybe breaking my rule about pilots was a good idea after all.

Luke felt amazing. Not just his cock, but everywhere our bodies touched felt like an electric current of pleasure. He was new, and strong, and exciting, and it was wonderful to drop all of my rules and expectations and simply *be* with a man for the first time.

I desperately wanted to touch myself, to reach between my legs and rub a fire into my clitoris until I was screaming with a second orgasm. But when I tried breaking out of his grasp, Luke squeezed my wrists tighter. He smiled against my kiss as if knowing what I wanted.

And then making the conscious decision not to give it to me.

“I told you I wasn't fragile,” I said when I couldn't take any more. “But you're still treating me like I might break.”

“Fragile like a bomb,” he said with a grin, continuing to gyrate into me slowly. “You want to explode?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“What if I don't want to let you explode?”

“Then I'll be a very unhappy girl,” I replied. “Captain Hendricks.”

I said the title as lustily as I could. Nothing changed for a few seconds, and I feared that he would continue torturing me. Then he leaned back, releasing his grip on my wrists and crouching back on his haunches. I didn't have time to touch myself though because he was pulling me up, spinning me around until I was on my hands and knees.

Then he slammed his cock forward into me again. I gasped at the force of it, but it was exactly what I wanted. What I *needed*. A long moan trembled out of my throat, echoing in the hotel room.

That's more like it.

"You like that?" he asked while grabbing my waist with both hands.

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes, yes..."

Luke pounded me from behind, crashing into me with reckless desire. It was rough, hard, animal sex. Sweat covered our bodies and our skin slapped together noisily, like an X-rated version of the salsa dancing from earlier. He grabbed a handful of my top in his fist and used it for leverage while fucking me. When that wasn't enough, he grabbed a handful of my hair instead.

I had never had my hair properly pulled before. It wasn't painful, but there was a delicious pressure in the way my hair tightened inside Luke's fist. I moaned louder as he jackhammered into me from behind even harder than before.

Luke's breathing intensified, and suddenly his groan turned into a roar. He pushed himself as deep inside as he could go, and then I felt him explode inside me. The hand pulling my hair tightened further, and his other hand gripped my shoulder, holding me back on him while he filled me with his come. I squeezed my sex around the base of his shaft as tightly as I could and touched myself, my own orgasm erupting as soon as my fingertips caressed my clit. Both of us trembled together, spasming with an ecstasy that seemed to last forever.

Sighing happily, I twisted and looked back at him as he loosened the grip on my hair. He leaned forward while we

were still joined together, and kissed me.

“I don’t want to move,” I whispered. “I want your skin against my skin, just like this, all night.”

He chuckled and kissed the back of my neck, then my shoulder, then my shoulder blade. He was still completely hard inside me. He pulled back, presumably to end our erotic coupling...

Then, to my surprise, he started fucking me again.

“What’s this?” I asked.

He gave my ass cheek a playful, but firm, smack. “The way you look, Veronica? I’m all ready to go again.”

I didn’t believe him at first. Men stopped having that kind of refractory period in their twenties. But Luke never softened as he gripped my waist with both hands and began driving into me again. I closed my eyes and savored the way he filled me, surprised—and excited—at getting a second round so quickly.

“Smack my ass again,” I whispered.

Without hesitation, he brought his palm down on my bare cheek. It made a loud smack, and the sting cascaded through my body. And it was immediately followed by a wave of pleasure.

“You like having your ass smacked?” his deep voice asked.

“I like the way you manhandle me.”

He grabbed a handful of my hair again and squeezed it in his fist. His free hand smacked my other ass cheek, and this time the surprise of it heightened my pleasure even more.

I moaned loudly while he pounded me from behind. He reached underneath and squeezed one of my breasts through my top, possessive and hungry all at the same time.

I’d had great sex before, but I had never been fucked like this. Luke slammed into me even harder than the first round, like he was trying to prove something. Or like he was trying to give me exactly the kind of manhandling that I had requested. I arched my back so he could hit my G-spot from a better

angle, and that cranked the intensity up even further, almost more than I could handle.

“Rougher,” I pleaded. “Don’t. Hold. Back.”

Luke put a hand on the back of my head and pushed my face down into the pillows. He was like an animal then, covering my body and fucking me as hard as humanly possible. Crashing into my pussy like he was trying to break it. The bed slammed against the wall, a percussive beat to match the jolts of pleasure.

Without even touching my clit, I came so hard and so intense that my eyes clenched shut and I couldn’t breathe. I opened my mouth to scream with pleasure but Luke’s hand was still holding my head down, and my cries were muffled by the pillow. I emptied my lungs of air, screaming without restraint.

“I’m going to come,” Luke said in a voice as rough as the way he was fucking me. “And when I do, I’m going to shove my cock in your mouth so you can swallow every single drop.”

Yes, I thought, still trembling from the aftershocks of my orgasm. Yes, take me, use me how you want. My muffled moans continued as his voice extended my orgasm.

His fingers dug into my hip, squeezing me while having his way with me, and then he pulled out. He knelt on the bed next to me and grabbed my hair again, twisting my face sideways to meet his waiting tip. It glistened with my juices as he shoved it in my mouth like he promised.

Luke exploded instantly, spasming between my lips and blowing his load into my mouth. He reached between my legs and touched my swollen clit, rubbing a fire into it while continuing to erupt in my mouth.

“Every. Single. Drop,” he cried out.

I watched Luke’s shaft twitch with every rope that filled my mouth, beating like a heart. I gazed up at the muscular pilot attached to it, and the expression on his face was pure heaven.

9



Veronica

“Okay,” I said while cuddling against Luke’s nude body on top of the sheets. “Your rule about not sleeping with a woman on the first date.”

“What about it?” he asked.

“It’s bullshit, right? Like, a test to see how a woman reacts?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

I twisted to look up into his eyes. “Despite how much fun that was, I don’t like guys who play games.”

“No games.” He held out both palms innocently. “That *is* a rule of mine, and I *do* usually follow it.”

“Then what happened tonight?”

“*You* happened tonight. I went back to my hotel room and realized I was being, pardon my French, a fucking idiot.”

I smiled and rested my head on his chest again. “Sorry for making you break the rule. But also, I’m not really sorry.”

Laughter rumbled deep within his chest. “The most important thing about a rule is knowing when to break it. Like drinking during a flight. I used to break that rule all the time. Just kidding. I don’t drink while flying planes. Not since the incident.”

“You already made that joke,” I said. “Earlier today, on our inbound flight.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

“It’s a good joke. I laughed.”

“You didn’t laugh the second time.”

“It’s not *that* good of a joke,” I replied.

“Are you glad I broke my rule?” he asked.

I nodded against his skin. “Extremely glad. If you hadn’t knocked on my door, I would’ve tossed and turned all night.”

His fingers gently caressed down my neck and along my shoulders. “I’ll make you toss and turn all night.”

“There’s no way you’re ready to go again,” I said skeptically.

“Not right now. But in twenty minutes? Watch out.”

“I should probably go get the bottle of Mezcal out of the hallway,” I mused.

“Leave it. I’m too comfortable right now.”

“What if some teenager finds it?”

“Then I’ll pretend I’m the Santa Claus of underage drinking.” His fingers stopped moving on my back. “How were you going to find my room?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You were rushing out of your room before I could knock. You knew I was on the next floor, but you didn’t know what room. Was your plan to knock on every single door until you found me? Or maybe shout my name up and down the hall until I opened up?”

I realized what he was asking—and what he had assumed. Rolling over until I was straddling Luke, I said, “Will it crush your ego if I told you I was going to the vending machine to get chocolate?”

He stared up at me, then closed his eyes and chuckled. “That explains why you had a one dollar bill in your hand.”

I cocked my head. “Why did you think I had it?”

“I thought you were going to treat me like the most pathetic stripper in Miami.”

I giggled at that, which made him grin. Then I wiped the smile off his face with a kiss, one that started softly but quickly deepened. Underneath me, I felt him harden.

“Twenty minutes, huh?” I whispered.

He looked down towards his crotch, then back up at me again. “I never was any good at math.”

I started to kiss him again, but then a phone rang. “What is that?” I asked.

“My ringtone,” he said, sliding away from me and reaching for his pants on the floor.

“Ringtones? Is it 2006 already?” I teased.

But Luke wasn't laughing as he looked at the number on the screen. He put the phone to his ear. “This is Hendricks. Yeah, Miami. Right now? Yeah. Uh huh.” He glanced at his watch. “Twenty or thirty minutes. Okay.”

He hung up and let out a long sigh.

“Who was that?” I asked.

Luke sat on the edge of the bed, facing away from me. “I have to go.”

I laughed out loud. “It's close to midnight.”

“I know.” He got up and picked up his clothes. “I'm sorry.”

I watched him begin getting dressed. “This is another test, right? You pretend like you don't sleep with women on the first date, which makes them want you even more. Then you get a mysterious phone call and pretend like you have to bail, which makes them beg you to stay.”

He buttoned his pants, cupped my cheek, and kissed me. “There's nothing I would rather do than stay here and *really* make you scream.”

That sent an excited shiver up my spine, but it died off quickly. “Then why are you leaving?”

“I have an obligation.”

“One you forgot about until right now?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’m a smart woman,” I said. “Explain it to me.”

He pulled on his shirt and sighed. “I can’t tell you. Not because I’m playing some sort of game, but because I really can’t.”

Luke pulled on his shoes, then walked to the door.

“Are you serious right now?” I said.

He paused in the doorway. The light overhead cast shadows across his face, accentuating his rigid features. “I’m sorry, Veronica.”

And then he was gone.

10



Veronica

“That makes no sense,” Dex said. “

“I know!”

It was the next morning, and the two of us were in line at a distillery to buy the special bottles of Mezcal. We had gotten here half an hour before they opened, and there was already a line to purchase the special batch of liquor.

“You know what this means, right?” Dex said.

“What?”

“He has a girlfriend,” Dex replied confidently. “Or he’s engaged. Oh! What if he’s secretly married but hides it from everyone at Gulf Airlines?”

“That... seems unlikely.”

“Why else would he suddenly leave at midnight after getting a phone call?”

“Maybe it was something for work.”

“Gulf Airlines doesn’t make pilots come into work in the middle of the night. Flight shifts are scheduled a month in advance. And even if it *was* related to work, he wouldn’t need to keep it a secret! Face it, Veronica: it has to be another woman, and he doesn’t want her to find out what you two did last night.”

I thought about Luke. He didn’t seem like the kind of guy to cheat on someone. But of course, it was ridiculous to think so. All foolish women thought that before discovering the truth.

And it's not like I knew Luke very well; we had spent one single night together.

I groaned. "Last night was so much fun. Why did it have to end like that?"

"I'll take my apology now, please."

I whirled around to face him. "What apology?"

Dex cleared his throat and spoke in a high-pitched voice. "I'm sorry for doubting you, Dexter. You were right about saying yes to the first three guys who ask me out. You are the wisest power-bottom in the greater Houston area."

"You still think agreeing to go out with him was a good idea?"

"Yes I do."

"Even if he has a secret family in Omaha or something?"

He nodded. "And even though the night ended in a less-than-ideal manner, you're still glad it happened. Admit it."

The doors up at the front of the distillery opened, and the line began shuffling forward. "It's possible, potentially, that you are at least partially correct."

Dex clapped his hands together. "That might be the first time you've ever admitted that I was right and you were wrong."

"There was one other time," I replied. "When I first moved to town, you told me barbecue was better in Texas than North Carolina."

Dex made a face. "North Carolina barbecue is vinegar based. I don't know how you ever liked the stuff. Ugh."

"One thing I *was* right about was my reason for not dating pilots," I said. "Now it's going to be awkward on the return flight to Houston."

"Only awkward for him," Dex insisted. "He's the one who fucked up, not you. Act confident on the flight. Pretend like he's not even there. Make him sweat."

There was a four-bottle limit per person, but that's why I had brought Dex with me. We bought the eight bottles together, packed them in my suitcase with special bubble wrap, then headed back to Miami International. Adam Mandalay, the third member of our crew, was waiting at the gate.

"And how did we enjoy our stay in Miami?" he asked. "Was it a good time, or bad?"

"Somehow, it was both," I said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Everything was fantastic except the ending. I'll leave it at that."

"So like Game of Thrones."

Dex busted out laughing. "Oh my *God*. The final season was so bad!"

"I couldn't stop screaming at my TV," Adam said, joining him in laughter. "Khaleesi, no!"

The jetway opened and we boarded the plane to prepare for the passengers. Dex was in charge of first class today, while Adam and I were handling the economy passengers. We were nearly done with our pre-flight checklist when Luke Hendricks and his co-pilot boarded.

Luke looked dashing in his pilot uniform, but his eyes were bloodshot. Like he hadn't gotten very much sleep. Something inside of me twisted with jealousy.

The co-pilot went into the cockpit, but Luke lingered in the forward cabin. "Hello," he finally said to me.

"Hi, Captain Hendricks," I said formally.

Dex opened the drink cart and pretended to count the cans so he could eavesdrop.

"Any meal requests for the flight?" I asked.

"I'm good, but Bob wants the pasta dish."

"I'll have it ready halfway through the flight."

Luke stood there a moment longer. He looked like he wanted to say more to me. I desperately *wanted* him to say something, to explain himself for last night. I knew the chances were low, but I wanted him to magically come up with an excuse that exonerated him and allowed me to still like him.

But then he dipped his head and started to walk into the cockpit.

“Do you have plans tonight, Veronica?” Adam suddenly asked cheerfully. “Because I was wondering if you wanted to get a drink after we land.”

I froze in complete shock. The question from Adam was so unexpected that it was like my brain rebooted. In the cockpit doorway, Luke had paused for a moment, but then resumed what he was doing. He was only a few feet away though, and could definitely overhear us.

“I know there’s an unspoken rule about members of a cabin crew going out,” Adam said.

“I don’t have any plans,” I said. “I’d love to get a drink. Or three.”

Adam gave me a vulpine smile. “We’ll talk about it when we land. I’ve got a few ideas.”

As the passengers began boarding and we resumed our flight attendant duties, I felt a thrill of excitement in the pit of my stomach. Adam was attractive. No, that was an understatement: he was *gorgeous*. He had been stiff and formal around me yesterday, so I felt blindsided by his sudden interest in me. It made it that much more appealing.

Dex and I were sitting next to each other in the forward cabin as the plane took off. He turned to me and whispered, “This is my fault.”

“How so?” I asked.

“I may have suggested to Adam that he ask you out.”

“What!” I hissed. I glanced to my right; Adam was in the other jump seat a few feet away, but he had headphones on.

Still, I lowered my voice and asked, “Did you suggest it to make Luke jealous?”

Dex shook his head. “I mentioned it to Adam *yesterday*. Before I knew you and Captain Hendricks slept together. I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you were pushy. Luke being jealous is a delicious fringe benefit of Adam asking me out. And there’s one other reason.”

“What’s that?”

“Now that I’ve said yes to *two* men, I’m almost done with my promise to you. One more man and I can go back to being a picky woman destined to die alone.”

“I’m glad your priorities are properly calibrated,” he muttered.

Yet as we reached our cruising altitude and we began serving the passengers, I thought about how going out with Adam would be fun all by itself. I would rather say yes to him than some random loser who might hit on me in a bar. He was friendlier with me as we worked together today, standing on either end of the drink cart as we made our way down the aisle, serving the passengers. Whenever we locked eyes, he smiled warmly. I found my gaze lingering on him as I poured drinks. Our fingers briefly touched when he passed me a ginger ale, and that spot on my skin felt warm for several minutes later, like his touch had left a mark.

Who cares if I went out with a different guy last night? Tonight is going to be a lot of fun.

11



Veronica

After we landed in Houston, I went to the baggage claim to collect my suitcase full of Mezcal. Dex swung by to give me a hug and say goodbye, and to wish me luck on my date that evening. A few minutes later, as the bags began rolling onto the conveyor belt, Adam came sauntering into the baggage area.

“Do you like music?” he asked.

“Of course,” I replied. “Who doesn’t?”

His smile deepened. “Then I know just the place. I’ll text you the address. See you there in... oh, two hours? Does that give you enough time to freshen up?”

I looked down at myself. “I was planning on wearing my Gulf Airlines uniform. But if that’s too weird, I suppose I can change into something else.”

Adam’s laugh put a smile on my face. “I like you. You’re feisty. See you then.”

After collecting my bag—and verifying that none of the bottles had broken in transit—I went home and changed into a summer dress. Then I tossed the dress aside and put on jeans and a T-shirt. The address Adam gave me was to a public square that had a little pavilion surrounded by bars and restaurants, so I didn’t know *exactly* where he was taking me, which made it hard to plan what to wear. I could have texted him and asked, but I didn’t want to seem difficult.

My phone buzzed, and I quickly grabbed it thinking it might be Adam giving me fashion guidance. But it wasn’t him.

Luke: Veronica, I'm sorry about what happened.

Me: You're sorry about what? Because I'm still kind of confused about what happened. You left suddenly in the middle of the night, and you won't tell me why. Can't you see how that's a red flag?

Me: Like, a HUGE red flag, the kind that waves above a used car dealership.

Luke: Can we meet tonight so I can explain it better?

Me: You can explain it right now on the phone.

Luke: I would rather do this in person.

Me: Sorry, I have plans tonight.

The three little dots appeared to show he was typing a response. I put my phone down on the bathroom counter and continued doing my makeup. When I checked again a few minutes later, there was no response.

"Yeah," I said to my reflection in the mirror. "He's probably married."

The sting of that realization was replaced by my excitement for tonight's date with Adam. I took an Uber to the address because I wasn't sure how much I would be drinking. It was a pleasant September evening and the pavilion area was crowded with people. A man with a guitar sat on the edge of a

large fountain, playing music for tips. Was that what Adam meant when he asked if I liked music?

“I have to admit,” his voice suddenly said behind me, “I’m disappointed you’re not wearing your Gulf Airlines uniform.”

He was standing behind me, hands shoved into the pockets of his designer jeans. He was wearing a well-tailored button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his forearms. He looked like a freaking model.

“I’ll wear it next time,” I said, then immediately cringed. It felt like bad form to discuss a second date before the first one had even begun. “You’re looking sharp.”

“Why thank you.” He gently put a hand on my back and pointed across the pavilion. “I’m thinking we get drinks at the dueling piano bar. Unless you think dueling pianos is too cheesy.”

“It’s the perfect amount of cheesy!” I replied. “And even if it wasn’t, it’s not like I’m lactose intolerant.”

Adam continued smiling, but narrowed his eyes. “Okay, now *that* was too cheesy.”

“I realized it as soon as the words left my mouth.”

“I can pretend I didn’t hear.” He put a guiding hand on my back. “Come on, let’s get some good seats.”

The sound of piano music bombarded us as soon as we walked into the building. There was a stage down at the front, with a pair of pianos facing each other—both were occupied, but only one player was currently playing a cover of a Katy Perry song. Two bars flanked either side of the stage, and the space in the middle was full of tables and chairs. We were given a two-person table a few rows back from the stage, which was nice because it meant we wouldn’t get singled out by the performers.

A waitress came by to take our drink orders. “I’ll have a…” Adam grinned while reading the menu. “Sex in the Driveway.”

“You’re getting a what?” I asked, skimming the menu.

He leaned close to me and pointed. “Peach schnapps, blue curacao, vodka, and lemon lime soda.”

“You know what? Make it two,” I said, quickly pulling out my phone and credit card. “We’ll start a tab.”

“What?” he asked me. “You’re giving me a funny look.”

“Well...” I wondered if I should say anything. But it was too late now, so I said, “When I first met you yesterday, I thought you were... gay.”

I waited for him to get upset, but he only laughed. “Believe it or not, I get that a lot.” He ran a hand through his brown hair. “Just because a man takes care of himself, people assume he’s less masculine. If it makes you feel any better, I can belch more and make sexist jokes. A blonde, brunette, and redhead are all stewardesses on a flight to Nantucket...”

“No, no,” I said, holding out a hand. “It’s actually refreshing. And I didn’t mean *gay* in a pejorative way. Dex is my best friend.”

“Now *that* man is gay,” Adam said with a chuckle. “I was certain of that even before he started winking at me.”

“He does like to wink at handsome men.”

Our drinks arrived, looking like two glasses of radioactive blue liquid. But they were tasty, and we guzzled them down and ordered another round while listening to the music.

I had never been to a dueling piano bar, but the concept was simple. The pianists took turns playing requests from the audience. In between songs, they made jokes and teased each other. There was lots of playful banter, especially with the performers and a bachelorette party in the front row.

Adam scooted his chair around closer to me so we could both face the stage. After four or five songs, he rested his arm across the back of my chair. Every so often I caught a whiff of his cologne. It was something exotic, but not *too* exotic, and difficult for me to describe. But it made my body come alive even though we were just sitting next to each other.

He doesn’t wear this cologne while at work, that’s for sure.

My phone was still on the table, and it lit up from an incoming text.

Luke: Whenever you get home tonight, text me. I want to explain everything to you.

I quickly put my phone away. Annoyance flashed inside of me for two reasons. One, I was mad that Luke had waited until now to decide to tell me what was really going on. If that's what he actually intended to do. And two, had Adam seen the screen? Nothing ruined a date faster than getting a text from another guy. Especially one who I had slept with less than twenty-four hours ago.

"The players are really good!" I said to break the ice.

Adam nodded along. "I hope us going out tonight makes Captain Hendricks jealous."

I felt myself freeze. "What do you mean?" I said.

"You and him are a thing, right? Or at least, you hooked up? I saw the way you two acted around each other in the cabin today. It was awkward. I hope us going out makes him jealous."

I stared at him while he watched the piano player give an emphatic rendition of Eye of the Tiger. *He asked me out just to make Luke jealous? Does that mean this isn't a date?*

"Yeah, I hope so," I replied, all excitement draining from my body.

12



Adam

Damn you for getting me into this, Dexter, I thought as we sat at the table in the dueling piano bar.

I had a rule. I didn't ask coworkers out. I'd had the rule since I was a teenager working at the movie theater in my home town. After working together for a summer, I asked out Tilly, one of the other concession stand workers. We went bowling, and then to see a movie. It was fun. We made out on her front porch after I walked her to her door.

But then she told me she just wanted to be friends.

The next four months working at the theater were miserable. We had the exact same work schedule, so we had to be around each other *all the time*. It was awful. The fact that we were both awkward teenagers only ramped up the torture of it all.

So I told myself I would never go out with a coworker again. And over the years, it had been a good rule. I'd watched friends crash and burn with women in their workplaces. My brother co-owned a bakery in Houston with a chef, a partnership that was strictly business until the two of them dated, and then got engaged. But after the engagement was called off, the two of them couldn't stand to be in the same room together, and had to sell the business just to get away from each other.

I had been tempted over the years, but never so much as I was with Veronica. From the moment I saw her, I knew I would need to remain vigilant in order to avoid breaking my rule. It wasn't even that she was hot. I mean, she absolutely *was* a smoking hot woman wearing the flattering Gulf Airlines

uniform, but that wasn't the main reason. It was the joke she made when I walked up and asked if they were my new crew family.

“Actually, we're going to a cosplay convention,” she had said. “We're dressed as extremely attractive flight attendants from the fifties.”

Nothing was more attractive to me than a sense of humor, especially if it was self-deprecating in nature. I felt myself leaning toward her as I introduced myself, pulled by some invisible gravitational weight.

Uh oh, I thought at the time.

So I was polite to her on the flight to Miami, but not too friendly. I warmed up to Dexter, but kept Veronica at arm's length. I was on my best behavior as if I was being watched by someone from Human Resources.

Then, when Dexter and I shared a taxi from Miami International to our hotel, he sprung it on me.

“I want to ask you a favor,” he said carefully. “Ask Veronica out.”

“How is that doing *you* a favor?”

He explained how picky Veronica was with men, and the agreement she had made to say yes to the first three men who asked her out.

“She's the best woman I know,” Dexter explained. “She's smart, and sassy, and has an amazing body...”

“I've seen her body, yes.”

Dexter gave me a skeptical look. “I've seen her naked in the dressing room at Neiman Marcus. Whatever you're imagining, I promise you it's better in person. And I say that as a man who is gayer than a pair of bedazzled rainbow sunglasses.”

“I don't date coworkers,” I explained. “It always ends poorly.”

“Veronica doesn't date coworkers either! So you're both breaking the same rule. That cancels each other out, right?”

Like math? Look, the date will probably go by quickly. You two will get a drink together, and that will probably be it. And then I'll owe you a *massive* favor. I know a lot of people here at the airline, so having me owe you a favor is a valuable proposition."

He was desperate. He must have really cared about his friend. But he was also convincing.

"Fine," I said, surrendering to the temptation. "I'll ask her out."

Once the idea was in my head, it wouldn't leave. I met an old college friend for dinner in Miami, then spent the rest of the night in my hotel room thinking about the date with Veronica. How I would ask her out, where I would take her. The piano bar to start, and then we would pop over to the Italian restaurant for food and gelato.

Even though Dexter said the date would probably end quickly, I was confident in myself. I thought I could win her over—or, at the very least, I wanted the challenge of it. It was the last thing I thought about when I fell asleep, and the first thing that popped into my head when I woke up.

When the pilots boarded the plane the next day, I noticed the awkwardness between Veronica and Captain Hendricks. Heck, I probably would have noticed it even if Dexter hadn't told me the backstory. But at the time, I thought they were weird around each other because he asked her out and she said no. I shot my shot, she agreed to the date, and everything was looking bright.

Then the plane took off, and I heard Dexter and Veronica chatting. He was explaining that he told me to ask her out.

"I mentioned it to Adam *yesterday*," he said. "Before I knew you and Captain Hendricks slept together. I'm sorry!"

I had EarPods in, but I hadn't started playing any music yet. I lowered my phone and continued eavesdropping on their conversation, barely audible over the roar of the jet engines.

"It's okay. I'm glad you were pushy. Luke being jealous is a delicious benefit of Adam asking me out. And there's one

other reason.”

“What’s that?”

“Now that I’ve said yes to *two* men,” Veronica explained, “I’m almost done with my promise to you.”

My heart sank. She had slept with Captain Hendricks last night. And now she only wanted to go out with me to fulfill her promise to Dexter... and to make the pilot of our flight jealous.

It stung. It shouldn’t have, because Dexter had warned me about all of this. But still.

I put on a smile and spent the flight pretending like nothing was wrong. I gave her my best charm in the baggage claim area, and again when we met in the plaza. Veronica was a beautiful woman, and I was going to have a good time tonight regardless of the reason.

But then her phone lit up with a text not from Captain Hendricks, but from *Luke*. I didn’t have a chance to read the message before she scooped her phone away, but the familiarity in the name on her phone ignited a fire inside of me.

So I brought it up. The fact that she was trying to make him jealous. Acknowledging it out loud would take away the awkwardness. Or, at the very least, it would prod her into giving me more information about the situation.

Veronica didn’t react the way I expected. She agreed with me about making him jealous, and then got quiet. Two songs passed without us saying anything to each other. Even though we were sitting mere inches apart, close enough that her perfumed scent was heavy in my nostrils, the tension in the air was like a brick wall between us.

I ordered a third drink, and so did she. I had a good buzz going by then, and she started leaning into me a little bit more. I wondered if she would take a selfie and post it to social media to *really* make Luke jealous.

At one point, she wrote down a song request on a slip of paper and handed it—and a twenty dollar bill—to the piano

player on stage. “What did you request?” I asked.

“You’ll see!” she replied.

Three songs later, the guy made some playful banter about the new Barbie movie. “Have you seen this one, Frank?”

“No, but I actually dated Margot Robbie in college!” the other pianist replied.

“Really? You dated Margot Robbie?”

“Actually it was Margot, *comma*, Robbie,” he said with a grin. “Robbie Margot was his name. He went by Rob. Real sweet guy.”

The piano player then launched into a rendition of *Barbie Girl*, by Aqua. The crowd roared. The bachelorette party all stood up and started dancing, and then Veronica did the same.

“I unironically love this song,” she told me, leaning close so I could hear over the music. “I remember watching the music video on MTV when I was like seven years old. Back when they still played music videos.”

I laughed. “It was a simple time back then.”

Veronica was pretty tipsy now, bordering on buzzed. And she was on her feet, dancing with her hands in the air.

“Come on!” she insisted. “Get up! You’re the one who brought me to a dueling piano bar, and I’ve waited all night for this song!”

I wasn’t self-conscious like a lot of guys, and I was pleasantly inebriated, so I stood up and started dancing. We weren’t really dancing *together*; it was more like we were dancing adjacent to one another. It wasn’t really a song made for dancing, but somehow we—and the other drunk patrons of the piano bar—made it work.

It was tough to hold a grudge while dancing to a stupid song from the nineties. In fact, the song had the effect of making me stop caring about anything other than having a good time. I totally forgot that Veronica was just using me to make Luke jealous.

Then she sidestepped a little bit until she was dancing directly in front of me. Her hair tickled against my face as she tossed her head back and forth, and her ass briefly brushed across my legs. She twisted to look back at me, belting out the lyrics, “Come on Barbie, let’s go party!”

I grinned back at her.

And then she *firmly* pushed her ass against me, shaking it in time with the music. It was outright grinding, the kind of dancing that would get you kicked out of a high school prom. She grabbed my hand and placed it on her hip, inviting me to hold onto her with both hands. Her skin was smooth and warm in that wonderful place between the top of her jeans and the bottom of her shirt.

I’m hard as a rock.

Intrusive thoughts bombarded me; taking Veronica home and doing this same dance without any clothes on, with nothing to separate my cock from her ass. Planting a hand on her back and bending her over my couch, slamming into her from behind so hard it moved the furniture across the room one thrust inch at a time. In the piano bar she arched her back, bringing her cheek up against mine. Her fingers wrapped around the back of my head, lacing into my hair.

Fuck, I want her badly.

The song ended and the lights brightened just a little bit. Enough to make us stop what we were doing. Veronica sat back down and grinned happily. “I’m glad they finally played it! I was beginning to think they wouldn’t.”

I sat down to hide the huge bulge in my pants, sipping on the rest of my drink. I was well on my way to drunk, now. “Want to go get some food?” she asked. “Or take the party somewhere else?”

Somewhere else. It sounded like she meant one of our places, and not another bar.

I thought about it. We were having fun, and our inhibitions were down.

But then she looked at her phone again, probably just to check the time, and it reminded me of the text from Captain Hendricks. And how she was trying to make him jealous. Extending the night would be a mistake, even if it was a fun one.

“I think I’m a little drunk,” I said. “I should probably call an Uber.”

“Aww, okay,” she replied while flagging down our waitress. “I’ll call one too.”

After she paid, we walked outside into the night. The air was cool and refreshing after the warmth of the piano bar, and the plaza was full of people out enjoying the evening. Veronica laced her arm into mine and began to sing *Barbie Girl* under her breath.

“I’m a Barbie girl, in the Barbie world...”

“Life in plastic,” I sang with her. “It’s fantastic...”

“You can brush my hair.” She cut her eyes over to me. “Undress me everywhere...”

She was dropping every hint in the book. My willpower was fading fast.

“I think that’s my Uber,” I said, pointing to the parking lot up ahead. “Black Nissan Sentra.”

Veronica looked at her phone. “Mine is the white Accord right behind it.” She turned to face me directly. “Thanks for inviting me out for drinks. It was a lot of fun.”

“You paid for the drinks, so I should be thanking you.”

She grinned, then hugged me. I wrapped her into my arms and savored the way her body felt against mine.

You can feel more of it, a voice whispered in my head. *If you invite her back to your place, she’ll say yes.*

She pulled away from the hug, but kept her body close, staring up into my eyes. She batted her eyelashes expectantly, pursing her lips together in the sexiest little pout. And then she

was leaning in for a kiss, and I wanted those lips to touch mine desperately...

...but then I moved my head to the side and kissed her on the cheek instead.

“Let’s do it again sometime,” I said, leaving her embrace and opening the car door for her. “Text me when you get home safe?”

She blinked in confusion, then nodded. “I will. Goodnight.” Veronica got into the car, and I closed the door for her.

Then I got into my own Uber and thought, *What the hell is wrong with me?*

13



Veronica

What the hell is wrong with Adam?

I had given him every sign in the book. I ground my ass into him on the dance floor. I suggested we go somewhere else, by which I meant *my place*. I even gave him my best fuck-me eyes when we said goodnight. Did he have the same stupid rule that Luke did about first dates, or was he actually gay after all?

No, definitely not gay. At least, not based on the steel rod of a cock I felt against my ass while we danced. He was definitely straight, and was digging everything I did.

It probably went back to the reason I thought he was there: he only asked me out to help me make Luke jealous. He was doing a favor for a member of his flight crew. That was the only possible explanation, and it explained why I was getting a weird vibe from him all night.

I was sexually frustrated on the ride home. Just as much as I was in my hotel room last night before Luke appeared at my door. Why couldn't I have a normal date where we had a few drinks, danced a little bit, and then had sex without any weird roadblocks?

The more I thought about it, the more annoyed I became. I pulled out my phone with the intention of texting Adam and bluntly asking him what was up, but then I saw Luke's text from earlier that night. And I decided to respond to that instead.

Luke: Whenever you get home tonight, text me. I want to explain everything to you.

Me: I'm almost home. You can go ahead and explain everything now.

Luke: Can we meet somewhere?

Me: No, because I'm too drunk to drive, and I don't want to pay for a third Uber tonight.

Luke: How about I meet at your place?

Me: I don't want you to meet at my place. If you meet at my place, we're going to do a sex together. Because I'm drunk and horny.

Luke: I honestly don't see any downside to this plan.

Me: The downside is that I don't WANT to do a sex with you. I'm mad because you have a secret family in Omaha.

Luke: Uhh

Luke: Is that a euphemism?

Me: Maybe you don't have a secret family in Omaha. But you definitely have a girlfriend or fiancée you're cheating on.

Luke: What on earth gave you that idea?

Me: You left at midnight and wouldn't tell me why. That's not even a red flag. That's like a red flag taped to another, BIGGER red flag!

Luke: I promise it's nothing like that.

Me: I'll believe you if you just tell me why!

Luke: I can't put it in a text message. I need to tell you in person.

Me: YET ANOTHER RED FLAG ON THE PILE OF RED FLAGS

Luke: I know it sounds shady, but it will make sense when I explain it. Can you meet me tomorrow morning for coffee? Will you do that, or is that another red flag?

Me: That depends on what kind of coffee you order.

Luke: I'll take that as a yes. I'll send you a link to the coffee shop. See you there at 8?

Me: Maybe I'll be there. Maybe I won't. I can't explain why, though! It's a big mystery!

Luke: I deserve that. I hope to see you there.

I didn't feel like cooking anything when I got home, so I ate a sleeve of Chips Ahoy cookies and a few slices of cheddar cheese. I sang a little song to myself in the kitchen while eating.

“Girl dinner, girl dinner. This is a healthy meal because it's a girl diiiiiiinner!”

I barely remember passing out in bed, but I did remember my vivid dreams that night. Luke was dancing with me, and then I blinked and it was Adam instead. In between songs I went to the bar, and that's when I saw the random pilot from the Miami airport. The one who looked like Matthew McConaughey in a bomber jacket. His name totally escaped me in the dream, but that didn't stop me from taking his hand and leading him out to the dance floor.

I wasn't as hungover the next morning as I expected, but I was still in no mood to meet Luke for coffee. Despite that, curiosity got the better of me: I wanted to hear what his excuse was. *It better be a good one.*

He was already waiting at the coffee shop when I arrived, sitting at an outdoor table with two coffees in front of him. But what surprised me the most was that he was wearing his pilot's uniform, except for the Gulf Airlines pin that usually accompanied it.

“We have the day off,” I said, frowning. “Our next flight isn't until Wednesday.”

“That is correct.” He raised a cup to me. “I got you this.”

I eyed it suspiciously, then took a sip. My eyes widened. “This is exactly how I take my coffee.”

“Two sugars, two vanilla creams.” Luke smiled in satisfaction. “I was behind you at the Starbucks in DFW a few weeks back.”

“Kind of stalkerish memorizing my order.”

“I only remembered because they got your order wrong. You went back up to the counter and, as the kids these days call it, you were a *massive Karen*.”

“It’s not Karen behavior to want your drink made properly.” I sat down. “Okay, spill the beans. Why are you dressed up on our off day, and why did you ditch me at midnight in Miami?”

“The answer to both questions is the same.” He stood up. “Can we take a drive somewhere?”

“Why did you have me meet you here if we were going to drive somewhere else?”

“It will make sense when we get there. Humor me.”

I wanted to laugh in his face and go home... but I didn’t have anything else to do on my day off. And my curiosity wouldn’t be sated until I knew the answer to this riddle. “Fine.”

We got in his car—a black BMW 7 Series—and drove north a few miles. I quickly realized where we were headed: George Bush Intercontinental Airport. But after scanning his pass at the employee entrance, he turned right instead of left. Toward the private terminal.

As he parked, I suddenly understood. “You’ve been doing private flights on the side?”

He nodded and turned off the car. “My co-pilot buddy got me into it. We only do one or two extra flights a week, but it adds up to a lot of extra cash.”

I got out of the car with him. “And you can’t let Gulf Airlines know because they have restrictions on how many hours pilots are allowed to fly per week.”

“This is correct.”

I followed him inside, where he checked in with a smiling woman behind an information desk. The private terminal was much nicer than the five public terminals, with high ceilings and a clean white floor. There were also far fewer passengers here, which definitely added to the exclusive feel.

“Your flight is on time, Captain Dricksen,” the woman told him.

“Thanks, Connie,” he replied.

“Captain Dricksen?” I asked.

“Just a pseudonym so the flight logs don’t raise any red flags. Got plenty of those already.” He winked at me. “It’s my last name, but with the syllables swapped. Hen-dricks. Dricks-hen.”

“That would be clever if you were a teenage boy trying to sneak into a secret club,” I teased.

Luke laughed. “Actually, I *did* come up with that when I was a teenager. Kuel Dricksen was the fake name I used to book hotel rooms under when my friends wanted to throw a party without our parents knowing.”

“Scandalous,” I replied.

He scanned his badge at a door labeled “Private Lounge.” The interior was spacious, with a dozen little sitting areas, a buffet of food along one wall, and a fully-stocked bar. A few pilots and flight attendants were scattered around the room, waiting for their flights.

There was one man who looked totally out of place in the private lounge. He was wearing khaki pants and trail running shoes, and had long gray hair. I immediately dismissed him from my mind... until Luke led me over to his table.

“This is the woman I was telling you about,” Luke said. “Veronica, meet Bernard Langston.”

“Please, call me Bernie,” he replied with a warm smile as he rose to shake my hand.

“Bernie owns the fleet of private jets we use,” Luke explained.

I did my best to cover my surprise. *This* man owned a bunch of aircraft? He looked like the kind of person who spent most of his time walking around in the woods. After taking mushrooms.

“You’re probably thinking that I don’t look like someone rich enough to own a fleet of jets,” he said with a knowing grin.

“I was actually just thinking about...” I searched for an excuse. “Okay, you got me. I was thinking exactly that.”

“Everyone does. I like being inconspicuous. Please, sit. Can I get you anything?”

Why is he offering to get me something, and not the other way around? “I’ve got a coffee, thanks,” I said. I gave Luke a questioning look: *why am I here?*

“My business is fairly simple,” Bernie explained. “I own a fleet of six private jets, which I lease out to corporations and individuals. But there is plenty of down time between those leases where my aircraft are not being used. So we supplement these with regular routes throughout the Caribbean. Mainly to Cancun, Cabo San Lucas, and Oyster Bay in Jamaica.”

“There’s a lot of rich oil and gas executives who want to fly down to Cancun to play a round of golf, then fly back the same day,” Luke said with a chuckle.

“I won’t bore you with any more details. We’re a private airline with limited routes.” Bernie beamed at me. “And we’re always in need of flight attendants with a certain level of discipline.”

Wait a minute. Is this a job interview? Suddenly I felt woefully under-dressed in my yoga pants and loose-fitting top.

“I already work for Gulf Airlines, and they have a clause in my employment contract about working for other airlines.”

“Which is what I meant when I said a certain level of discipline,” Bernie replied smoothly. He sounded like he’d had this exact conversation a hundred times before, and was well-practiced with coercion. “Everything is under the table, off the books. Those rules in your employment contracts are pointless, anyway. Why should Gulf Airlines care if you work one or two flights a week with us? As long as it doesn’t interfere with your flight schedule, which I can promise you it

won't. We work with our flight attendants and pilots to ensure there's no conflict."

I glanced at Luke. "I don't know..."

"A perfectly reasonable response." Bernie handed me a folder. "There's some information in there if you want to think about it some more. It's not for everyone, but if you're interested, we would love to have you work for us."

I thanked him and said goodbye, and then Luke led me out of the lounge. "It would have been nice to know I was interviewing for a *job* before I came here."

Luke winced and said, "I didn't know he would give you the pitch. He usually has too many flight attendants on the books and not enough pilots. I only brought you in there to prove what I was doing. To eliminate as many red flags as possible, you might say. Hopefully this explains why I left suddenly the other night. Another pilot backed out and I had to fill in."

All of a sudden I felt very silly for suspecting worse from Luke. "This is an adequate explanation, yes."

"I definitely don't have a secret family in Omaha," he said. After a long pause, he added, "I would keep a secret family in a major airline hub, like Atlanta, or Charlotte. Far more practical."

It was a relief to laugh with him. He wasn't married, or engaged, or anything really nefarious. He was just moonlighting for some extra cash on the side.

Bernie came out of the lounge and gave me a wave. "Good to meet you, Veronica. Hope we can work together real soon."

"You too," I said as he left the terminal. Luke and I watched him go.

"Sorry for all the secrecy," Luke said, gently touching my arm. "I signed an NDA about my work with Bernie, and I didn't want to admit to what I was doing in a text message or email that could potentially be used against me later."

"You think I would do that?"

He immediately shook his head. “No, but phones get hacked all the time. If it’s one thing my short time in the Air Force taught me, it’s that an abundance of caution never hurt anyone. But still, I’m sorry. Do you forgive me?”

“I guess so,” I replied.

He leaned in and gave me a kiss. Nothing special—just a peck on the lips. Even still, it ignited a fast-burning fire inside of me, a reminder of the night we shared together.

“I hope you didn’t have too much fun with the other flight attendant,” he suddenly said.

I gave a start. “Actually, we didn’t. We only got drinks together and...”

Luke waved a hand to cut me off. “I wasn’t trying to pry. None of my business. Besides, it’s not like the two of us are serious or anything. Yet.”

“Yet,” I agreed with a grin.



Taylor

“It’s real simple, boys,” I said to the three men standing around me at the Houston Airport private terminal. “It’s a thirty, maybe forty minute flight out to the gulf. I’ll circle the oil rig once or twice, give you a nice view. Let you snap some photos so you can expense the trip. Then, if conditions are cooperative, I’ll put the plane down on the surface. It’s a real calm day, so I think your chances are good for some deep sea fishing.”

The three men, all executives for an oil company dressed in fishing gear, grinned at each other. “And we can bring the cooler?” one of them asked.

I nodded and gave them my best smile. “Cooler, SCUBA gear, your mother-in-law. If it fits in the back, you can take it.”

They laughed at the joke, which was one I recycled often. These kinds of guys always did.

“Now then,” I clapped my hands together, “gather your gear and meet me out on the tarmac. My plane’s the fine lookin’ aircraft with...”

I trailed off as I saw a familiar face farther down the terminal. I placed her immediately: the woman from the Miami terminal the other day. A flight attendant for Gulf Airlines.

I hadn’t realized it until that very moment, but since that day she’d been stuck in my head like a bad idea. Seeing her here, in another city on another day, felt like a sign from the lord

above. The kind of sign you'd see on the Vegas strip, bright neon and flashing.

And I didn't even know her name.

My smile disappeared as she shifted to the left and I saw who she was talking to. I didn't know the tall, dark-haired man personally, but I recognized him as one of the pilots who worked for...

My hackles went up as I saw Bernard Langston himself come striding out of the executive lounge. He said something to the two of them, then walked out of the building.

"Are we ready to go, Captain Hawkins?" one of the oil execs asked.

I forced a smile back onto my face. "I've gotta take care of one thing real quick. Collect all your gear and I'll meet you back here in a minute."

I walked away before they could respond, my boots clicking on the shiny white floor of the private terminal. The pilot she was with disappeared back into the executive lounge, while she turned toward the exit.

Now, I considered myself a gentleman. Women were beautiful creatures that deserved to be respected and worshiped as such. But I was only human, specifically a *man*, and it was impossible for me to ignore the way she looked in a pair of black yoga pants that clung to her curves like a second skin and left *nothing* to the imagination. Between that and the simple shirt showing a little bit of midriff, she looked like she was headed to a coffee shop rather than a job interview.

I pushed aside my primal attraction and intercepted her before she reached the doors. "Almost didn't recognize you without the Gulf Airlines uniform," I said.

She whirled in surprise, then gave me the kind of smile every man liked to see. "I've only been to two private terminals in my career as a flight attendant, and both times I've ran into you. Kind of stalkerish, isn't it, Taylor?"

I gave a start. "How'd you know my name?"

“The guy at the Miami terminal told me.”

“So you were askin’ after me?” I leaned against the wall casually. “Now who’s the stalker? I don’t even know *your* name.”

“I’m Veronica. And I discovered your name because I ratted you out for stealing a bag from behind the counter,” she replied smoothly.

Veronica. The name danced around in my head like a dream.

“See, that’s where you’re confused, Veronica,” I said. “I wasn’t stealin’ anything. It was my bag. Freddie was just holdin’ it for me.”

“A crumpled up paper bag, the kind my brother used to deliver weed in. Kind of suspicious. What was in it?”

I tensed, then forced myself to relax. *She doesn’t know anything. She’s just flirting a little.*

Rather than answer her question, I said, “You can’t work for Bernie Langston.”

Veronica raised a challenging eyebrow. “And why can’t I?”

I glanced around to make sure nobody was close enough to listen in on our conversation. The last thing I needed was to make enemies with a guy like him.

“He’s bad news,” I said, leaning close to whisper. “Working for him is a mistake.”

She gave me an annoyed look. “Why? Because he’s a rich guy who owns a bunch of planes? How does that make him bad news?”

I hesitated. How could I tell her without *telling* her? I barely knew this woman. If I told her the truth, and she repeated it to the wrong people...

“Just trust me, Veronica. You don’t want to get involved with Bernie or the sort of clientele who rents his planes.”

“What kind of clientele? Rich assholes? I deal with them all the time.” She looked past me. “And it seems like you deal with the same kinds of people.”

I turned and followed her gaze across the terminal to where my three customers were waiting with a cooler of beer and fishing equipment.

“Look, you don’t know what you’re getting into. You have to trust me on this one.”

“Trust you? I don’t even know you.”

“How about you get to know me over dinner?” I said, flashing that smile that unlocked most doors. “I’ll explain everything then.”

Veronica let out an annoyed huff. “What’s with men refusing to just come right out and *say* things? Everything has to be all secretive all the time.”

“You’ll understand once I lay it all out for you,” I replied. “Bottom line? It’s not worth the risk.”

“Oh, I understand.” She crossed her arms under her breasts. “I think you’re jealous because you tried getting a cushy job with Mr. Langston, and he wouldn’t hire you. All these other pilots are flying nice jets while you’re stuck in a seaplane that looks like it was built during the Kennedy Administration.”

“Hey now,” I replied in annoyance, “I’m living my best life. Can you say the same? If your life was perfect, why are you risking your career with Gulf Airlines to moonlight with a private company?”

Veronica bristled at that. I must have struck a nerve.

“My Uber is here,” she said curtly. “Thank you for the warning, but I’m doing just fine.”

She doesn’t know what she’s getting into, I thought as I watched her leave. But she’ll find out soon enough.



Veronica

I made \$34 an hour. That was good money, especially considering Gulf Airlines had better benefits than most airlines. Not to mention the fringe benefit of getting to travel all over the world.

But my eyes popped out of my head when I opened Mr. Langston's brochure on the ride home: the airline, called Excelsior Air, boasted \$71 an hour for flight attendants, more than twice what I was currently making. It sounded too good to be true until I thought about it a little more. His private jets catered mostly to rich guys. The brochure also explained that the job was for only one or two flights per week. Never more than two, even if I didn't work for Gulf Airlines and had more availability.

The only downside was the potential for getting caught and fired by my current employer. But Luke was doing it, and presumably pilots and flight attendants who worked for other airlines. If they were comfortable working for Bernie on the side, then why shouldn't I?

Because Taylor just warned you not to.

It was obvious that he was jealous. Taylor was a direct competitor of Bernie, and the two probably fought for the same types of customers. He was trying to scare me off. The vain part of my mind believed he probably wanted an excuse to flirt with me, too. Not that I expected every man to want to flirt with me—I wasn't *that* self-absorbed—but he had definitely given me a healthy dose of charm at the Miami airport. And he had done the same here before our discussion

turned into an argument. He didn't even give me a legitimate reason. What was with men and being vague lately?

Yet there was something about the man that made me want to listen to him. He was compelling. And charming. And sexy in a raw, *real* way that neither Luke nor Adam were.

It's too bad he didn't ask me out. I wouldn't mind him being the third guy to have to say yes to for Dex's stupid challenge.

But it didn't matter, because I wasn't going to turn down this job. At least not without giving it a try first.

I was excited about the opportunity, but even more relieved that Luke's big secret was something innocent. I had totally written him off, assuming that he was being secretive for nefarious reasons. Now that I knew the truth, I was looking forward to seeing him again. Whether it turned into something serious, or remained a casual fling, I knew that it was going to be *good*.

I spent the rest of my day off running errands and doing chores around the house. After dinner, Dex texted me:

Dexter: Okay, I've been a good little boy and have resisted bugging you ALL DAY. But now you need to give me the scoop on your date with Adam Mandatory Lay.

Me: It was a lot of fun, but I think he only asked me out to help make Luke jealous.

Dexter: What? How did he know about Luke?

Me: He says he saw the way we were acting around each other on the flight, and jumped in to help.

Dexter: Booooooooo. When I suggested that he ask you out, I thought he was legitimately interested.

Me: He was giving off a weird vibe all night, too.

Dexter: Weird how?

Me: Well, we got tipsy and started dancing. I grinded my ass all over him, and then he said he wanted to go home.

Me: I would say that he really is gay, but I could feel his hard-on through his pants.

Dexter: How big is he? What's his thickness like? Describe it in terms of dog breeds. Is he a Yorkie? Chihuahua? French Pointer? Labrador Retriever? German Shepherd? HUSKY?

Me: You're focusing on the wrong thing. The date fizzled out and I'm not sure why.

Dexter: Aww. I'm sorry honey.

Me: And he's somewhere between a Newfoundland and Bernese Mountain Dog

Dexter: I KNEW IT

We had a three-leg trip scheduled the next day: Houston to Nashville, Nashville to Chicago, and then Chicago to Houston. It was one of the Gulf Airlines daily routes, and the one our flight crew flew the most often.

Adam was friendly and polite when we met him in the terminal, but he was a little bit stiff. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that was probably the best possible outcome. I had fulfilled one of Dex's challenges by agreeing to go out with him. We had fun, but it didn't go anywhere. Now we could go back to being just regular coworkers.

And since that had fizzled out, it meant I could focus on what I had going with Luke.

Halfway to Nashville, he came out of the cockpit to get a snack. "What can I get for you, Captain Hendricks?" I asked with just a hint of sexual undertone.

"Oh, there's plenty I'd like from you," he replied in a low voice. "But for now, I'll take two ginger ales. Just the cans."

"I know you like the cans," I whispered back, bending over to reach the bottom of the drink cart. Even though the ginger ales were within reach, I spent several moments rummaging around while my ass was in the air.

When I stood back up, I saw that he hadn't bothered to hide the way he was watching me. "Got plans tonight?" he asked.

"Actually, I've got a date with a handsome pilot who secretly knows how to salsa dance, even though he pretends to be a big serious former Air Force guy."

His eyes flickered with amusement. "Well, I hope you two have fun."

“I know we will.”

On the other side of the drink cart, Dex rolled his eyes.

The rest of our route passed without much excitement, and when we landed in Houston that evening, I immediately drove to the address Luke gave me. He lived in a nice three-story condo a few miles from the airport, but I didn't see much of it because we were busy making out while walking up the steps to his bedroom on the third floor.

The chemistry we'd had in Miami hadn't faded one bit in the past three days. Luke pulled my uniform skirt up around my waist and buried his face in my panties, pulling them aside and then eating me out like I was the in-flight meal he had been waiting to devour. And after fantasizing about him during all three flights today, I found myself rocked by a quick orgasm that had him rumbling happily into my wet folds.

Then Luke stripped off his pilot uniform and grabbed my legs, pulling me to the edge of the bed. He guided his cock up and down my drenched slit, teasing me. I wanted him desperately, and he seemed to sense it, because he didn't make me wait long: he buried his hard length into me, pulling my legs up until they were resting on his shoulders. It was from that angle that he pounded me mercilessly, crashing deep into me with every stroke, one hand squeezing my breast while the other remained wrapped around one leg.

The sight of him was beautiful; a painting of tan muscles from his navel to his neck, chest covered with a smattering of dark hair. The bulging muscles glistened with sweat, contracting and squeezing together as he fucked me with every deep stroke. The view of him alone might have been enough to bring me to another climax, but paired with his cock plunging into my pussy again and again, my orgasm came in wave after wave of pleasure, an ecstasy so intense from this angle that I let out an endless scream of bliss.

And as soon as I came down from it, I pulled Luke down onto the bed and rolled over until I was on top of him. Still reeling from my climax, I rode him like I was trying to win first place at the Houston rodeo. Soon I was moaning again

while slamming my hips down onto his body, and his deep voice joined me quickly, crying out in shock and heavenly pleasure as his cock spasmed inside of me, filling me with his load, pulse after pulse of it until he finally went still. Only then did I collapse on top of him, my lips finding his in a long, sweaty kiss.

“Sorry for the noise,” I purred some time later. “I know you share walls with your neighbors.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He tapped the wall behind the headboard with a thick finger. “These neighbors have four kids, and they bounce off the walls constantly. It’s about time I return the favor.”

“You mean this is the first time you’ve had a woman scream in pleasure in your bedroom?” I teased.

He turned to smile at me. “That was definitely the loudest they’ve ever heard. From a guest of mine, *and* from me.”

I nodded. “Good answer.”

“You know, I intended on taking you out on a proper date tonight,” he said. “To a restaurant, with food and drinks and maybe some nice background music.”

“And I intended to fuck you so hard you pulled a muscle,” I replied. “But sometimes we all *come* up short.”

He winced and reached underneath him. “Actually, I arched my back so hard there at the end that I might have pulled something.”

“Worth it?” I asked.

He grinned. “As of right now, all evidence points to: yes. It was very worth it.”

“Another good answer.” I sighed and rested back onto the pillows. “We got in late, anyway. I wouldn’t have wanted to go out.”

“Some other time,” he promised.

“I don’t care where we go, as long as we always end up back here, waking your neighbors the same way.”

“A noble goal.” His fingers gently caressed across my nipples, sending a shiver up my spine. “Have you thought about the freelance job? Working for Bernie?”

“I’m definitely interested,” I replied. “At the very least, I’ll give it a try. Then decide from there.”

“I think once you see how easy the passengers are, and how large the paycheck is, you’ll be hooked,” he replied.

For a little while, we lay there together, idly touching each other.

“There is one thing,” I finally said. “Another pilot came up to me in the terminal and warned me not to take the job.”

Luke sat upright in bed, eyebrows furrowed in concern. “Who?”

“His name is Taylor Hawkins. I ran into him in Miami while picking up my luggage the other day; I don’t really know him at all.”

Luke immediately chuckled. “That old bush pilot? I wouldn’t trust anything he says. He was a cropduster in Iowa. Those guys are all nuts. Too many years inhaling pesticides. What specifically did he warn you about?”

“That’s the thing... he wouldn’t really say. He gave me some vague warnings about working with those kinds of clientele.”

“He’s one to talk. Most of his jobs involve flying oil men down into the gulf.”

“That’s pretty much exactly what I said to him,” I replied. “But there’s nothing else I should know about the job, is there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Anything else that I should be worried about.”

Luke took one of my hands and folded it between two of his massive palms. “Veronica, I’ve been working for Bernie Langston for six months. I haven’t noticed anything

suspicious. It's the easiest money I've ever made in my life. For once, it feels good to actually *thrive* in my career, rather than just trying to survive."

I let my other hand slide up his thigh. "Oh, you're thriving all right." His cock stirred underneath my fingertips.

"Care to chart another flight plan?" he asked formally. "This time from a different approach angle?"

I gave him an even look. "How many times have you used *that* line on a woman?"

"More than once. Fewer than a hundred." He pushed me down onto the bed, holding my hands out to the sides. "Is that a no?"

"You are cleared for landing," I replied.

The two of us giggled like fools, then quickly forgot all about the silly joke.



Veronica

Flight attendant work schedules were different than most other jobs. We received our schedules months in advance, which was the only convenient thing about the job since our actual hours were irregular to the point of chaotic. In any given month, my schedule would require me to work early mornings, late nights, weekends, and holidays—especially the latter, since people tended to fly more often around holidays.

Gulf Airlines only had one or two international routes—including a direct flight from Houston to Madrid, which I was working later this month. Most flights were domestic, and short hops at that. But that still meant working twelve or fourteen hour days sometimes.

The other side of the coin was that we had frequent days off. Often this meant we were technically on stand-by, and had to be prepared to fill-in for any other shifts that might open up. But these weren't as common for us as it was in other airlines, and I had plenty of days with nothing on the schedule and zero chance of that changing.

It was a day like that when I worked my first shift for Excelsior Air, Bernie's airline. The uniform was simple: black slacks and a white blouse, which I wore with a comfortable pair of black flats. I quickly realized that working for Excelsior was a lot simpler than Gulf Airlines or any other company. There was no desk to run at the gate, dealing with people crowding around to be the first to board a flight. There weren't unhappy customers rebooking canceled flights and taking their frustration out on the airline staff.

When I arrived at Houston's private terminal, I almost had too *little* to do. I checked-in at the front desk to verify my flight. Then I walked right out onto the tarmac, where our Gulfstream G650 was waiting, looking sleek and modern with a blue Excelsior Air logo painted on the tail.

I found Luke going through the pre-flight checklist in the cockpit. "Good morning, Captain Hendricks," I said warmly.

"Captain *Dricksen*," he corrected. "And yes, it's a good morning now that you're here."

"Well aren't you sweet." I wanted to give him a kiss, but didn't know if that was a good idea while we were on the job, even with the cabin still empty. "Okay, what do I need to do?"

Luke gave me a quick run-down on how the job worked. The plane was already loaded up with drinks and food. Our passengers didn't just walk out to the tarmac by themselves; I had to go back into the terminal lounge and get them. The assistant at the desk pointed them out to me: it was a group of eight guys who were flying down to Cancun to golf. It was a quick day trip: fly down, hang out for several hours while they played golf, then fly back that afternoon.

I collected the eight passengers and led them out to the plane, where a ground crew member of the airline took their golf clubs and loaded them into storage. I checked off their names at the door to the aircraft, then served them drinks while we prepared to take off. Even though it was seven in the morning, every passenger ordered a beer or whiskey—and some more than one. After take-off, I served more drinks and passed around a basket of snacks for them to choose from.

We landed in Cancun, taxied to the private terminal, and the men disembarked and collected their golf bags. Me, Luke, and his co-pilot stood inside the cabin and watched them saunter into the terminal, laughing and making jokes as they went.

"What do you think?" Luke asked. "They weren't too rowdy, were they?"

"It was the easiest flight of my life," I replied honestly. "They were a little rowdy, but still better than most

commercial flights.”

I was kind of in a daze. Most Gulf Airlines flights had at least a hundred passengers, and it was impossible to make everyone happy. I usually ended a flight feeling mentally, physically, and emotionally drained.

But the flight here was a breeze. Serving drinks and snacks took maybe thirty minutes spread out across the length of the flight. I had spent most of the flight sitting in the jump chair by the cockpit, doing a crossword puzzle.

If every flight is like this...

“Most are easier than this one,” the co-pilot said, as if he could read my mind. “Many of our flights have four or five passengers. Easy as cake.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m going to head into town and get some food. You want anything, Luke? Veronica?”

Luke and I exchanged a look.

“I think we’re good,” Luke replied. “I’m going to brief Veronica on the procedure for when we return to Houston.”

“Hard copy. Text me if you change your mind.”

Luke and I watched him exit the plane and walk across the tarmac.

“What kind of procedure do we have when we return to Houston?” I asked. “Is it complicated?”

“Actually, there’s almost nothing for you to do when we land,” he replied. “Lead the passengers into the terminal and you’re done. The ground crew takes care of cleaning the plane and restocking the refreshments.”

I frowned. *Then why did you say you needed to...*

I trailed off when I saw Luke smiling at me.

Oh, I thought. I think I understand what procedure you’d like to brief me on. And I know just how to thank you for getting me this gig.



Luke

Being a flight attendant was a thankless job. Hell, it was worse than that. Not only did passengers rarely thank her, but many were knuckleheads in a proactively-rotten manner. They were rude, demanding, and then blamed her if something didn't go perfectly. Just last week I'd heard about a woman who was kicked off a flight because she tried to assault the flight attendant for running out of Diet Coke before reaching her row.

I was genuinely excited for Veronica to start working for Excelsior Air. It was an easier job, with better pay. As long as Gulf Airlines didn't find out, there was quite literally zero downside.

It also meant I got to see more of her.

The Excelsior uniform wasn't as audacious as the Gulf Airlines skirt, but it still *turned my propeller*, you might say. Veronica had a magnificent ass, and the black slacks hugged it in a way that made me want to make an unscheduled landing onto her backside. After my co-pilot left, I knew we were alone for a little while. The ground crew wouldn't refill the gas tank until shortly before takeoff. We had some time to kill.

Veronica immediately began playing along. "Can I get you anything, Captain Dricksen?" she asked in an exaggerated sexy voice.

"I've got a craving, but I'm not sure what I want," I said. "Got any recommendations?"

She pushed me backwards into the cockpit and into the seat. “I’m sorry, but I’m all out of snacks.” She pouted. “Maybe I can make it up for you in another way?”

She went to her knees in front of me, unzipped my pants, and threaded my semi-hard cock through the zipper. But it was only semi-hard for a few seconds, because I was instantly hard as soon as I felt her breath on my skin. Veronica slowly wrapped her fingers around my girth, giving me the tiniest little squeeze.

“Maybe something like this will sate your appetite?” She kept her eyes locked onto mine as she kissed my tip, parting her lips slowly to take the entire head into her mouth. She was wearing red lipstick today, and those red lips wrapped around my cock, pushing lower as she took more of me, was a sight so beautiful that I could have exploded right then and there.

I craned my head back and enjoyed the way she sucked me off, bobbing her head on my cock. After a few strokes, she pulled back and asked, “Is this acceptable to you, Captain?”

“It’s more than acceptable.” I started to say more, but then Veronica was sucking me off again, so I trailed off with a long moan.

This had always been a fantasy of mine. Hell, it had probably been a fantasy of every commercial airline pilot since the Wright Brothers hopped off the ground at Kitty Hawk. Having Veronica wearing a sexy little flight attendant outfit, giving me a blowjob in the cockpit of the plane I had just landed, was better than anything I could have imagined.

“I want you,” I said after a few minutes.

“I’m here to please *you*, Captain,” she replied before resuming her job.

Fuck, why does that turn me on so much?

I felt the familiar tingle that I was getting close. I warned her that I was going to come, but she didn’t slow down—if anything, she sped up, bobbing her head faster and faster. Veronica kept her lips wrapped tightly around my hard length as I began to come, erupting in her mouth like a geyser. She

gazed up at me through her eyelashes as I unloaded in her throat, cock pulsing in her fingers, red lips sucking tightly until there was nothing left inside of me.

“Jesus,” I said. “Veronica...”

She finally pulled back, using a finger to wipe a little bit of come away from her lip. “Consider that a thank-you for getting me this job.”

“I got it for you out of the kindness of my heart,” I replied. “But I won’t say no to this.”

I pulled her into my lap and gave her a long kiss. Her tongue found its way into my mouth, undulating wetly in a way that made me want to go again.

“Seriously though, can I return the favor?” I asked. “I want to taste *you*, next.”

She grinned down at me and tapped me on the nose. “And *I* want to taste tacos! Let’s go into town and get some food. Dex recommended a place that’s away from all the tourist spots.”

Flying, blowjobs, and tacos, I thought as we exited the plane. *This is turning out to be one hell of a day.*



Veronica

Every pilot had fantasies about their flight attendants. It was the worst kept secret in the airlines. We were attracted to pilots in their uniforms, and they were attracted to us walking around in tight-fitting pants or skirts. There was a lot of sexual energy in an environment like that.

But I had never actually *done* anything with a pilot on an actual plane. Yeah, we were parked on the tarmac, but it was still *incredibly* hot to give Luke a blowjob in the cockpit. Naughty and sexy without actually doing anything wrong or dangerous.

We went into town and got street tacos from a restaurant that only had a single two-person table out front. Then we returned to the airport terminal with the intention of having some more sexy fun, but Luke's co-pilot was back, napping in one of the seats. So we went into the private terminal lounge and relaxed while waiting for our passengers to finish playing golf. I finished my crossword while Luke watched history videos on YouTube on his phone.

The passengers seemed pretty drunk when they returned, dragging golf bags behind them with duffel bags slung over shoulders. They were practically peaceful on the flight home; most slept in their seats, while a few others chatted quietly. Aside from handing out some waters and bags of chips, I pretty much had nothing to do until we landed in Houston.

As we taxied up to the private terminal, I saw a familiar sight: an old seaplane was parked a few spots down from our Gulfstream. Taylor Hawkins was up on a ladder with his head

buried in one of the engines. As he dropped a wrench into a toolbox and rummaged around for something else, I saw that his arms were smeared with grease.

He has to do his own maintenance. No wonder he's jealous of Excelsior Air.

Yet there was something sexy about a man who did everything himself. Not that Luke's job as a pilot wasn't attractive; it was very much so. But watching Taylor wield a wrench that was longer than my forearm, afternoon light shining in his sun-bleached hair...

"Dinner at my place?" Luke asked while I gazed out the window.

"What happened to taking me out on a proper date?" I joked.

He picked up his briefcase and grinned. "I have other plans for you. Things we can't do in public." He paused. "Not without getting arrested, anyway."

I followed him off the plane and into the terminal. When we got to the door, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck go stiff. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Taylor Hawkins on his ladder, scratching the back of his neck with a greasy hand while watching me.

I felt a strange sense of guilt after Taylor saw me. Why did I care so much what that random pilot thought? We'd had exactly two conversations together, both for only a minute. He was practically a stranger to me.

I feel bad that he's flying his own plane, I told myself. And maintaining it himself. His business is probably barely squeaking by.

I had a normal flight the next day with the regular crew: me, Dex, and Adam. We were assigned a different set of pilots though. Occasionally pilot and crew schedules would line up for a few days, but that never lasted since pilots and cabin crew had different rules and regulations for how many hours we could work per week, and for how long.

"It must be disappointing," Dex said as we prepared for our first flight.

“What?” I asked.

“Seeing a captain that you’re *not* hooking up with.”

I rolled my eyes. “You make it sound like I’ve made it into a pattern. I’ve slept with exactly one pilot in my life.”

“The one you’re currently sleeping with!”

“Yes, that’s correct. I don’t know why you’re saying it like that.”

“I’m just so happy,” Dex said, letting out a romantic sigh. “I’m the one who caused this romantic affair. I’m pretty much Cupid, except I fly through the air.”

I held out my palm. “First of all, settle down. It’s been a week. Second of all, I wouldn’t say you’re Cupid. We’re not madly in love. We’ve only hooked up a few times. And third, Cupid *did* fly through the air. He had wings.”

“What? No he didn’t. He had a bow and a quiver of arrows.”

“And wings,” I insisted. “Google it if you don’t believe me.”

Dex paused to look at his phone, then hastily changed the subject. “So you don’t see a future with Luke?”

“If I tell you I do,” I negotiated, “will you let me off the hook for your challenge?”

“Nope! You need to say yes to the third person that asks you out.” He pointed a finger at me. “Unless you and Captain Sexypants become Facebook official. Then I’ll put a pause on the challenge.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll say yes to one more guy who asks me out.” The first passengers began coming down the jet bridge, led by a large man wearing a Sailor Moon anime shirt. After he passed, I shared a look with Dex: *hopefully it’s not him*.

Adam and I were responsible for the economy passengers for the flight to Nashville. He was friendly the way he had been when we first met, but there was still something about him that was stiff. Like he wasn’t a hundred percent relaxed around me.

“A little birdie told me you found a job moonlighting for Excelsior,” he said while we were descending to the runway.

Alarm raced through my body. “How did you hear about that? Was it from someone else at Gulf Airlines?”

“Relax,” he said, putting a comforting hand on my arm. “Dexter told me. Your secret’s safe.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“How do you like it?”

“Honestly, it’s amazing. The pay is better. I don’t have to deal with unhappy customers at the gate. And the actual passengers are easier to deal with. Alcohol is free on these flights, so I just keep it flowing and everyone is happy.”

“There have always been rumors of pilots and crew doing that on the side, but you’re the first person I’ve actually known who has done it,” Adam said. “Think they’d hire me?”

I winced. “I don’t think there’s any *official* rule about it, but based on what I’ve seen so far, I think they only hire women.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Understandable. The rich customers only want to be served by beautiful women.”

“I never said beautiful.”

Adam shrugged. “One would assume. Sorry to hear it. If they ever change their mind, hit me up. I’ll sling tiny bottles of liquor for twice the pay any day.”

Was he trying to compliment me? I wondered while watching Adam out of the corner of my eye. Is that his way of apologizing for the way our date went? Or is he flirting with me?

I could still remember the way he felt that night while we danced. Grinding my ass against his crotch, feeling his fingers on my hips. The kiss we very nearly shared at the end of the night before he turned his lips away and kissed me on the cheek instead.

The whole night felt unfinished. Incomplete. I continued eying him sideways, looking as sharp as ever in his uniform.

He was even sexier now that I knew he was *packing heat* underneath, so to speak.

And as the plane began to land, I noticed something else: *he* was checking out *me*. Glancing at me out of the corner of his eye, admiring my crossed legs. His gaze lingered there a long moment, becoming almost hungry, before he abruptly turned away.

What's going on with you? I wondered.

19



Veronica

The vast majority of my assigned flights were domestic, for one simple reason: the majority of Gulf Airlines flights were domestic. The company had originally serviced routes exclusively around the Gulf of Mexico—hence the name—but had eventually added one or two other routes as the need arose. One of those routes, for whatever reason, was a direct flight from Houston to Madrid, Spain. Despite the exotic location, few flight attendants requested the route; it was always an overnight, which had its ups and downs, but most crew didn't want it.

Which made it easy for me to request it every month or so. Free trip to Europe? Yes please.

For this route, we flew a Boeing 767 wide-body aircraft, with an expanded cabin crew of five. Dexter always opted out of these routes (he complained about overnights ruining his sleep schedule) so Adam and I were joined with another three-person cabin crew for the flight.

I was paired up with Sharon, a woman in her sixties that was a veteran of the airline. The flight departed at five in the afternoon. Once we reached cruising altitude, we served dinner to everyone; this included the economy passengers, who received meals on all international flights over 800 miles. It took almost an hour just to serve the meals, which felt like *forever* compared to the simple tasks I'd had on my Excelsior flight.

After collecting everyone's trays, and refilling drinks, the lights were turned out in the cabin so people could try to get

some sleep and acclimate to Spain's time zone, which was seven hours ahead of Houston's. I savored the silence; everyone was either sleeping or watching the in-flight entertainment, so the only noise was the constant drone of the engines.

At the back of the Boeing 767, past the bathrooms and rear cabin, were two narrow beds where the flight crew could get some sleep. Obviously not everyone could sleep at the same time, and not for very long, but it at least gave us the option.

"You can get the first shift of sleep if you want," Sharon told me. "I'm at the end of the most recent Colleen Hoover book and I don't think I could sleep until I finish it."

I rarely slept on these flights, but it was nice to get away from the passengers and rest my eyes a little bit. The beds were on either side of the aisle, with a privacy curtain for each of them. Neither were occupied, so I put my phone on the pillow of the left bed and went to the restroom.

When I returned, Adam was sliding into the bed on the right, across the aisle. "Hi," I said.

"Hello," he replied. "You won the coin toss for first sleep shift?"

"Actually, Sharon gave it to me without a fight. She wants to finish reading her book."

Adam glanced over his shoulder, then leaned close enough to whisper. "My partner, Heather, insisted we flip a coin. But after I won, she looked really unhappy about it. So I offered to let her sleep first, and insisted she take it, but she just sighed and told me it was fine. I think she *wanted* to pout about it. I heard her complaining to the captain when he came out to get his meal."

"Some people want to be unhappy and pretend the world is out to get them."

"She'll get her wish." He leaned closer. "When I'm done sleeping, I'm going to *accidentally* spill coke all over the bunk so she can't use it. That will give her something to complain about."

I laughed at the unexpected bit of pettiness from Adam.

“Just so we’re clear, I’m only joking,” he said.

“Suuuure,” I replied while untying my ponytail so I could sleep. “Now I’m going to accidentally spill a drink in *my* bed and pretend that you did it. Turn the entire crew against you.”

Adam glared at me. “Goodnight, Veronica.”

“Goodnight, Adam,” I replied sweetly.

I got into my bed and closed the privacy curtain. A few seconds later, I heard Adam doing the same. I pulled out my phone to do today’s Wordle and Quordle puzzles, but found myself staring at the screen without really paying attention.

I liked Adam. He was funny. And we definitely had *some* sort of chemistry. If we had never gone out on our date, I wouldn’t have worried about it. I would have enjoyed him as a nice coworker I could flirt with and left it at that.

But I couldn’t do that. We’d had a date together, and it was *fun*. And then, inexplicably, he had ended it before it could go anywhere.

“You still awake?” he asked, voice barely audible over the background drone of the engines.

I considered ignoring him, but my curiosity was raised. “Yup.”

“How’s everything going with Captain Hendricks?”

Something about the way he said *Captain Hendricks* dug at me. It was like he was insisting Luke was somebody formal, not someone I should be dating. Okay, maybe I was projecting my own emotions onto his question, but still.

“I’m not sure that’s any of your business,” I replied curtly.

There was silence for several minutes. One of the other cabin crew came into the back, rummaged around with a drink and ice, then disappeared again.

“It’s not my business, no,” he finally said. “But you and I went on a date together, and I was curious, so I thought I would ask.”

I pulled aside the curtain. “Are you *sure* we went on a date? Because it seemed like everything was going fine, and then you gave me a kiss on the cheek and went home.”

“And then you never called me,” he said. “Or texted me. Or made any indication that you wanted to go out with me again.”

“Because you kissed me on the cheek and ended the night early!”

He tore open the privacy curtain so I could see his scowl. “Because I was annoyed you only went out with me to make Captain Hendricks jealous.”

“I... you think I was using you? *You're* the one who asked *me* out!” I shot back.

“Because Dex told me to. He said you thought I was hot.”

“You are hot!” I hissed. “I did want to go out with you! I don’t understand the problem here. If you thought I was just trying to make Captain Hendricks jealous, why did you ask me out in the first place? Why not tell Dex?”

“Let me clear up the timing. I was genuine when I asked you out,” Adam explained. “I was excited about it, even. But then I overheard you and Dex talking on the plane. You told him you were happy to go out with me *because* it would make Luke jealous. I went through with the date anyway, but I was tempted to cancel after hearing you say that.”

I searched my memory. I remembered the conversation with Dex; I had thought Adam was listening to music because he had EarPods in. “That’s not exactly what happened. I said making Luke jealous would be a *fringe* benefit of going out with you. It wasn’t the main reason I agreed to go out with you. That was good all on its own!”

Adam looked surprised. “Oh.”

“You seemed like you were into me at the piano bar,” I continued. “But then halfway through, I started getting a weird vibe from you.”

“It was a text,” Adam said. “You got a text from Luke during the date. Before that, I was able to forget about

everything and enjoy your company. But when I saw the text, it reminded me of the real reason you went out with me.”

“That *wasn't* the real reason...”

“I know that now,” he said, patting the air to calm me down. “But at the time... ugh. I really messed things up, huh? The date could have gone totally different.”

“We still had a good time,” I said. “Especially when we were dancing. What else might have happened on the date?”

Adam slid his feet off the bunk and looked both ways in the aisle. Then he stepped over to my bed, cupped my cheek, and gave me a long kiss on the lips.

It was so surprising, so unexpected, that I didn't know what to do. I allowed my lips to move against his, churning wonderfully while most of the plane was asleep around us.

“That's what might have happened at the end of the night, instead of a kiss on the cheek.” Adam grinned at me, then returned to his bunk, pulling the curtain closed again.



Veronica

I lay on my back and stared at the bulkhead over my little bunk, the cheap grey plastic curving up above me. My body was alive now, more than it had been in a while. Adam had just kissed me. While we were both at work. And then he went back to his bunk like that was the end of that.

What's going to happen? I wondered. Would we go on another date when we got back home? Had I missed my chance thanks to this stupid misunderstanding? That possibility filled me with a deep sense of regret. Imagine missing out on something special with a guy because he misinterpreted a conversation he overheard.

I wanted to call out to him. I wanted to pull back the curtain and join him in his bunk, to demand to know what happened next. But I was too much of a coward, so I remained in my bunk.

“Veronica?” Adam suddenly asked.

“Yes?”

“Can I kiss you again?”

“Only if you hurry. Sharon and Heather are on the other aisle right now.”

I heard the other curtain pull back, and then mine suddenly opened. Adam planted a knee on the bed and closed the curtain, then lowered himself on top of me.

“I meant can I kiss you again, on a date,” he said.

“That’s one misunderstanding I don’t mind,” I said. “But it’s too late now.”

I leaned up to press my lips against his, and then we stopped caring about who had meant what. Adam pulled my skirt up around my waist, allowing me to spread my legs wider in the narrow bunk space. He sank into me, deepening the kiss with a flicker of tongue. My body came even more alive underneath him, and everywhere our skin touched, it felt like electricity connected, causing the hairs on my body to go stiff.

His cock was also stiff, something he couldn’t hide in the form-fitting slacks. Adam ground it into my panties, creating a wonderful friction between our two sexes. I was completely drenched, both from the unexpected way this flight had gone, and from the audacity of us to do this during the flight itself.

“We could get caught,” I breathed between kisses.

“I know.”

“We’ll be fired,” I said.

He moved his lips down to my neck. “Do you want me to stop?”

I opened my mouth to say yes, we probably should stop, but I couldn’t make myself form the words. My body craved Adam too much, and I had been thinking about this in my subconscious every day we’d worked together since our date. I wanted this more than anything.

Our mouths churned together as he unbuttoned his pants and kicked them down to his ankles. Then his fingers were curling under the elastic of my underwear, tugging them down urgently. When he bent back over me, I felt his crown sliding against my sopping entrance. Newer currents of electricity passed between our sensitive parts at this, drawing a moan from my lips.

Adam kissed me harder then put a finger to his mouth. *We have to be quiet.*

Yet it was difficult to suppress my groans as he guided his throbbing cock into my wet folds. Adam was gorgeous all by himself, and I would have been incredibly turned on regardless

of where this took place, but doing this in the overnight bunk on a wide-body 767 made everything so much hotter. Passengers were only twenty feet away. The other flight attendants were wandering around somewhere. We could get caught.

The thought was so scintillating that I wrapped my legs around Adam's ass and squeezed, pulling him into me. His cock felt like a wide-body too, stretching my inner walls and giving me that delicious ache that came from a man joining me for the first time.

Now I had to bite down on my lip to keep from crying out, and even Adam looked like he was struggling. He rested his forehead against mine, panting softly with the effort of holding back.

Yet as he began to move, we discovered one fatal flaw to our spontaneous coupling: the bunk creaked. When Adam thrust into me, the entire bunk shifted forward and *squeaked* on whatever bolts held it into the bulkhead. He slowed down, sliding his cock even slower, yet it caused the same noise—just more elongated.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I whispered.

“Roll over,” he said. “Onto your side.”

I obeyed, and he went onto his side next to me, his cock feeling like an extra thick rod of heat against my bare ass. He guided himself into me from behind, filling me once again in a way that nearly took my breath away.

And this time, thrusting sideways on the bunk, there was no noise.

“There we go,” he breathed into my ear as he began to fuck me. “How's that?”

I didn't dare open my mouth for fear that only a cry of pleasure would escape, so I clenched my teeth and nodded vigorously.

Slowly, Adam fucked me on his side. I clenched my eyes shut and savored the way he felt: the bare skin of our legs touching, the fingers curling over my hip and holding onto me

like he didn't dare let go. The drone of the engines surrounded us, concealing all the small noises we made. Adam's shallow breathing. My soft gasps. The slap of his skin against mine, a little bit louder as he increased his pace.

Then he pushed a little harder into me, and the bunk creaked again. We both tensed, but he continued moving—slower this time. Agonizingly slow, like he was legitimately trying to torture me with his cock. That only increased my desire for him to *really* lay into me, to let loose without caring what anyone thought. The temptation to beg him to fuck me harder, to cast aside all cares and worries about getting caught, was strong. The only thing I could think about was how much I wanted *him*.

“Sharon, where's the extra tray I left out?” came a voice outside the bunks.

We both froze.

Footsteps walked down the aisle next to our bunk. I glanced up; the privacy curtain was held to the wall by magnets, ensuring that as little light got in as possible. And ensuring that we remained concealed... as long as nobody pulled open the curtain.

“I didn't touch it,” Heather, the other flight attendant, replied. “I assumed it was for you.”

While they argued, Adam continued fucking me slowly. So slowly.

“It was *right here*,” Sharon insisted. “It was the last chicken meal.”

Adam's fingers were gripping my thigh possessively, but now they slid a little farther until they touched my mound of pubic hair. The fingertips continued sliding deeper until they touched my swollen clit. I had to bite down on my lip to keep from moaning.

“Ask Adam or Veronica,” Heather said. “Maybe they thought it was theirs.”

I froze at the mention of our names, but Adam was undeterred. He slowly rubbed my clit in a circle while

continuing to grind against my ass, cock plunging as deep as it could go.

I felt like a can of soda that had been shaken up so much it was close to bursting. Adam was doing everything possible to make me come, and the more I resisted it, the better he felt. Oh, how I wished we were at home without anyone to hear us, able to tilt back our heads and scream at the top of our lungs.

Yet there was something so deliciously *naughty* about doing this in a public place.

I saw a shadow move underneath the privacy curtain, then stopped. I tensed, waiting for Sharon to call out to one of us. If she discovered one of the bunks was empty...

Adam's fingers pushed harder into my clit. Everything was tingling, and I knew I was close. But the shadow underneath the curtain remained there. I needed her to leave, to go somewhere else so Adam and I could finish what we were doing. Sharon could jump out of the plane for all I cared, so long as she gave us the privacy we so desperately desired.

The shadow moved on, and then I heard Sharon say, "I don't want to wake them. A passenger probably took it."

"Happens all the time," Heather agreed. "They come back here and think they're welcome to whatever they find. I bet there's one more up in first class. Let's go talk to Chase."

As Sharon and Heather walked back toward the front of the plane, I stopped fighting the overwhelming pressure that was building inside of me. Soon I was driving my hips back against Adam's cock, begging to be fucked while he rubbed a fire into my clit. And as my orgasm crashed into me, Adam's free hand curled underneath my head and around, clamping down on my mouth. I screamed then, a wordless cry of ecstasy muffled by his palm and the roar of the engine noise. Adam's own moans soon filled my ear, gasps of pleasure that were so intense it almost sounded painful for him.

We came together in the overnight bunk, only feet away from the unsuspecting passengers and other crew, collapsing together, totally spent.



Adam

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to do something like this.

I drove into Veronica from behind, unable to stop myself even with the other flight attendants right outside the curtain. Veronica felt too good. Not just the way she clamped down on my cock while she came, gripping me tightly like she was trying to squeeze the come out of me. But the way she felt in my arms, soft and warm, with my face buried into her thick hair, breathing deeply of her scent.

When the footsteps moved away from our spot, I felt Veronica finally let go of whatever was holding her back. I covered her mouth with my palm and she *screamed* as she was rocked with her intense orgasm. Her entire body trembled in my arms, like she was having a damn seizure. It was impossible for me to last any longer; I blew my load pretty much instantly, causing her to clamp her pussy around me even tighter.

It was like all the pent-up energy from our date had been stored away, collecting compound interest, until it was finally unleashed.

After, she continued shivering and whimpering in my arms. She kept pushing her hips back against me, like she wanted me to keep moving. Like she didn't want the sex to stop. I brushed her hair to the side and kissed her neck, then her cheek, then her chin.

"I didn't expect that," Veronica finally whispered.

“What did you expect?”

“I thought we would make out a little,” she replied. “Maybe some heavy petting.”

I leaned up onto one elbow and frowned down at her. “There was no way I could climb into this bunk and *only* kiss you.”

She let out a giggle. “Good point. I’m glad it happened.”

“I wish it had happened when we went on our date together.”

Veronica narrowed her eyes. “That’s still your fault for ending the date prematurely.”

“I was confused back then.”

“I was grinding my ass all over you on the dance floor.” Veronica shifted her hips to simulate the motion. “I gave you all the hints.”

“Yes, yes, I know. It’s my fault.” I twisted her head around so I could kiss her on the lips. “But I hope this made up for it.”

She grinned. “It’s a start.”

Two sets of footsteps came down the aisle again. “...glad it worked out,” Heather was saying.

“Me too,” Sharon replied. “I would not have been a happy camper. Can you take care of that passenger’s drink while I eat? The one in row thirty-seven.”

“Not a problem!”

The two of us remained frozen together while listening to Sharon eat her meal in the rear cabin. It was only a few feet from us, and she would have a clear view of the aisle if either of us left.

While we waited, Veronica reached into her bag and pulled out a pack of tissues. “Thank you,” I mouthed to her, then used them to clean myself off. Continuing the flight service with a jizz stain on my pants would *not* be easy.

She used one of the tissues on herself, then sat up in the bunk. She kissed me, then pressed a finger to her lips as she

pulled back the curtain and quickly slid out into the aisle.

“You’ve got plenty of time to keep sleeping, Veronica,” I heard Sharon say.

“Just going to the bathroom,” Veronica replied, sliding the curtain shut behind her and then putting on her shoes. I listened quietly as she went to the lavatory. As I pulled on my pants and silently buckled my belt, I thought about how the situation reminded me of getting stuck in a girl’s bedroom when her parents came home early.

It’s too bad I don’t have a window I can climb out, I thought. The only windows here involve a thirty-five-thousand foot fall to my death.

The lavatory flushed, and the door opened. I tensed, waiting to see if Veronica was going to climb back into bed, but then she began speaking to Sharon.

“Do you know if we have any of those Diet Dr. Peppers left? The cart up front was all out, and I have a craving.”

“Let me see.” I heard the sound of rummaging.

“What about in the back of the cart?” Veronica asked pointedly. “I know it’s tough to get back there, but I think I saw one...”

I realized what was happening: she was getting Sharon to look the other way. This was my chance.

Putting my full trust in Veronica, I opened the curtain and smoothly stepped up into the aisle. Heather was helping a passenger much farther up the plane, but otherwise nobody nearby was aware of anything.

I closed the curtain behind me and opened the one to my original bunk. Then I sat down on the edge and checked the time on my phone. Thirty minutes had passed since I got into the bunk. I still had plenty of time to try to catch some actual sleep.

There’s no way I can fall asleep after that, I thought, rising from my bunk and pretending to stretch. I’m going to be wired for the next twenty-four hours.

“Done with your nap?” Heather suddenly asked next to me. “That was quick, but if you’re finished...”

“It’s all yours,” I said with a smile. “I think I’m going to stay up.”

I shared a private grin with Veronica before going into the lavatory myself.



Veronica

I couldn't go to sleep after all of *that*, so I sat in my bunk and did a crossword puzzle to help my brain relax. I only got one answer completed though; I kept staring down at the bunk where Adam had just been. I replayed the sex in my mind over and over. It had happened so fast that it didn't seem real.

It really happened. We had sex. On a plane. While we're both working! The blowjob I gave Luke in the cockpit on the runway seemed tame by comparison.

When my hour was up, I discreetly removed the blanket that was covering the bunk and carried it with me into the rear cabin. "Your turn," I told Sharon, who was sitting in one of the jump seats reading her book.

Adam and I spent the rest of the flight sharing cutesy smiles. We had a secret, and that made everything so much hotter. I already couldn't wait until we had a chance to do it again. Maybe not on a plane, but somewhere more private.

The lights came on and we prepared the breakfast service, which involved a granola bar and a container of yogurt for the economy passengers. Then we were descending into Madrid, and disembarking the plane.

"So, what trouble do you want to get into?" I asked Adam after we passed through the employee section at customs. "I've been to Madrid plenty of times, so I know all the cool spots."

"I actually have plans," Adam said with a wince. "An old friend from college lives in Seville, and took the train up here

to spend the day with me.”

“Oh,” I said.

“And just so there’s no misunderstanding, that friend is a *guy*. His name is Eduardo. This isn’t an excuse to avoid you, I promise.”

“I’ll choose to believe you,” I teased. “But I’m extremely happy that Eduardo is not a female friend.”

Adam smirked. “Although Eduardo does have a sister. She might have come with him to Madrid...”

“No,” I said, jabbing a finger at him. “You can’t make me jealous, no matter how hard you try.”

“Challenge accepted.” Adam glanced around to make sure the other crew from our flight weren’t around, then kissed me. “See you on the return flight.”

I was disappointed that I didn’t get to spend the day with Adam, but a fun foreign city was a great way to spend my time instead. I did everything that was originally on my itinerary: I visited The Prado museum, which took up most of my day, then consumed several glasses of wine in the Chueca district while people-watching. That was followed by dinner, and then an early bedtime at our hotel.

The flight back was eleven hours, uninterrupted by sleep since we were chasing the sun rather than moving forward across time zones. Adam and I kept sharing private little smiles while we worked, our fingers lingering together every time I passed him a can of soda while we serviced the economy passengers.

When we landed in Houston and exited the plane, Adam said, “That was a boring flight.”

I glanced over at him. “It was?”

“Yeah,” he said without looking over at me. “I didn’t sleep with *anyone*. Boring.”

I giggled all the way to our cars. But rather than say goodbye, I invited Adam to follow me back to my place. We showered to get clean after the long day, then spent the rest of

the evening making love in a full-sized bed. And this time we could make all the noise we wanted.

*

The next week was a whirlwind of activity. Dating one man had a way of filling most of a woman's free time, but dating *two* of them? I barely had any time to myself. Which I obviously didn't mind since every second that wasn't spent on an airplane was spent in bed.

Despite the revelation with Adam, things were still great with Luke. Better than ever, even. One evening, he insisted we go out rather than stay in bed and order take-out. But rather than take me to dinner, he surprised me with a salsa club in downtown Houston. We spent three hours grinding and moving on the dance floor, barely taking enough breaks to order drinks. By the time we finally went next door to get food, we were both sweaty and exhausted.

But not too exhausted to go home and sweat some more in bed.

And things with Adam? It had always been a good idea not to sleep with my coworkers, especially cabin crew who I had to *directly* work with. I still knew that, logically. But now that Adam and I were sleeping together off the clock, it made our time working together so much sexier.

We had a secret, one which we were doing our best to keep from everyone else. Acting normal around him while serving drinks on our flight from Houston to Denver was excruciating, but in the best kind of way. Work was now completely innocent foreplay. It meant that when work was over, we were both absolutely *dying* to hook up.

"Stop staring at us like that," Adam said one flight while the three of us were seated, waiting to land.

"Like what?" Dex asked.

“You know. Like that.” Adam pointed. “You’re doing it right now.”

Dex sighed happily. “I’m just so giddy to see you two *together*. Especially since I’m the one who caused it.”

“We know,” I said. “Do you know *how* we know? It’s because you’ve reminded us every time we’re all together.”

“At least seven times now,” Adam muttered.

Dex leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “I’m like Cupid, except I fly.”

“Again, Cupid flew all the time,” I said. “He had wings.”

But Dex wasn’t listening. “Just like Cupid.”

We landed and found a table in the employee lounge to relax. Adam was hungry, so he went in search of a salad.

“Can we take a minute to discuss just how *right* I was?” he said when we were alone.

“Fine. You were right.”

Dex cupped his ear. “Can you repeat that for me?”

“You were right.”

“One more time? I love to hear it.”

I groaned. “You’re really milking this.”

“I’m just so happy,” he said. “Happy for *you*, Veronica. You were ready to be alone your entire life, but now you have two amazing men in your life. From famine to feast.”

“You make it sound like I was a street urchin begging for change, and you came to my rescue.”

“You were worse than a street urchin: you were a single woman in her thirties,” Dex said.

From anyone else, the comment would have infuriated me. But from Dex, my best friend, I knew where he was coming from.

“Okay, so now the important question,” Dex said. “Which of them are you going to marry and have lots of babies with?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s too early to think about that.”

“Which one do you see yourself having a future with?”

“I don’t know. Both of them have potential.”

“Surely you’re leaning one way,” Dex said.

“I’m not,” I replied. “And don’t call me Shirley.”

We both chuckled at the dumb *Airplane!* reference.

“So they’re both tied?” he asked.

I nodded. “Right now they’re both extremely good candidates for a long-term relationship. But seriously, I’m trying not to get ahead of myself. You’ve said it yourself: I think about things too much, and get in my head and find ways to say no. For once, I’m trying to relax and enjoy the moment.”

“That’s good,” Dex said, “because you still technically have to say yes to one more gentleman suitor.”

“Ugh, seriously?” I asked. “You’re still holding me to that after the first two turned out great?”

He nodded emphatically. “A deal is a deal. Who knows? Maybe the third guy will finally be Mr. Right.”

“Dexter, sweetie,” I said, “the last thing on my mind is adding a third man to the mix.”



Veronica

Adam lived on the outskirts of Houston, in a single-family home that was on a corner lot, double the size of any of the other lots around it. With its white-picket fence and antique shutters, it looked like the idyllic place for someone to raise a family of five.

“I inherited it from my grandma,” he explained when I asked him about it one morning after spending the night. Adam was stirring eggs in a skillet while answering over his shoulder. “She skipped my parents in the will and gave it directly to me.”

“She must have really loved you,” I said while holding a mug of coffee.

Adam shrugged. “I was the only one who ever visited her. I never thought I would receive anything when she died. My cousins were pissed about it. They made a scene at the funeral when they found out.”

“Funerals bring out the worst in people.” I glanced at my watch. “I hate to rush you, but I have to leave in ten minutes.”

“Perfect timing, because these are almost done...” He moved the eggs to a plate and began garnishing them with spices and a few slices of bacon. It turned out that Adam was a tremendous cook, and had made dinner for me half a dozen times already. Each meal was better than the last. He finished with the presentation on his current work of art, then dramatically placed the plate in front of me.

“Dig in.”

Scrambled eggs were a simple dish, but something in the way he cooked them brought out flavors I had never imagined before. It was so good that I wolfed it down without pausing to compliment him.

“I’m happy about your Excelsior side hustle,” he said while sitting down with his own plate of food. “But I have to say I’m jealous.”

“I know, it’s not fair that they only hire women,” I said.

Adam shook his head. “No, I mean I’m jealous of how much of your time it’s occupying. You’re taking two extra flights a week. That’s two days *we* could be spending together.”

“It also means more money in my pocket when we *do* spend time together,” I replied. “Like that trip to Marfa we’re making next month.”

“I am excited to visit the world’s most remote Prada store,” Adam said.

I gestured with my fork. “It’s not an actual store. It’s just an art project.”

Adam ate a bite of his own food, chewed, then swallowed. “It’s kind of a big step.”

“A Prada art project?” I asked. “I don’t know. It’s just viral marketing for a big brand.”

“I meant us. Going away for a long weekend. You’re not worried we’re moving too fast, are we?”

I leaned forward and cupped his chin. “We had sex on an airplane over the middle of the North Atlantic. I think we can handle a trip to the desert.”

“You make an extremely good point.”

“You’re not worried we’re moving too fast,” I asked, “are you?”

With a mouthful of eggs, he kissed me on the cheek. “Not even a little bit.”

I grinned at him as I finished my breakfast.

*

The private terminal at the Houston airport was beginning to feel more like my home than the commercial terminal. I waved and said hello to Rita, the woman who ran the check-in desk. I swung by the lounge and got another coffee, along with a strawberry tart from the dessert buffet. I chatted with two of the other pilots I knew, then headed out to the tarmac.

This was my sixth flight. Most were day trips, with anywhere between four passengers and fourteen. Luke was already in the cockpit, going through his pre-flight checklist. Bernie Langston had been nice enough to make sure Luke and I flew together whenever our schedules aligned.

“Morning, gorgeous,” he said as I poked my head in.

“Morning yourself, Captain Dricksen,” I replied, bending down to kiss him. “Who do we have for our flight to Cabo today?”

“It’s a solo passenger. Heading down there by himself.”

I gave a start. “Just one?”

“It happens sometimes,” he replied while making a check next to an item on his list. “Should make your job easier, I would assume.”

I returned to the terminal to fetch the client. Rita pointed him out to me: he was maybe in his fifties, with hair that was gray, but thick. His skin had the leathery look of someone who spent a lot of time out in the sun. He was wearing Air Force One sneakers that looked like they should be expensive, except they were dirty and scratched. When I introduced myself to him and shook his hand, I noticed a turtle tattoo on his forearm.

As I led him onto the plane, I wondered if it was a bad sign for Excelsior to make the flight with only one passenger. Surely the airline wasn’t making a profit. Unless he had bought up the entire flight just for himself.

He doesn't look like someone who would do that.

I put it out of my mind as we took off. As I served him, I pretended he was someone famous, like Elon Musk, or the new Chancellor of Germany. He was friendly, but quiet, and only ordered a Diet Coke. He turned down the snack basket too.

We landed in Cabo and I wished the passenger a pleasant stay. As I stepped off the plane, a strong wind carried the smell of ocean spray to us, even though we were miles inland from the water. I grinned to myself; I really did love this job.

A member of the ground crew opened the storage hatch on our plane and began unloading suitcases onto the tarmac. It was like a clown car; they just kept coming, until there was a pile of at least a dozen of them. The ground crew started to load them onto the luggage cart, but our lone passenger stopped him with a few words in Spanish. Then he loaded the suitcases onto the luggage cart himself, holding each piece with both hands and carefully placing them.

“That’s a lot of luggage!” I said. “Are you moving down here?”

The man looked flustered that I was commenting on his luggage. “Yes, well, I, uh...” He shrugged, then pushed the luggage cart toward the edge of the tarmac, where a pickup truck was waiting. A man there opened the bed of the truck, and then the two of them began loading the truck with the bags.

“Can you imagine living here?” I asked Luke at lunch. We were sitting at a table in downtown Cabo, close enough to the water to feel the salty spray on our faces. “Maybe when I retire someday.”

“The thing about a place like this,” Luke said while gesturing with his margarita, “is that it’s great in small doses. I’m afraid if I moved here, all the things I love about it would become commonplace.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.” I downed the rest of my margarita and ordered another. “I would love living near the

ocean. I mean *really* living near it—not like where we are in Houston. That doesn't count."

Luke leaned back in his chair and gazed out at the sea. He looked gorgeous in his short-sleeved pilot uniform, sun reflecting off his tan skin. "It's not my first choice, but there are certainly worse places to live."

"What's your first choice?"

"The Alps," he said without hesitation. "A small ski village in France, or Italy. Like Chamonix, or Courmayeur. But I wouldn't want to live there in the winter. I don't care about skiing. Those valleys are stunning in the summer, when the snow melts and wildflowers grow everywhere."

"Yeah, okay, that sounds amazing," I said. "I take it you've been?"

He shook his head. "My grandpa told me about it. He fought in Europe in the second world war, then took my grandma back there on their honeymoon. I have a photo of them in Chamonix, France, with Mont Blanc towering behind them. Sometimes, when I'm bored, I'll pull up Google Maps and look at the area. Drop a pin for Street View and look around."

"I could eat cheese and drink wine every day for the rest of my life," I said wistfully. "Okay, so you've never been there. What's stopped you?"

"Opportunity," he replied. "I wouldn't want to go for only a week. I would want to spend a whole month there. Long enough that the locals treat me like one of them, and not a tourist. But it's tough taking that much time off from the airline." He sipped his margarita. "When I'm retired."

"When we're retired," I said, toasting.

He arched an eyebrow. "Are you commandeering my retirement plan, now?"

"I'm merely adapting my own plan," I replied smoothly. "I'll live on the beach in the winter, then spend my summers in the Alps."

"Maybe I'll see you there," Luke said coyly.

I shrugged. “Maybe you will.”

We finished our lunch and took a taxi back to the airport. We didn’t take off for another hour, but our lone passenger was already waiting in the same pickup truck—except this time it was parked directly on the tarmac, twenty feet from the plane.

I tried chatting the passenger up on the flight home. I asked if he was moving down to Cabo, and he said no. I asked why he was visiting for such a short trip, and he said his plans changed. But I knew that wasn’t true, because he was registered for the return flight from the start. It’s not like he had flown down, then suddenly changed his mind and decided to fly back.

Whatever, I thought while filling out my crossword puzzle. If he wants to be secretive, it’s none of my business.

It was, quite literally, the easiest flight of my career. Aside from serving him two more Diet Cokes, I didn’t have to do anything. We landed in Houston at three-thirty and I gave him my spiel, thanking him for choosing Excelsior Air and saying that I hoped he chose us again in the future.

I gathered my own things and walked off the plane with Luke. That’s when I noticed the old fashioned seaplane with the red stripe on the side. Great; Taylor Hawkins was here. The last thing I wanted was to get a lecture from him.

Then I saw something even more surprising. The ground crew was unloading luggage from the storage compartment of our plane. But not just any luggage. It was the same luggage our passenger had brought with him to Cabo. The *exact* same: I recognized the red leather luggage tags on the handles.

“Veronica?” Luke said. “Earth to Veronica.”

I gave myself a shake. “Sorry. I was just...” I stared at the suitcases being unloaded. They looked heavy. Maybe heavier than before. “I hadn’t realized he loaded up all his luggage again.”

“They did it while we were eating lunch. They texted me to get the access code. What’s up?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” I continued following him toward the terminal, and caught a glimpse of Taylor Hawkins standing next to his plane. He was helping two passengers down out of the plane, but his head was twisted to stare at me. When we locked eyes, he gave his head a disappointed shake.

What’s going on? I wondered as we went inside. Was Taylor right all along?



Veronica

Luke took me to a movie that afternoon, and then out to dinner after. The movie was fun, and the dinner was enjoyable, but I spent the entire time thinking about the passenger on our plane and his excessive amount of luggage.

“What’s eating at you?” Luke said.

“Nothing.”

He put down his drink and leaned across the dinner table. “If this is about the other guys you’re dating, it’s okay. I don’t feel threatened.”

I gave a start. “Other guys?”

“Adam, the flight attendant. And whoever the third man is that you had to say *yes* to in order to fulfill your agreement with Dexter.”

I chuckled to myself. “I haven’t been asked out a third time. I’m still on the hook for that.”

“And Adam?”

I hesitated before answering. “We’re still casually dating. But I’m not thinking about him right now. You’re the only man I think about when we’re together.”

“As relieved as I am to hear that,” Luke said, “something is on your mind right now.”

I downed the rest of my drink—a margarita on the rocks that was nowhere near as good as the one we’d had at lunch—and ordered another. “It’s about the flight today.”

Luke's eyes widened. "Did something happen? Was our passenger inappropriate? I've heard horror stories about men on private flights who think they can do whatever they want to the crew. Veronica, I need you to know that if anything like that ever happens, me or one of the other pilots will set things straight."

"That's not what happened," I quickly said. "And I can take care of myself, although it's good to know you have my back if I ever need help."

"Are you worried about Excelsior?" he asked. "Single-passenger flights aren't uncommon. I wouldn't let it bother you unless it becomes a trend."

"I was worried about that at first, but no. It's about the passenger's luggage."

Luke blinked. "What about it?"

"Isn't it strange that he brought so many bags to Cabo?"

"People over-pack all the time. Especially the kind of rich guys who can afford to fly private."

"But he brought them down to Cabo, unloaded them, then loaded them for the return flight," I insisted.

Luke shrugged. "I've seen people transport furniture and other stuff on private flights. Sometimes it's cheaper than paying for international shipping. And if the goods are delicate, like porcelain or fine china, then a private flight is safer."

"The suitcases were full on the way back," I said, lowering my voice. "Maybe even more full than on the way down there."

"Why are we whispering?" Luke asked.

"Because..." Was he really going to make me say it? "What if it's drugs?"

"Drugs?"

"Drugs!" I hissed. "What if he's smuggling drugs into the country? And we aided him?"

“If he were smuggling drugs,” Luke said skeptically, “why were the suitcases full on the flight down?”

“Because they were filled with stacks of hundred dollar bills? I don’t know how drug smuggling works.”

“Hundred dollar bills...” Luke shook his head and chuckled. “Veronica, that’s crazy. You’ve been watching too many TV shows.”

“How am I the crazy one here?”

I paused as our waitress returned with my drink. Luke asked for the check, and she walked away.

“Just because someone flies on a private jet doesn’t mean they’re allowed to do whatever they want without consequences,” Luke explained. “Their passports are still scanned and their trips are logged. There are video cameras everywhere at the private terminal, both here in Houston and down in Cabo. Everything he’s doing is being recorded. If he’s smuggling drugs, he’s not very good at it.”

“Then what’s up with the suitcases?”

“Hell if I know. But I doubt it’s anything nefarious.” He patted my hand on the table. “I’ve been doing this a while, Veronica. You don’t need to worry. Nothing illegal is going on, I can promise you that.”

His comments reassured me that evening, but I started wondering about it again the next day. I kept picturing the luggage being unloaded, then loaded again—especially considering how carefully the passenger was handling the bags. And then there was Taylor’s cryptic warning about working for Bernie Langston...

“Every flight is tracked and recorded,” Dex said when I brought it up to him the next day, on a direct flight to Seattle. “If smuggling drugs via private planes was so easy, it would happen all the time. You would never see drugs moved across the land border.”

“I am inclined to agree with my fabulous flight friend,” Adam said. “This sounds like the plot of a bad thriller. Real life is never that exciting.”

“I would *kill* to have some drug-smuggler-related excitement in my life,” Dex groaned as he removed the coffee pot from the cubby in the forward cabin and added it to the top of the drink cart. “Or any excitement at all, really. If some passenger pinched my ass, I would thank them for breaking up the monotony.”

“Just enjoy the private gig for what it is,” Adam insisted, giving my back a quick little rub. “You’re lucky to have it, and you don’t want to ruin it by making wild accusations.”

I knew they were probably right. And for a few days, I was able to stop thinking about it.

Until my next Excelsior flight on Thursday.

When I walked into the private terminal, I immediately groaned. Taylor Hawkins was leaning on the check-in desk, chatting up Rita. Before I could dart into the lounge, Rita waved enthusiastically at me.

“Two passengers on your flight to Cancun today,” she told me. “They’re both in the lounge. You’re paired up with Captains Dricksen and Cox today. They’re already on the plane.”

“Thanks, Rita,” I said. “Taylor, can I talk to you?”

He shared a look with Rita. “Uh oh. Sounds like I’m in the dog house,” he said with his charming Texas twang. “You going to give me a public lashing, or should we go someplace private?”

I led him outside to the tarmac, where the sound of jet engines drowned out all other noise. Taylor ran a hand through his sun-bleached hair and said, “If this is about working for Excelsior, tell old Bernie he can stop barkin’ up my tree. I’m not interested. Got plenty of legitimate business. In fact, I’m fixing to take a nice couple on their honeymoon for the next three days. We’re puddle-jumping from Jamaica, to Turks and Caicos, then over to the Virgin Islands.”

“This isn’t about offering you a job,” I said, looking around to make sure nobody was nearby. “It’s about Excelsior. Why don’t you think their business is legitimate?”

He snorted. "Cause it's not."

"What do you know? What specifically? Don't be all vague about it. I want you to tell me what's going on."

Taylor leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. His handsome face was more smug than I had ever seen it. "Oh, so now you're keen on listening to what I have to say?"

I hesitated. How much could I say to him? "It's possible that I've come across some suspicious behavior that I cannot explain."

"Let me guess," he said. "You brought up your concerns to your pilot boyfriend and he says you're overreacting. Maybe you told your friends about it, too, and they don't think there's anything to worry about. So now you're here, wasting my time, hoping I'll confirm whatever it is you think is going on."

I let out an annoyed sigh. "Can you just tell me what's going on?"

"Honestly?" he said. "I don't know exactly what's going on. But I've heard whispers from other pilots, some who have worked for Bernie in the past. Everyone knows something shady is going on. If you ask me, it's only a matter of time before the cops come down on Excelsior's whole operation. You ought to get out while you can."

"It's a good side gig," I argued. "The pay is better than what I make at Gulf Airlines, and the work is easier."

Taylor spread his hands. "Then what are you talkin' to me for?"

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Tell you what." He reached into the pocket of his bomber jacket and came out with a faded business card. He wiped away some dirt with his thumb, then handed it to me. "If things ever get too spicy working for Excelsior, and you're stuck down in Cancun or Cabo or wherever else they do their business, you give me a call and I'll get you out of there."

I blinked at him. "You would do that for me?"

“If I don’t have anything better to do.” Suddenly he put on a bright smile and walked past me. “There’s the happy couple. Leo, Kristi, I’ve got your winged chariot all gassed up and ready to fly.”

I watched him lead the honeymooners toward his plane, a little bit dazed by the interaction. Then I went back into the terminal to retrieve our two passengers for the flight.

“Which ones are they?” I asked Rita at the desk.

“They’re the two men who... actually, here they come now.”

She pointed toward the lounge, where two men were exiting. One of them was wearing baggy cargo pants, and a fisherman’s vest over a T-shirt. He looked innocent enough, and wore a big smile while gazing around the terminal.

The other man was the one from my previous flight. The man I was suspicious of.



Veronica

The man with the thick gray hair and the turtle tattoo was wearing sunglasses today, even though we were indoors. His name didn't matter on the first flight since he was alone, but today I made sure to note it: Alan Broussard.

"Glad you're flying with us again, Mr. Broussard," I said, covering up my surprise. "Right this way. We have the same pilots as last time, so it should be a smooth flight."

He nodded, but said nothing as he and his companion followed me out onto the tarmac. The storage compartment was open on the side of the plane, where I could see that his luggage had already been loaded. It must have been as much luggage as last time, because the storage compartment barely had enough room to allow the hatch to close.

Be cool, I told myself while I served them drinks. Broussard ordered a Diet Coke, while his partner requested gin. *These are two completely normal passengers. Nothing suspicious at all.*

But after we took off, I couldn't help but let my curiosity run wild. They looked shifty. They sat next to each other on the empty plane, and spoke in hushed voices.

They're totally smuggling drugs!

When I served the other passenger his second glass of gin, I asked, "What do you two fine gentlemen do for a living?"

They looked at each other before answering.

"Commercial real estate," the companion in the cargo pants replied.

I turned to Broussard and waited for his answer.

“A little bit of everything,” he said curtly. He had a Louisiana accent. Bordering on Cajun.

Okay. Now to get him to open up some more.

“A renaissance man,” I said approvingly. “I like it. Life is too short to get pigeon-holed into one career. I work for airlines right now, but I’ve always dreamed about being a tour guide somewhere exotic. Like in the mountains, or in a beach town. I bet Cabo has great opportunities for that kind of thing. Have you ever done anything touristy in Cabo?”

“Not really.”

“What about Cancun? Is this your first flight to that side of Mexico?”

“It’s my first time,” his companion said.

“Got any plans?”

He started to respond, then clamped his mouth shut at a look from Broussard. “Nothing planned. Just business.”

Another glare from Broussard.

“I mean, not business,” the companion said. “We’re playing golf. I think of golf as *work* because sometimes we discuss business while we play, but that’s not really the main point of it.”

“It’s going to be a beautiful day in Cancun to chase the white ball around,” I said warmly. “Which course are you hitting? I have a friend who always books a tee time at the Playa Mujeres Golf Club.”

The man in the cargo pants hesitated. “We’re playing, uh.”

“We have some things to discuss,” Broussard told me. “If you’ll excuse us...”

“Sorry for talking your ears off,” I said with a smile, then returned to my spot by the cockpit.

So they were traveling for business, but Broussard didn’t want anyone to know that. Interesting. Normally, I would

assume the confusion had to do with their plan for expensing the trip, or writing it off as a business expense. But paired with the mystery of the suitcases, it only raised my hackles further.

“Where do you want to eat?” Luke asked me when we walked away from the plane. “I’m thinking one of the resorts by the beach. I bet I can squeeze in a Swedish massage before the return flight.”

“That’s the thing,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. The workers were standing by the storage compartment of the plane, but they were waiting for us to leave before unloading the luggage. “The return flight is in four hours. It’s not enough time.”

Luke frowned at me. “That’s *plenty* of time. I could spring for a ninety-minute massage if I wanted and still have time for lunch.”

“Not your massage. Golf. You can’t play a round of golf in four hours.”

“I’m very confused right now.”

“The passenger said they’re playing golf in Cancun. But there’s just not enough time. And when I pressed him about where they were going to play, he froze up.”

Luke stopped in his tracks and rounded on me. “Let me get this straight. You were interrogating our passengers?”

“I was making friendly conversation, which is quite literally part of my job.”

“Veronica...”

“I’m sorry,” I said, kissing him on the cheek. “I know I sound obsessed. Let’s get you that massage. If they have a couples option, maybe I’ll join you. Especially if they have champagne.”

We waited in line at the taxi stand while Luke did some quick Googling. The Moon Palace Resort was on the south side of Cancun, just 15 minutes from the airport. We got into a taxi and headed to the resort.

“The couples massage is only fifty bucks extra,” Luke was saying while scrolling on his phone. “And when the massage is over, we have full access to the spa grounds. Which includes lunch overlooking the beach.”

“You had me at spa grounds.” I turned and looked out my window at the other cars leaving the airport. “I hope they have...”

I trailed off. In the lane next to ours was a black SUV. The windows were tinted, but the front passenger window was rolled down. I couldn’t see the man’s face, but his arm was hanging out the window.

With a turtle tattoo clearly visible.

It’s them.

As I watched the SUV pull ahead of us and merge into a turn lane, I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward in the taxi and patting the driver on the arm. “Can you follow that black car?”

“He goes north,” the driver replied. “Your resort is to the south.”

“Veronica? What are you...”

I reached into my purse and pulled out the first cash I touched. It was a fifty dollar bill. “This is yours if you follow them.”

The driver immediately swerved into the left lane, accelerating rapidly to catch up. The light at the intersection turned yellow, and he sped up to get through the light and stay behind the black SUV.

“Veronica! What’s going on?”

“That’s them,” I said. “Our passengers. They’re in that car!”

“So what?”

“I want to see where they’re going. I bet they aren’t playing golf.”

The SUV ahead of us was going ten miles over the speed limit, but our taxi didn’t seem to care. He followed two cars

behind them, changing lanes every time they did, always keeping them within sight.

“Turn this car around,” Luke said in his most commanding voice.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” the driver replied. “If you can do better than a fifty.”

Luke pulled his wallet out and looked at the contents. But I wasn’t worried. I had another hundred bucks in my purse. In my experience, cash was king.

On the north side of Cancun were most of the really exclusive resorts, which was where it appeared the SUV was going. But when we reached the city proper, their vehicle turned left rather than continuing north. We followed them into the heart of the city, where tourists normally didn’t go.

“Veronica,” Luke hissed, grabbing my leg and squeezing. “We need to turn around. *Now.*”

“Just a few minutes longer. I have a feeling we’re almost there.”

The SUV drove along a major road through the middle of town, which was crowded with traffic. Abruptly, it made a ninety-degree turn and drove across traffic down a side street and into a neighborhood. Our driver slammed on the gas, shooting across traffic in a tiny gap that left half a dozen cars honking. But our target was still ahead of us.

“They’re turning,” the driver suddenly said. “Into the park.”

Sure enough, their SUV turned right into a private park. There was a guard house next to a gate, where men with machine guns stood watch. The gate rose, allowing the SUV inside.

Damnit, I thought as the gate closed. *We lost them.*

“I am sorry, but I cannot follow them,” the driver said. “You can get out here, or...”

“Take us back to the highway,” Luke commanded while staring daggers at me.

This time, I didn't protest.



Veronica

The traffic heading south out of Cancun was much worse than heading north, and we were stuck in the gridlock for over an hour. By the time we got to the Moon Palace Resort, we had missed our massage reservation, and there wasn't time to rebook. And to top it all off, the taxi fare was close to a hundred dollars.

"Google Maps says it's some sort of ecological park," I said when we sat down to lunch at the oceanside restaurant at the resort. "At least, I'm assuming that's what Parque Ecológico Kabah means. But that's very clearly a front for whatever they're—"

"*Veronica.*" Luke's tone cut me off like a knife. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

"Come on. Wasn't that fun? It was like a little adventure."

"Adventure?" Luke scoffed. "*Adventure?*"

I put my phone down. "I'm sorry you missed your massage. I was looking forward to it, too. How about we have a nice lunch, and then I'll find a way to make it up to you with your own *erotic* massage?"

The server came by, and I ordered a white wine. Luke ordered water.

"This isn't about the massage," he said when we were alone again. "We can't stalk our customers."

"Nobody saw us," I said, although I was feeling a bit guilty about the entire thing. "We're not going to get in trouble."

“That’s not the point! An action doesn’t become *wrong* when you get caught. It’s wrong regardless of the outcome.”

“Exactly!” I said. “And what that Alan Broussard guy is doing is definitely wrong. He just keeps getting away with it.”

Luke let out a frustrated noise. “Why are you obsessed with this?”

“Why are you not?” I shot back at him. “Don’t you wonder what’s in those suitcases?”

“It’s not my job to know,” he said simply. “It’s my job to fly the plane from one airport to another. It’s *your* job to make sure they’re happy on the flight. The one thing that’s definitely not either of our jobs is to butt into their business for no reason.”

“They’re doing something illegal,” I insisted. “I’m certain of it. There’s no other explanation for shuffling those suitcases back and forth.”

“There are plenty of explanations. Maybe he has an extensive baseball card collection and is meeting with someone to sell them.”

I snorted. “You’re letting your imagination get the best of you?”

“Me?” Luke almost knocked his plate off the table as he gesticulated. “*YOU* are the one with the imagination, believing this is some international drug ring!”

“Keep your voice down!”

“If they were doing anything with drugs, the authorities would notice. Trust me, I have friends who work for the DEA. You can’t get away with that in the US.”

“Oh, the authorities would notice it? Just like they noticed your fake name, Captain Dricksen?”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s not illegal. It’s just a pseudonym to shield me from Gulf Air. All the actual paperwork is in my real name and social security number. Veronica, listen to me. You’re going to get us in trouble,” Luke said emphatically.

“Stop butting into their business and go back to being a regular flight attendant.”

We ate the rest of our lunch in silence. Part of me knew he was right, that I was flirting with danger. He had every right to be afraid. Drug dealers weren't known for being level-headed, especially in a foreign country.

But the curiosity was eating away at me. What was going on in that park?

The flight home also passed in mostly silence. I served the two passengers their drinks, but otherwise said nothing to them. They seemed to prefer it that way. Yet as the plane soared over the gulf toward Houston, I couldn't get myself to focus on my crossword puzzle. There was a bigger puzzle going on, and I felt like I was one good clue away from solving it.

When we landed, I said goodbye to the two passengers and gave them the scripted spiel about hoping they fly with us again. Then, rather than exiting the plane with Luke and his co-pilot, I piddled around by the seats. Picking up crumbs, pretending to look busy while I watched the bags being unloaded on the tarmac outside. Broussard and his friend were very careful with the luggage, taking the time to move each bag together rather than individually. These were extra large suitcases, but they couldn't have been heavy enough to require two people to move them. Something was definitely going on.

“Veronica?” came a familiar voice. “May I have a word?”

I whirled to find Bernie Langston standing in the doorway of the plane. Today, his smile was polite rather than genuine. I felt like a little girl who had gotten caught eating cookies for breakfast.

“Of course, Mr. Langston.”

This time he didn't insist I call him Bernie; he simply gestured to two of the white leather seats that faced each other with a table in the middle. He sat down across from me and held his hands together in front of him.

“It has been several weeks since you joined us,” he said. “How are you liking Excelsior Air?”

“It’s wonderful,” I said truthfully.

“Do you have any specific needs on the job?” he inquired. “More flexible hours? An additional shift per week? Anything at all I can give you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I need anything.”

“That’s good.” He held up a finger. “I have something I need from you, however.”

Bernie wasn’t a naturally intimidating man; if anything, he reminded me of a retired hippie who spent most of his time hiking. But there was an intensity in his eyes now, and an edge to his soft-spoken words.

“Our airline isn’t like the commercial flights you’re used to. We don’t serve passengers by the hundred; we serve them individually, or in threes and fours. We give our passengers a level of exclusivity and service they can’t get anywhere else. That means knowing when to go the extra mile for someone who needs it... and it means knowing when to leave our customers alone.”

Shit, I thought. *Does he know we followed Broussard today in Cancun? He can’t know about that.* I felt a bead of sweat run down the back of my neck.

“I appreciate that you are a friendly person,” he went on. “It’s what we love to see in our employees. But there is a limit, and there is a *line*, and it’s important to know where that line is so one does not cross it. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“I think I do,” I replied. “Is there anything specific you want me to address?”

He held my gaze, and in that instant I was certain he knew that I had followed the two passengers into Cancun. He was going to fire me right here. Or maybe worse, if he was connected to drug dealers...

“One of our customers, Alan Broussard, is an introverted man,” Bernie finally said. His eyes still twinkled knowingly. “In the future, I think it would be best if you give him his drink and have no other contact with him. Of course, this applies only to Mr. Broussard; you are free to be your warm, welcoming self to all other Excelsior passengers.”

“I understand,” I said. “I’m sorry if I made him uncomfortable at all.”

The fire left Bernie’s eyes and he spread his hands. “I’m glad we had this little chat. So long as there are no more problems going forward, I think we can forget all about this.”

By the time we exited the plane, the luggage had been unloaded and was sitting in a cart over by the edge of the tarmac, where two Toyota 4Runners were parked. Broussard and his associate were chatting with the two drivers without touching the bags.

I followed Bernie to the terminal entrance, where Luke was waiting with a blank expression. As we went inside, I stole one last glance at Broussard and the bags.

And then one of the bags on the cart, the one on top of the pile, jerked.

There’s something inside the bag, I realized. Or someone.



Luke

I had been working for Excelsior on the side for half a year. It was an easy gig. My boss didn't micromanage me, and I had flexible hours. We exclusively flew to exotic locations like Cabo, Cancun, or Cozumel. Sometimes, when the mood struck us, we flew to cities that *didn't* start with the letter C. But they were still exotic, and allowed me to sip fruity drinks while listening to the calming sound of the ocean.

Eventually, when I retired from my full-time airline job, I pictured continuing to work for a company like Excelsior on the side. Flying once or twice a week to scratch that itch, and to travel to great spots for free. That was the life I wanted for myself. That was the dream.

But Veronica had gotten it into her head that something illegal was going on. And like a Golden Retriever chasing a tennis ball, she wouldn't give up.

I understood where she was coming from, but the truth was that life wasn't that interesting. Heck, it was downright boring—even for an airline pilot. Humans had a way of imagining things being more scandalous than they actually were, because it was better than accepting the truth.

This was something Veronica refused to admit.

"I know what I saw," she insisted on the drive home from the airport. "The luggage *moved*."

"I can't believe Bernie sat down and talked to you about it. The passengers must have complained to him. If he finds out we *followed* them through Cancun..."

“Are you listening to me?” she snapped. “The bag moved for no reason!”

“Or,” I countered, “the bags weren’t stacked perfectly and one of them shifted.”

“Are you doubting what I saw?”

“No, but I think you don’t *know* what you saw. Or I think there’s a simpler explanation.”

“There’s only one explanation, if you ask me.”

I sighed. “What are you suggesting? Because I don’t understand how your theory about drug smuggling explains a bag shifting a little bit.”

She waited until I glanced over at her in the passenger seat before saying, “Human trafficking.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Really?”

“They’re trafficking *people*. Maybe even children.”

“Wow. That’s certainly a theory.”

“You don’t think it’s possible?”

“Sure, anything is possible,” I replied. “It’s possible that a supervolcano erupts tomorrow and destroys all life on earth. It’s possible that I find a winning lottery ticket on the ground when I get home. It’s possible that every person in America writes in Shaquille O’Neal on their ballots and he wins the 2024 election. Just because something is *possible* doesn’t mean it’s likely.”

“You’ve made your point.”

“Have I?” I shot back at her. “Because I don’t understand why you’re so insistent about this.”

“And *I* don’t understand why you don’t believe me. You’re acting like I’m crazy.”

“Because you’re acting crazy!” I gripped the steering wheel tighter. “You’re taking very small pieces of data and extrapolating it into a wild conspiracy, first involving drugs, now involving human trafficking. Bernie had to sit you down

and tell you not to harass the passengers. You're lucky he gave you a warning instead of firing you."

She stuck out her chin stubbornly. "My job isn't the most important thing here."

How can you be so selfish?

"What about my job?" I said, growing more frustrated with her. "I've been doing this for six months. I rely on this income. If you keep making waves, I might get fired alongside you."

Veronica looked at me. I could see tears welling up in her eyes. "How can you focus on your job when people might be getting trafficked?"

I groaned. "This is ridiculous."

"I can't just sit back while something like this happens right in front of me. I have to do something."

"Then make an anonymous tip to the DEA, or Homeland Security," I suggested. "But let the experts handle it."

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the window for the remainder of the drive home. I parked in front of her house, but didn't turn off the car.

"I think it's best if I just went home," I told her.

"Good. Because I wasn't going to invite you in. I don't sleep with men who call me crazy."

"And I don't date women who actively try to get me fired!"

She got out and slammed the car door. I watched her walk up her driveway and go inside, then waited until the lights came on inside the house before driving away.

But I couldn't help wondering: *did we just break up?*



Veronica

I think we just broke up.

I considered myself a strong, independent woman. That was part of why I was a picky dater: I knew my self-worth. Part of that meant I would only date men who respected me. Not just as a woman, but as a *person*.

And after today, it was clear Luke didn't respect me. I needed a man who *supported* me. Or at least, a man who trusted me enough to want to learn more. But Luke seemed content to ignore everything I was saying and pretend like everything was okay.

"We're done," I said out loud to my microwave, which was reheating a leftover burrito. "It's over."

But as I finished the burrito and crawled into bed, I started to second-guess myself. I knew what I had seen, but if the roles were reversed, I might be skeptical too. Especially if it meant jeopardizing my job. Working for Excelsior was as cushy of a gig as someone could get in this industry. Regardless of what I said to Luke, I myself was worried about losing the job in spite of my suspicions about what Broussard was doing.

Was Luke the unreasonable one here, or was it me?

After tossing and turning for half an hour, I pulled out my phone.

Me: Hey, want to come over?

Adam: Sorry! When you said you were busy today, I made my own plans.

Me: Don't have too much fun without me!

Adam: We're having the exact correct amount of fun.

Me: We?

He responded by sending me a selfie. He was at a bar with his arm around a blonde woman. I felt my skin go cold.

Adam: Sorry! I couldn't help but tease you a little since you were out with Captain Hendricks today. This is my big sister, Anne. She's in town until tomorrow.

Me: Ohhh, you had me going! That was not very funny!

Adam: Want to join us for a drink? I've been telling her about you, and she wants to pass judgment. Also, we're both a little wasted.

Me: Tempting, but I think I'm staying in for the night. You two have fun, though!

We had a three-leg flight the next day with Gulf Airlines. We were on the same rotation with Luke and his co-pilot

again, which made for an awkward boarding situation. While walking through the forward cabin toward the cockpit, Luke said hi to each of us. But when he said hi to me, I pretended like I hadn't heard.

"Uh oh," Dex whispered to me. "Trouble in paradise?"

"You might say that. We had a fight."

"Oh!" Adam said, grinning widely. "Sorry if I seem happy about this change of events, but I can't help but see how it benefits me. Call me a turtle, because slow and steady wins the race."

I laughed. "I'm not sure if we're through, but it's not great right now."

"What was your fight about?" Dex asked. "Let me guess. He wanted to do something really weird in the bedroom."

Adam started whistling to himself, pretending not to listen.

"Nothing like that. Here, come this way."

I walked down the aisle a bit to put some space between us and the cockpit so Luke wouldn't overhear. Then I explained the situation to Dex and Adam. When I was done, the two of them exchanged a look.

"Honey, you know I usually take your side," Dex said.

"Aw, man. Really?"

"I think you're being a little *extra*," Dex went on. "Maybe something weird is going on with that Broussard guy, but that doesn't mean it's human trafficking. It doesn't even mean whatever they're doing is illegal."

"What do you think?" I asked Adam.

"I think it's in my best interest to tell you what you want to hear." Adam grimaced. "But I respect you too much to do that. I think I agree with Dexter. There are lots of regulations regarding private flights. It's not easy to do something illegal under the radar without people finding out."

"Then what do you think is going on?" I asked.

Adam shrugged. “I don’t know. But I doubt it’s as nefarious as you think.”

“You both sound like Luke,” I muttered.

“I call them like I see them,” Adam said with an apologetic smile.

“What about submitting an anonymous tip to, like, the FBI or something?” Dex asked.

“Luke suggested that too.”

“Because it’s a good idea.” Adam braced me by the arms. “Let’s say you’re right. This guy is trafficking humans or drugs or weapons on these private flights. And let’s say you snoop around a bit. What if you get caught? What if they discover that you’re on to them? There’s no way they would allow a potential witness to live. They’ll *kill you*.”

“And we don’t want that, sweetie,” Dex agreed.

“You have good instincts,” Adam told me. “But if what you suspect is true, you’re out of your league. You’re not equipped to deal with that sort of crime. Submit an anonymous tip to whichever agency is in charge of that, and let them handle it.”

The passengers started filing onto the plane, so we had to return to the forward cabin and prepare for the flight. As I thought about what Adam and Dex had said, I knew they were right. Everything they said made sense.

But it still felt like nobody wanted to believe me.



Veronica

After doing some research, I determined that the FBI was in charge of investigating human trafficking in the United States. There were still pay phones in the Houston airport, so I called the anonymous tip line from there and reported what I had seen from the Excelsior Air passengers. Then, for good measure, I did the same for the Texas Attorney General's office, which had a similar tip line.

Even though it felt pointless before, I was relieved once I had made the calls. Doing *something* was better than nothing, even if that something was inadequate. I slept great that night with the knowledge that someone in a position of power might handle it.

The next few weeks flew by now that I had a clear conscience. I flew my regular routes with Gulf Airlines, and continued accepting Excelsior flights once a week. I wasn't given any flights with Broussard, or with anyone else who seemed suspicious. It was mostly rich businessmen flying down for golf, and the occasional groups who were heading down to the Caribbean for longer vacations.

Bernie Langston will eventually get busted, I told myself. One day I'll show up to the private terminal and the police will be arresting him, and then I'll be the hero.

Adam and I went on our trip to Marfa. It was a weird little town in the middle of West Texas with a population just shy of 2,000, situated at the crossroads of two state highways that stretched across the endless flat desert. It was a nine-hour

drive from Houston, which was a harsh reminder that Texas was way too freaking big.

But the long drive emphasized that the two of us were really *getting away* together. We walked through all the small shops and got burritos at a local joint. We visited the Prada Marfa, a standalone Prada building that was an art exhibit rather than an actual store. We even visited something called the Marfa Holocaust and Historical Model Ship Museum, which was a combination I never thought I would read on a sign. The owner was obviously eccentric, and followed us around the little museum explaining all of his theories for the original tribes of Israel, but the hundreds of hand-made model ships were fascinating to admire.

And at night, Adam and I went back to our Airbnb and devoured each other without any rush or reason. He made love to me under the covers, wrapping me in a warm cocoon of safety and sex. He bent me over the makeup table in the hallway and pounded me until the walls rattled and the ground shook. Once, while we were showering after an especially intense bedroom session, he dropped to his knees behind me and ate me out, tongue licking up my pussy and ass until my cries echoed off the shower tiles.

Then we went out into the backyard of the Airbnb, with nothing but desert all around us. Adam got a fire going in the fire pit, and we roasted marshmallows and shared a blanket while staring up at the impossibly-bright stars.

We stayed there three nights, but it passed in the blink of an eye. And on the drive home, we held hands.

“I really like you, Veronica,” he said when we were still a few hours from Houston.

I grinned over at him. “I like you a lot, too.”

“I know you still have to say yes to one more person. Dexter has made it very clear he’s going to hold you to that. And I know you and Luke are still... *something*. But when all of that is over, I want to sit down and talk about us. And maybe if we want this to be serious.”

“I’d like that,” I said. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t *have* to say yes to one more person who asks me out. I can forget about the challenge.”

“Sure,” Adam said, “but then Dexter will spend the rest of your life holding it over you. Even if, in a hypothetical future, we got married and had kids and eventually grandkids, he would be there at their birthday parties complaining that you didn’t uphold your end of the bargain.”

I giggled to myself. “You’re right. He would be insufferable.”

Adam mentioning a hypothetical future with me, with imaginary kids and grandkids, didn’t freak me out the way I expected it to. Commitment had always been a terrifying concept, but the more I thought about it the more I realized I was afraid of commitment with the *wrong person*. Now that I had been in a pair of successful—and healthy—relationships thanks to Dex’s challenge, the idea of settling down was exciting.

Although Luke and I hadn’t hooked up in the weeks since our fight, I still thought about him a lot. I had called the Excelsior Air scheduler and requested to be put on different flights than Luke, but I still saw him occasionally with Gulf Airlines. Each time he passed me in the forward cabin, or when he came out of the cockpit to get a meal or drink in the middle of a flight, I resented him a little bit less than before. Soon I was smiling at him, and he was smiling back without any of the awkwardness.

And then, one Friday night, he texted me.

Luke: I’m in Miami right now, getting Cuban shrimp at Benecio’s. It made me think of you.

Me: Send me a photo! I was thinking about that place the other day.

Luke: Listen. About the big fight we had. Maybe I overreacted because I was afraid Bernie was going to fire both of us.

Luke: What I'm trying to say is: I'm sorry.

My heart twisted as I read the text. It was what I had hoped to hear from him in the three weeks since the fight. I read it a second time, then a third, and it felt like applying cool aloe vera to a sunburn. I didn't *want* to be mad at Luke. Even though things were going great with Adam, it felt like Luke and I had unresolved business.

But there was still something nagging in the back of my head.

Me: Do you believe me about what I saw? At Excelsior?

Luke: I believe you think you saw something.

Me: That's not a real answer.

Luke: I've taken what you said to heart, Veronica. I've kept my eyes peeled on all my Excelsior flights, and for all loading and unloading. Yeah, some of the passengers seem suspicious, but I don't think anything illegal is going on.

Me: Then I don't have anything more to say to you at this time.

Luke: Damnit, Veronica. I've tried to gather evidence, but there isn't any. In fact, the only thing I've found is evidence that **DISPROVES** your theory.

Me: Evidence? What evidence?

Luke: Alan Broussard and his associate were moving a suitcase off the plane. Carrying it between the two of them, like they usually do. Broussard dropped his side, and the plastic edge broke off. A chunk of something white rolled out.

Me: White? Like cocaine?

Luke: Smoke was coming off of the chunk. It was dry ice, Veronica. It evaporated in about thirty seconds. So unless they've found a way to cryogenically freeze people like in a sci-fi movie, I'm absolutely positive they're not trafficking humans.

Luke: Does that satisfy your curiosity?

Me: What would they need dry ice for? Why use regular suitcases rather than special equipment? This doesn't answer any of my questions. It just raises a whole bunch of new ones.

He started typing a response several times, as indicated by the three little dots, but he never sent anything. That was probably for the best.

Dry ice? I wondered. *What is that about?*

My imagination ran wild that night. I thought about organ harvesting, and pictured a huge black market for human organs. Sometimes they might transport the body parts on ice, and sometimes they might need to send a living person to keep the organs fresh. To my conspiratorial mind, that made sense in a really sick, twisted way.

Regardless, something is going on.

As time went on, I began losing hope that anything would come from my anonymous tip. There weren't extra security agents at the airport. The FBI didn't randomly show up and search the cargo of any Excelsior planes. Every time I flew one of their flights, I felt my frustration growing.

"I get it," Adam said while we were at a bar one night. "You're certain something illegal is happening, and you've gone through all the proper channels, but nothing is happening. It makes you feel powerless, and that sucks."

"You sound like a therapist," I muttered while staring into my glass of wine.

"Not a therapist. Just someone with good advice." He patted my hand. "You've done your best. But at this point, there's nothing more to do." He slid off the barstool. "If the bartender comes back, order me another wine."

As he walked to the bathroom, I thought about what he had said. About feeling powerless to stop something so blatantly obvious. Part of me knew he was right, that there wasn't anything more I could do.

"But that's not the case." I pulled out a faded business card from my pocket. "There's one more thing I can do."



Veronica

Taylor Hawkins sat across from me in a diner booth, hunched over his plate, shoveling eggs into his mouth. He had already finished off the bacon, sausage, and pancakes, so the eggs were all that remained of his breakfast.

“Well?” I said, holding my coffee mug with both hands. I hadn’t ordered food. “What do you think?”

He finished the last bite of eggs and leaned back in the booth with a sigh. “Yeah. Human trafficking is about what I feared. I once saw one of their suitcases thrash around on the tarmac. The guy loading the bags started cursing up a storm before him and his buddy carried the bag over to their truck.”

I gawked at him. “You saw that and didn’t do anything about it?”

“I made an anonymous tip to the authorities,” he answered simply. “That was about a year ago, and as you can see, Excelsior is still running.”

“I did the same. That was a month ago.”

Taylor gestured with his hand. “Well, now, there you go.”

I leaned across the table. “We need to do something about this.”

“Something the feds won’t do?” Taylor ran his fingers through his messy dirty-blond hair. “Veronica, in case you didn’t notice, we don’t have an army. Or data collectors. Or whatever else people use to gather evidence of crimes.”

“We can collect evidence,” I insisted. “We just have to try harder.”

He stared at me from across the booth. “I’m listening.”

“What if we go down to Mexico ahead of them. On our own, using your plane. We can videotape them on the tarmac. Then follow them, see where they go.”

“Now, hold on a minute. You just told me you *did* follow them in Cancun, and they led you to a park guarded by men with machine guns.”

“It’s a big park,” I said. “I looked it up on Google Maps. The entrance is guarded, but if we sneak in from another side...”

Taylor was already shaking his head. “Trespassing in Mexico is a bad idea. Throw in the men with guns? Well, now it’s the king of all bad ideas. Besides, we don’t know when they’re flying. You don’t get the passenger information until you show up at the terminal before the flight.”

“I can ask Rita at the front desk. She’ll tell me. It won’t even seem suspicious if I come up with the right excuse.”

“Okay,” Taylor said slowly. “So we can find out when Broussard is flying. We still need some sort of plan beyond that. Unless you want to accidentally trip over one of the bags and knock it open.”

“Can we not do that?”

He gave me a skeptical look.

My mind raced. I thought Taylor would be eager to help me, but he was poking holes in everything I said. And the worst part was: he was right. We needed a real plan.

“How about this,” I said. “On all our flights to Mexico, I usually leave the airport and get lunch in the city. When I return, the plane is already loaded up and ready to go. That means there’s a window of time after they load the plane, but before we take off, when we might be able to access the bags and see what’s inside.”

Taylor scratched his chin. His eyes were alive with thought. “Do they stick around? Watching the plane?”

“One of the loaders usually hangs out nearby. But we could distract him somehow. He’s usually glued to his phone the entire time.”

“Okay, let me walk through it.” Taylor pushed his plate aside and leaned across the table toward me. “We find out when they’re flying. We head down there in my plane and hang out on the tarmac. We wait for the plane’s luggage to be unloaded, then loaded up again shortly thereafter. One of us distracts the loader while the other checks the plane. We snap some photos, or gather any other evidence. Then we hop on my plane, fly home, and turn it over to the authorities.”

“It’s not a bad plan,” I said. “What do you think?”

“I think I need to sleep on it.” He tossed a twenty dollar bill on the table and stood up.

“What?”

“I do my best thinking after a good night’s sleep.” Taylor checked his watch. “And I’m flyin’ to Puerto Rico this afternoon, and have some errands to take care of first.”

“Wait!” I said.

He turned around.

“Why did you offer to help me?” I held up his card. “Why did you give me this if you need to *think* about it?”

“You looked like someone who might need some help. Or, more accurately, you looked like the kind of woman who would get herself into trouble and need rescuing.”

“No other reason?” I pressed.

He grinned down at me. “I have a feelin’ you have a reason in mind.”

The attraction in his eyes was unmistakable. Every woman knew that look, and Taylor had given it to me pretty much every time our paths had crossed. And the attraction was mutual; I was intrigued by this dashing solo pilot who seemed to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted to. It certainly helped that he had dropped everything and agreed to meet me this morning, no questions asked.

“Ask me out,” I said.

His smile deepened. “You want me to ask you out?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t *you* ask *me* out, then?”

“Because if you ask me out, I have to say yes.”

“You *have* to?”

“It’s a long story. But yeah. If you ask me out, right now, I have to say yes.”

I stared up at him expectantly. His cool blue eyes regarded me with curiosity, and something that might have been lust. He picked up his mug of coffee from the table and downed the dregs before answering.

“I don’t want to ask someone out who *has* to say yes. There’s no sport in that.”

“I want to say yes.”

“I’ll call you after I think about your offer. The one regarding Excelsior, not whatever forced date thing you have going on here.”

He walked out of the diner, leaving me even more confused about my feelings than before.



Taylor

This was a bad fucking idea.

I had a pretty good thing going right now. My plane had a full tank of gas most of the time, and I was starting to tuck away money for a rainy day. Five years ago, that alone felt like the dream. Making a living doing what I loved, and not worrying all the time.

But I was a small fish in a small pond. Making matters worse was that I was surrounded by big fish. I had to keep my head down and try not to attract too much attention. Most of the other private airline companies ignored me, but if they so much as glanced in my direction, they could steal away my customers.

And out of all the big fish swimming around me, Bernard Langston was the biggest. He had a lot of money, but even worse, he had a lot of friends. Friends who owed him favors. If he ever decided to call in some of those favors, I didn't want to be on the receiving end.

I have enough trouble on my own.

After breakfast with Veronica The Troublemaker, I drove down to Rice University to pick up a package. This time it was stored in a plastic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunch box, the kind of thing I used to have as a kid. That made me chuckle, although the guy I picked it up from immediately turned and speed-walked away once it was turned over.

Then I hopped in my plane and flew down to Puerto Rico. I was used to this kind of trip by now, but it still unnerved me.

Not just because of what I was transporting, but because it was so damn *quiet*. On most trips, my passengers wore headsets so I could chat them up. Give them the full experience. But on *these* trips, I was alone with my thoughts.

I landed in San Juan and took a taxi to the same bar with the amazing street tacos. Neither the tacos nor the beer did anything to sate my appetite, though. The second beer didn't help either, but things started feeling all right by the third.

Yeah, messing with Bernard Langston's business was a terrible idea. That alone was reason enough to walk away from all this nonsense.

Then there was Veronica herself.

I'd made a lot of bad decisions because of women. That wasn't an indictment of women: it was an indictment of *my* judgment. When a pretty woman was involved, my brain turned to mush and I found a way to do the dumbest thing possible. I was mature enough to know that about myself.

I hadn't been able to get Veronica out of my head these past few months. Every time I flew in and out of Houston, I hoped to get just a glimpse of the gorgeous woman. And when I did see her, even for small snippets of time while she walked from the terminal to a private plane, I perked up for the rest of the day.

I had it *bad* for this woman. Which was an even bigger reason not to get involved than Bernard Langston himself. Doing something headstrong was a bad idea by itself, but doing it for a woman made it ten times worse.

The familiar sound of a motorbike rumbled up to the bar and stopped. The man I had been dealing with for the past year walked inside, went straight to the bar, and ordered three shots of tequila. He downed one of them without hesitation, then brought the remaining two over to my table. He didn't sit.

I didn't need any encouragement to take the shot this time. In fact, I slammed the glass down, grabbed the second one, and finished it, too. I waited to see if my contact would get angry at this, but he seemed to find it funny.

“What’s with the delivery?” he asked, pointing at the lunch box.

“It’s how it was given to me.”

He grunted, then picked it up.

“That’s the last one,” I said, letting the tequila give me courage. “I’m done after this. I’m walkin’ away.”

He snorted. “We both know that’s not true. You won’t walk away from this.”

When he was gone, I ordered two more beers. I wouldn’t be able to fly, but I didn’t much care right then. I would call the airport and have someone move my plane, then I’d find a hotel. I’d made worse decisions before.

And I’m not done making them tonight.

I called Veronica and said, “I’m in. I’ll help you.”



Veronica

Taylor and I met again at the diner to go over some of the finer details of the plan. Although it was dangerous, it was relatively straightforward. The biggest hangup was waiting until Broussard flew again.

“Hi, Rita!” I said when I was at the private terminal one day. “I’ve got a favor to ask. And it’s okay if you don’t feel comfortable with it.”

She frowned from behind her check-in desk. “Why, sure, Veronica. Anything.”

I leaned on the desk and lowered my voice. “I heard a rumor a celebrity is going to be flying on Excelsior in the next few weeks.”

Rita’s eyes widened. “Who?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Veronica! Come on!”

I made a show of looking conflicted. “Well. I guess it won’t hurt anything. It’s Ryan Gosling.”

Rita squealed so loudly I began regretting the plan.

“Be cool, Rita!” I said. “It’s just a rumor. But I wanted to see if you knew when he would be flying. I know the passenger information isn’t given to the flight attendants until the day of the flight, but...”

She was already pulling up the calendar and scrolling through it. “Let’s see. Monday, no. Tuesday, no...”

I came around the side of the desk, and she didn't stop me. I scanned the list of names as she scrolled, looking for Alan Broussard instead of Ryan Gosling.

"I don't see him listed," Rita said with a note of disappointment.

"Thanks for checking!" I said. "Maybe next week."

I checked again a week later. Ryan Gosling didn't have any flights scheduled—and neither did Broussard. That was strange; it had been three weeks since he had made *any* flights. Had my anonymous tip scared him off? Was he lying low until there wasn't much attention on him anymore?

I don't want him to just stop. I want him to get caught and pay for any crimes he's committed.

When I walked into the terminal the third week, Rita was shaking her head before I even got a chance to ask. "I already looked. No *special customers*," she told me.

"Can I take a look? I read an article talking about all the fake names he uses when he flies. He has four!"

She let me back behind the desk again and surrendered the mouse. I scrolled through, and immediately saw Alan Broussard's name on the register for Wednesday, flying down to Cabo. *Bingo. We're in business.* But I had to keep scrolling to act like I was looking for Ryan Gosling...

...which was fortunate for me, because Broussard had another flight to Cabo on Thursday. And a third flight on Friday.

Three flights in a row? Something big must be happening.

"You look excited!" Rita said. "Do you recognize any of those names?"

"I thought I did for a second, but it's not him," I said.

Rita sighed and opened the top drawer of her desk. "I'm never going to get him to sign my limited edition Airline Barbie now." She held it up; it was still in the box.

“Sorry for getting your hopes up,” I said genuinely. “Maybe next week.”

Next week we'll have bigger news than Ryan Gosling, I thought.

“Three flights in a row?” Taylor said on the phone. “You think something big is happening?”

“Either that, or they’ve scheduled more flights for subterfuge. Do something innocent on two of them, and make the *real* transport on the third. That way, if they get raided or something, there’s only a one-in-three chance they get caught.”

“Roger that. I’ll book us a departure for Wednesday morning. We’ll land before them, and hang out on the tarmac to watch when they roll in and do their thing. Instead of flying back that day, are you cool if we stay in Cabo until Friday? Cheaper to get a hotel than fly back and forth.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I replied. “I’ll find a way to get off work.”

I called my manager at Gulf Airlines and told her I had tested positive for COVID. I never took sick days—and pretty much never got sick—so she didn’t doubt me or give me any grief about it. But Adam called me that afternoon.

Adam: I heard the news. We hooked up two days ago. You would think I’d be the first person you told that you tested positive! Your germs were ALL UP IN my germs!

Me: Sorry! It’s been a busy day. I don’t actually have COVID. I’m using some sick days to take care of a few things.

Adam: You have no idea how worried I was. I was about to drive to CVS to buy a bunch of take-home tests.

Adam: Is everything okay?

Me: Yeah! Nothing to worry about, I promise.

Adam: Is there anything I can do to help?

Me: Nope. I appreciate you asking, though :-)

Adam: Because you know I'm here for you if you ever need me.

Me: I know, and that means a lot to me.
<3

Then, that evening, I got a text from my *other* gentleman friend.

Luke: Hi. Are you available to meet tomorrow? I need to talk to you about something.

Me: That's not vague at all.

Luke: It's important, and I'd rather not discuss it over text. I know that sounds

cryptic, but I promise I'm not being paranoid.

Me: I'm busy tomorrow.

Luke: What about in the morning, before work?

Me: I actually have COVID. So I'm probably out of commission until the weekend.

Luke: My reason for wanting to meet with you has nothing to do with our relationship. But regardless, if you don't want to see me, you can just say so. Tell me we're done, that you never want to see me again, and you won't hear from me again.

I stared at the screen for a long time. Here was the fork in the road. I could end things with Luke and exclusively date Adam, or talk things out a little more.

Me: I'm not trying to avoid you this time. I swear. I do think it would be good to sit down and talk with you about everything. I don't know how I feel about us, but I don't want to end things yet.

Luke: I'm really glad to hear that. Text me this weekend if you're feeling better.

And if you feel like having an extremely handsome pilot deliver soup directly to your door, you know who to call.

Me: Actually, that sounds really good. Can you give me Captain Cox's number?

Luke: Ouch. I wouldn't call Hank handsome, extremely or otherwise.

Me: Maybe I'm into balding men with beer bellies.

Luke: I happen to know exactly what kind of man you're into.

Me: Maybe my tastes have changed. A pudgy dad-bod sounds real appealing right now.

Luke: I think you need to get to the emergency room. COVID has clearly fried your brain.

It felt good to laugh with Luke again. His deadpan humor was something I had missed over the past month, despite being frustrated with him. I was immediately relieved that I had agreed to see him again.

I wonder what he wants to talk to me about. It was probably just an excuse to see me. I didn't even mind, though.

Enough thinking about Luke. I turned my light off. *Tomorrow, we figure out what's really going on with Excelsior.*



Veronica

I met Taylor at the Houston private terminal wearing a sweatshirt with the hoodie pulled up to cover my face. Even still, I was terrified of someone recognizing me and asking questions that I didn't have answers to. Specifically, Rita at the check-in desk.

To avoid her, I waited outside the front entrance for what felt like an hour. Finally, when several passengers went up to the desk and crowded around to ask questions, I slipped inside and hurriedly walked through the private terminal without being noticed.

Taylor was waiting outside by the tarmac. When he saw me, he chuckled. "You look like the Unabomber. Glasses included."

"Well yeah, I'm trying to go unnoticed!"

Taylor gave me a confused grin. "Why?"

"Because..." I searched around for a reason. "If someone recognizes me, what will they think? I'm not scheduled on any flights today."

"They'll think," Taylor said with a smirk, "that you and I are involved in an exciting affair, one that has escalated to international travel. Come on, my plane's this way."

Despite what he said, I didn't lower my hoodie until I was inside his plane. It was the exact opposite of flying in a fancy private jet; there were three rows of cramped seats, with cushions that were worn and patchy. Taylor handed me a

headset, which had two functions: protecting my ears from the loud engine noise, and allowing us to speak via microphones.

And it was a good thing we had the protection, because the propeller engine was *loud*. After sputtering to life, it was a constant roar that made it difficult to think. Taylor chatted with the air traffic controllers, taxied us out to the runway, and then took off. Compared to the private jets I was used to, it felt like we were barely moving at all. Like a horse-drawn wagon compared to a new Corvette.

“You’ve been spoiled, is all,” Taylor said when I brought it up. His voice sounded hollow in my headset. “This here is the best way to fly. Jet engines are overrated.”

Despite the lack of bells and whistles, I enjoyed the flight on Taylor’s plane. In a private jet, everything was so smooth and effortless that it was easy to forget you were flying. But on a small seaplane I felt every bump, and squealed at every updraft that made us lurch suddenly in the air. The cockpit carriage was also entirely made of glass, which meant I had a much better view of the sky all around us, instead of a few small portholes to look through.

Taylor spent the flight chatting me up about his career. Mostly he talked about planes. He described the cropduster he flew in Iowa, and then the replacement he leased after the first one blew an engine. He explained how he saved up to buy a share in his first seaplane up in Alaska; pilots often split the cost of purchasing a plane into thirds or fourths to make it more affordable, which he did in that situation. Then, finally, he was able to buy this seaplane outright.

“Don’t have to share her with anyone else,” he said proudly. “She’s all mine.”

Taylor was a natural storyteller, and I immediately saw why his customers loved him. Getting flown around by him may not have been luxurious, but it certainly felt more like an adventure.

We landed in Cabo ahead of the Excelsior plane, just as we had planned. Taylor parked the plane at the edge of the private terminal, with our cockpit facing the rest of the area so we

would have an unimpeded view of everything that happened. Ten minutes later, the Excelsior flight touched down and taxied over to the private terminal, stopping directly in front of us.

“Couldn’t have planned that any better,” Taylor muttered.

The pilot, co-pilot, and flight attendant all left the plane. As soon as they were gone, Broussard and one of his colleagues began unloading the suitcases from the side hatch.

“And now we wait,” I said as they rolled the baggage cart down the tarmac toward a waiting pickup truck.

Taylor snorted. “I don’t like waiting. Let’s see where they go.”

“I did that already,” I explained. “They led us to a park that was guarded by men with machine guns.”

Taylor unclipped himself from his harness. “That was in Cancun. Maybe it’s different here.”

“But...”

“We came here to investigate, right? So let’s investigate.”

I followed him out of the plane and through the terminal. The air was far too warm for the hoodie I was wearing, and I regretted not leaving it on the plane. When we reached the crowded loading and unloading zone and saw the taxi line, my heart sank.

“It’s too long of a wait,” I said. “There must be forty people waiting.”

Taylor was looking off to the side, though. He approached a man sitting on a motorbike, the kind with a delivery box on the back. “¡Hola! ¿Señor? ¿Tienes un momento?”

I watched as the two men haggled in Spanish for a few moments. Taylor counted out a few American bills and handed them over. The rider stepped off the bike and walked away, leaving it for us.

“Get on,” Taylor said, straddling the bike and putting his sunglasses back on.

“But we don’t have any helmets...”

“Are we doing this, or not?” Taylor snapped. “I don’t do anything half-assed, and we’re losing time. I told him we’d have the bike back in ten minutes.”

Not wanting to seem like a chicken, and curious about what Broussard was doing, I climbed onto the back of the bike. I had to mold my body against Taylor’s, wrapping my arms around his chest to hold on. He revved the bike, then shot away from the loading area so fast that I yelped.

My heart raced even faster as he zigged in and out of the traffic at the airport. The way he leaned the bike into every turn, narrowly avoiding cars on either side of us, nearly made me vomit. I clenched my eyes shut and listened to the sounds of the bike’s engine, and car horns honking, and people shouting all around us.

We drove for maybe two minutes before Taylor said, “Found him. We can relax now.” I opened my eyes; he had stopped weaving through traffic and was now behind a car in the middle of a lane. Two cars ahead of us was a familiar looking pickup truck with suitcases piled in the back.

As we followed the truck south into town, I thought about how glad I was to have someone like Taylor with me. He didn’t doubt me, or second guess me at every turn. He said he was in, and backed it up with *action*. It was an extremely attractive quality in a man.

Or maybe it’s the way he smells. With my face pressed against his back, every breath brought with it the scent of leather, oil, and a rich cologne that seemed like the distilled essence of Taylor Hawkins.

We followed Broussard for ten minutes, into downtown Cabo, before turning off onto a touristy street. The truck parked in front of a large building that advertised souvenirs and rare bottles of tequila. Taylor kept his distance as Broussard exited the truck and went inside. Men came out of the building and began carrying the suitcases inside.

Taylor kicked out the kickstand and climbed off the bike. “This way.”

My legs wobbled as I rose and followed him into a nearby alley that bordered the building. Taylor stood on his tip-toes to gaze through the windows that were set high up on the wall. Eventually we found a wooden crate, which he dragged underneath one window. Carefully, he stood on the crate and looked over the edge of the window and into the building.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“What is it?”

He stepped off the crate and gestured for me to look. Taylor was taller than me, and I had to stand on my tip-toes to peer over the edge. My heart raced as I gazed inside. The window gave us a view of a warehouse storage room, with crates and pallets stacked everywhere. Broussard was standing next to one pallet, watching the men work.

Then my heart sank. What they were loading into the suitcases wasn't anything illegal.

It was bottles of limited edition tequila.



Veronica

“I was certain it was something illegal.”

We were at a dive bar in Cabo, the kind only locals visited. We were the whitest two people there, by a *wide* margin. But Taylor had a certain swagger to his step that made it seem like we belonged, and he and the bartender were laughing within minutes. Now we were eating tacos at a table in the corner while getting properly drunk.

“It’s still illegal,” Taylor said. “Smuggling expensive tequila into the States to avoid taxes, then selling it for a huge profit.”

“That’s white collar crime. I thought something *legitimately* awful was going on. Something heinous.”

“It actually explains everything,” Taylor mused. He took another shot of tequila, added the empty glass to a cluster of six others on the table, and bit into a slice of lime. “The bottles are heavy, which is why they had to be loaded by two men. The delicate way they handled the suitcases. I guess the dry ice you saw was to keep it cold? I don’t know jack about liquor transportation.”

“It explains why my anonymous tips didn’t lead anywhere,” I said, nursing my beer. I had already had two shots of tequila, and a third would be trouble. “Smuggling a few bottles of tequila into the country is small potatoes. Just some lost tax revenue.”

“Compared to human trafficking or drugs,” Taylor agreed, “liquor is downright quaint. Look on the bright side: this is a

good outcome. Nothing nefarious is happening under your nose. You can go back to your regular life without any guilt.”

My regular life. I wasn't even sure what that meant anymore. I had spent over a month obsessing over this. I had no trouble admitting I was wrong... but something still didn't feel right about all of this.

“The one thing I can't stop thinking about is that moving suitcase,” I said. “The one I saw on the runway. And the one you saw.”

“I don't know,” he said. “Maybe I didn't see what I thought I saw.”

“You might be having second thoughts, but I'm not. I know what I saw.”

Taylor leaned back in his chair. “How sure are you?”

“I'm one hundred percent positive.”

He stared at me for a long moment, blue eyes as hard as ice. Then he sighed and downed the rest of his glass of beer. “That's good enough for me. We can check again tomorrow, see what we see.”

“Maybe they move liquor sometimes,” I suggested. “And only traffic people every third or fourth flight.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “All right, we're going back to the original plan. Tomorrow, we'll hang out in my plane after they land. We'll watch them leave with the suitcases, and then return with their goods. Then, before they take off, we'll find a way to check the bags on the jet. Nobody hangs out around the aircraft after the bags are loaded?”

“Nope,” I said. “They load them, then disappear for a while.”

Taylor nodded. “Sounds like a good plan. I'll go close out the tab.”

“One more for the road?” I asked. “Maybe see if they have that good tequila that's being transported?”

Taylor winked at me. “I'll see what I can rustle up.”

I admired the way he looked as he walked to the bar and leaned on the counter. Faded blue jeans and work boots. An old T-shirt that clung to his muscles like a second skin. The wavy sun-bleached hair that I wanted to run my fingers into.

Why won't he ask me out? If anyone was going to be the third person to do it, thus completing my agreement with Dex, I wanted it to be Taylor. In fact, I wanted him to ask me out *period*. Even if there wasn't any agreement.

Yet he had given me flirty smiles without ever making a real move.

I quickly looked away as he turned around and came back to the table. "They didn't have that tequila. But that's all right. I have a better idea."

We walked through the streets of Cabo, on the outskirts of the touristy areas down by the water. It was a calm night, and the sound of music drifted from a few bars that were within earshot. Every so often, the wind would shift and bring with it the salty smells of the ocean.

Even though we were walking through a shady part of Cabo, I never felt in danger. Taylor walked with the confidence of someone who had gotten into scraps before and didn't mind if another one came his way. That confidence must have been obvious, because nobody bothered us as we walked through the city.

Eventually we came to the souvenir shop with the tequileria in the back. It was closed at this hour, but that didn't deter Taylor from walking around the side alley where we had been earlier today. He climbed up on the same crate and gazed through the window.

"What are we doing?" I asked. "Do you think there's evidence inside?"

"You're lookout," he said, ignoring my question. "Whistle if anyone comes by."

And then he pushed open the window and started to climb through.

"Taylor!" I hissed. "I can't whistle!"

“Then shout or something. I don’t care.”

“Taylor! *Taylor!*”

He landed inside the building with an unceremonious crash. It wasn’t *too* loud, but in the darkness of night I expected a dozen men to come running. I cocked my head, listening, but none ever came.

“Psst! Veronica! Take this!”

I looked up, and Taylor was dangling a bottle out the window. I took it, then helped him climb out into the alley.

Before anyone could come investigate, we jogged out of the alley and onto the main road. When we were a few blocks away, I began to breathe easier.

“What’s the bottle for?” I asked. “Do you think it has something to do with human trafficking?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” Taylor said, adding a little extra Texas twang in his drunken state. “This isn’t for evidence. This bottle’s for *drinkin’*.”



Taylor

Since I had flown both of us to Cabo in my plane, Veronica paid for our hotel rooms with credit card points. “I have approximately a billion points,” she told me. “We can splurge for rooms with an ocean view.”

We were sitting on the balcony of her room, overlooking the ocean from the fifth floor of a resort. The soft thumping of beachside music drifted up to us, along with the fresh salty air coming up out of the Pacific. We toasted our two glasses together, then downed the tequila.

“Oh my God,” Veronica said, grabbing the bottle and reading the label.

“That might be the smoothest tequila I’ve ever had,” I agreed. “Goodness gracious.”

Veronica gawked at her phone screen. “It better be smooth. It’s eight hundred dollars a bottle!”

“Sounds like I need to smuggle some of that into my liquor cabinet,” I said, examining the fancy cork from the bottle. “I’m in the wrong business.”

Veronica put down the bottle and smiled across the balcony table at me. “I think you’re in exactly the right business.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

She gestured at me. “Your whole vibe. Most pilots dress in a uniform, but you look like something from another time. Jeans, boots, a carefree attitude...”

“I’ll have you know I care very deeply about a great many things,” I argued.

“Okay, but you *act* carefree. Like you’re a feather on the wind, floating from one place to another. Never thinking more than a day in advance. Take this trip, for example. When I told you what I thought was going on, you were ready to take a few days and fly down here *immediately*. Most guys, pilots especially, would need a lot more advance notice.”

“You’re not too far off,” I admitted. “But that lifestyle has gotten me in trouble.”

One of her dark eyebrows rose slightly. “How so?”

That look is going to get me in trouble. Veronica was smiling at me like a bad idea I was tempted to make. It reminded me of all the other times I’d allowed a woman to lead me into a bad situation, following them from Iowa, to Alaska, to Florida, and now to Texas.

But Veronica seemed different. Hell, the next woman *always* seemed different. Yet there was something about her that told me it was the truth this time.

“Not sure I want to get into it,” I said.

“Does it have to do with the reason you won’t ask me out?”

I gave a start. “What do you mean?”

“The other day, at the diner. I told you to ask me out.” She fixed her gaze onto me firmly. “And you said no. Why not?”

“I already told you. There’s no fun in asking out a girl who has to say yes.”

“What if I wanted to say yes?” she insisted. “Regardless of what I *have* to do?”

“Well, now, that certainly changes things,” I said.

A slow smile spread across her face. “Then ask me.”

“Maybe I will... when all of this is over,” I said. “We have work to do tomorrow.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t ask me tonight.” She batted her eyelashes at me. “Right now.”

Fuck me. She was giving me the biggest set of bedroom eyes I’d ever seen. And it’s not like I hadn’t thought about Veronica that way. Far from it.

I’ve thought about her every time I land at the private terminal in Houston. And every night before I go to bed.

“You’re drunk,” I made myself say. “Maybe we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“I’m not.” She stood up and balanced on one foot with her eyes closed. “See? I’m as sober as a nun.”

She was right. I had been watching her closely all night, and she had gotten nice and tipsy—but never crossed the line into drunkenness.

“I could take a sobriety test right now.” She spread her arms wide, then bent her elbow until she was touching the tip of her nose. “See? I’m totally—ahh!”

She lost her balance and stumbled to her side. The wire metal railing was sturdy, but she hit it at her waist and started leaning over the edge. Before I could think about it, I was on my feet and pulling her away.

“You’re not drunk, but you’re not sober,” I said, savoring the way she felt in my arms.

Veronica gazed up at me. “Maybe you’re right. But I’m sober enough to do this...”

She stood on her tip-toes to kiss me, and I found myself leaning down into her lips. I hadn’t realized how much I had wanted this until that very moment, feeling her mouth churning against mine hungrily. She pressed her petite body against mine and I felt my resistance failing, my inhibitions melting away like ice on the wing of a plane.

We stumbled into the bedroom, falling onto the bed without our lips ever losing contact. I felt like I would die if I stopped touching her, and based on the tiny little whimpers coming from her throat, she felt the same way. The only time we

stopped kissing was when I pulled her shirt up over her head, and when she removed mine.

The warmth pulsing through her jeans was impossible to ignore as I sank in between her legs. My cock was throbbing for Veronica, desperate to feel her from the inside, but I made myself hold back. A good chef knew to make his table wait a little bit longer for their meal, and a good lover knew when to draw things out. I tore my lips from Veronica's, dragging my fingertips across her bra and the bare skin of her belly before unbuttoning her jeans and sliding them off her legs. She was wearing the sexiest pair of white cotton panties, dark with moisture where she was wet with desire. I removed those too, one slow inch at a time, sliding them down her legs and tossing them aside.

As I gazed up at her, she squirmed underneath me, moaning with desire. A voice whispered in my head: *you're doing it again. You're falling for a woman without thinking it through.*

But I didn't care. I couldn't resist. My desire was too strong.

Gripping Veronica's legs tightly, I slowly leaned in and gave her pussy a tentative lick. She jolted at the touch, but I held her firmly as I rolled my tongue up and down, just the tip making contact. She was completely drenched, and I couldn't help but imagine how those pink lips would feel wrapped around my cock. It took all of my willpower to continue eating her out rather than taking her immediately.

I devoured her pussy while she squirmed and moaned. She tasted so wonderful, soft and warm on the inside, a blossoming pink flower for me to please. As she arched her back and gripped my hair she began making more noise, so I ran one hand up her chest, brushing past a hard nipple until I found her mouth, then clamped my hand over it.

This made her go wild; she let out louder moans, muffled properly by my hand, and her pussy quivered and contracted around my tongue. Finally she let out one long cry of pleasure and arched her back so violently I was certain it would snap. She gripped the down comforter, fingers squeezing until they turned white.

Slowly, like a balloon deflating, she sighed back into the sheets.

I gave her inner thigh a final kiss before sliding up next to her, kissing her gently on the lips to allow her to taste herself. Her eyes were closed like she was already in a deep sleep, and she kissed me back so softly I wondered if she would really pass out then and there.

“That. Was. Amazing,” she whispered.

“Thought your back was going to snap,” I said as I curled up against her body. It was hot like a furnace as she folded herself up against me.

“I would have died happy.”

“If you insist...” I slipped a hand underneath her ass and another by her neck, preparing to snap her in half like a twig. She squealed and pulled away, laughing softly in the darkness.

“Careful,” I said. “You don’t want to make too much noise. This is supposed to be a classy resort.”

“That’s no fun.”

“And what do you consider fun?”

“This.” She shoved me onto my back and swung a leg over my body. I could feel the juices of her pussy brushing along my cock, which made it instantly go rock-hard. She leaned over me, raven hair like a curtain blocking out everything but our faces and tickling my cheeks.

“I think any way with you is fun,” I said.

Veronica leaned back until her lower lips pressed hard against my dick, then ground herself up and down my shaft. I let out a low rumble from my throat while she rolled back and forth.

“This kind of fun?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

“Mmm hmm.”

She didn’t torture me long; she reached in between her legs and shifted me into a vertical position. I felt the wonderful warmth of her inner walls as my tip pressed inside, and then

she lowered herself farther. She didn't hesitate, pushing all the way down until she had taken every throbbing inch of me.

“Oh *fuck*,” I groaned.

Her smile deepened. She didn't move up and down; she merely rested on me, back on her haunches like she was getting her bearings. Taking her time, in no rush at all. She was a goddess on top of me, the beautiful dark-haired vixen I'd been dreaming of for the past few weeks. Being here now didn't feel real. I had never expected us to actually hook up.

It was my every dream come true. I wanted her to do things to me—fuck, I wanted to do so much right back to her.

“You're not allowed to make any noise,” she said. “Wouldn't want to disturb the other resort guests.”

Then she lifted her ass off me, the pleasurable friction from her tight pussy instantly raging through my lower body like a firehose. She ran her fingernails along my chest as she moved, her hips pressing hard into my legs. I grabbed two handfuls of her plump ass and squeezed, which made her bite her lower lip.

“How's that feel?” she whispered.

“Oh, I think you know.”

“I really don't,” she said with a pout. “How am I supposed to know if you don't tell me?”

“You feel good.”

“Just good?”

“Really fucking good.”

“That's more like it.” She increased her pace a touch, a trot instead of a walk. She was so tight it was like a hand squeezing me tightly, warm and wet and perfectly shaped to accept me inside of her. I knew I wasn't going to last very long with Veronica.

Yet I couldn't bring myself to care.

“Ohh,” she moaned softly, tilting her head back to show off her gorgeous neck. I ran my hands up her chest and squeezed

her breasts together, fingers tightening on her nipples. That drove her to ride me faster, rising a little bit higher each time before lowering herself again. Her nipples must have been extra sensitive because she closed her eyes and lost herself in the rocking motion, up and down, up and down, swallowing my shaft whole with each stroke.

I kept my eyes wide, transfixed by her beauty on top of me, while she rode me.

Soon she began moving faster, crashing her body down on mine like a hammer, skin slapping against skin. Her mouth hung open in a silent wail of pleasure as she neared another climax. I did my best to hold onto my own, not wanting to release until she'd finished. And because I never wanted this to end.

Her legs began faltering from exhaustion or pleasure, so I grabbed her thighs and helped move her up and down. Her moans grew louder—almost to the point where I needed to cover her mouth—but then her legs spasmed on top of mine, and she groaned with simultaneous ecstasy and exhaustion.

I rolled her sideways to take over, pushing her onto her back. But she immediately twisted around to get onto her knees, pressing her round butt against me while touching herself.

“Hurry,” she moaned. Begged. “I’m close.”

It was the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen: Veronica on her knees, heart-shaped ass waiting for me while she pressed her face into the sheets. I grabbed her narrow waist and thrust forward, allowing my cock to slide right in effortlessly. The pleasure was so intense it was a wonder I didn’t burst right then.

Veronica immediately bounced her ass back against me, demanding I move faster. Gripping her waist tightly, I began thrusting deep inside her. She moaned into the bedsheets with her hair splayed around her like a dark halo.

The angle hit all of her buttons; I could feel her inner walls quivering with each stroke. She let out a long moan into the

sheets while I fucked her from behind, my cock slamming into her harder and harder, urged on by her cries of pleasure.

“Oh. My. God. Yes. YES!” she moaned, louder and louder.

She had no control of herself then, completely at the whim of her ecstasy. I leaned forward and pressed her face into the sheets to muffle her cries. Realizing she could now let loose, she screamed a scream that would have woken the entire resort—and all of Cabo—if not for the down comforter. I could feel her fingers moving rapidly at her clit, fast enough to start a fire.

My own orgasm had been building, barely held back while I focused on her. As I felt and heard her climaxing I finally let go of my inhibitions and fucked her as hard as I could, crashing my body into her beautiful ass.

“Come for me,” she said, pulling her lips from the comforter. “Come with me!”

As I felt the tingling sensation run up my shaft, I had to bite my lip to stop myself from roaring as loud as I could. I grabbed a handful of Veronica’s hair and yanked, arching her back wonderfully as I thrust one final time, burying my dick deep into her as I let out my first spurts, filling her with more of my come than I thought was possible, again and again as I pressed my body as tight against her as I could, never wanting to let go.



Veronica

I hadn't realized just how much I'd been *wanting* this.

It was a weird realization, especially for a woman who was already kind of seeing two other men: that I wanted a third in my life. But ever since that day when I met him in Miami, Taylor Hawkins and his smooth Texas drawl had been in the back of my head like a bad idea.

Not a bad idea, I thought while he ate me out, beautiful face buried between my legs. *The best idea possible*.

I generally wasn't a fan of drunken hookups—or even *tipsy* hookups—but in this case I didn't mind it. The alcohol had lowered our inhibitions and caused us to do something we both wanted, as opposed to something that was legitimately a mistake.

The way he gripped my waist, driving into me from behind, was almost too much for me to handle. That wonderful line between intensity and ecstasy. But he rode that line perfectly, pushing my face down into the sheets and *taking* me in the way I so desperately wanted.

Sometimes a girl just needed a man to fuck her brains out.

From the sounds he made, a rumbling cry that started deep in his chest and came pouring out of his mouth, it was just as powerful of an orgasm for him. His fingers dug into my flesh almost painfully, gripping me as he buried his cock as deep as it would go, filling me with his seed.

The two of us collapsed forward onto the bed, giggling and laughing together.

“You definitely disturbed the other guests,” I said. “You were louder than I would’ve been.”

“The resort can send someone to our room for all I care,” Taylor replied. “I got my money’s worth for this stay.”

“I paid for the room with my points.”

“Well in that case, I got *more* than my money’s worth.”

I shoved him playfully, and he pushed me back. A little slap-fight broke out, until he rolled me over and wrapped his arms around me, spooning me tightly.

“You still haven’t asked me out,” I said.

“I already told you. It’s no fun if a woman *has* to say yes.”

“So you’ll fuck me,” I teased, “but you won’t ask me out?”

“That remains to be seen.”

Taylor’s cell phone began ringing somewhere in the room. He made no move to get it. “You going to answer that?” I asked.

“I’m not doing anything that requires me to stop holding you,” he replied, kissing me on the ear.

“That’s a good answer.”

“I’m full of ‘em. Besides, it’s not like I have a boss to answer to. If it’s a potential customer, well, they can leave a message.”

“You don’t care about losing a potential customer?”

His hand slid up my chest and cupped a breast. “This is the only thing I care about right now.”

“That’s awfully short-sighted of you.”

Taylor rumbled with laughter. “I never have been a good businessman.”

We cuddled together for a while. I listened to Taylor’s steady breathing, and enjoyed the way his breath stirred my hair.

“This trip wasn’t a complete failure, at least,” I finally said.

“It wasn’t a complete failure before this.”

“Of course it is,” I replied. “They’re smuggling expensive tequila. That’s probably the only nefarious thing they’re doing. Yes, I know what I saw with the suitcase, but maybe there’s some legitimate explanation I haven’t thought of.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore.”

Another silence stretched.

“Do you want to go home tomorrow?” Taylor asked. “We could leave first thing, be back in Houston before lunch.”

“Do you?” I replied.

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Sure it is,” he drawled. “You’re the one who convinced me to come down here in the first place. If you’re giving up, then I’m fine calling it quits early.”

“But you’ve been suspicious of Excelsior longer than I have.”

“That’s true,” he admitted. “But if all they’re doing is moving tequila...”

His phone rang again. This time, he pulled away from me with a sigh and rolled to the edge of the bed so he could reach down and find his pants. I twisted toward him and gave his ass a very loud, very satisfying smack.

Taylor pointed the phone at me. “You’d better watch yourself, young lady.”

“Young lady? We’re the same age!”

“Act like a child, get treated like a child.”

I ignored him and reached around to squeeze his butt again. He responded by doing the same to me. For a few seconds we played grab-ass, on our knees on the bed, like little kids.

“Taylor Hawkins, speaking,” Taylor finally answered, using his free hand to push me away. I continued playing with him,

trying to give his ass another smack that would be loud enough to hear on the other end of the phone.

But then Taylor's eyes widened and he stepped out of my reach.

"No, of course I'm not in Cabo. Why would I lie about that?"

Someone pounded on the door, three long *thumps*.

Thinking that it was the hotel staff coming to tell us not to make so much noise, I grabbed a bathrobe out of the closet and walked to the door. "Don't answer that!" Taylor insisted.

I waved him off and approached the door. I wasn't stupid enough to open up for a stranger in Mexico. Gazing through the peep-hole, I saw a suited man standing in the hallway, hands clasped in front of him.

"Hi, I'm sorry if we've made too much noise," I said through the door. "We promise to keep it down."

"Veronica!" Taylor hissed at me. He was gesturing for me to come back.

"You're a paranoid man, Taylor," I said, turning away from the door.

There was a beep outside the door, and then a familiar click. An electronic keycard unlocking the door. I spun around as the door began to open.

"Hey! You can't just come in—"

I cut off as the man stepped inside, holding a matte black pistol ahead of him. He completely ignored me as I scrambled back against the wall; he was focused entirely on Taylor, who had dropped the phone and was now standing beside the bed. A moment later, a second man entered the room. He closed the door behind him and raised a pistol in my general direction.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh God, I'm going to die, I thought, raising my palms.

"Nice cock," the first intruder said in a thick Mexican accent. "Not in Cabo, huh?"

“I misunderstood you,” Taylor said, holding his palms up in surrender. “I thought you meant Cancun, since that’s where I usually—”

“We’ve got men everywhere in this city. You think you can show up and we won’t find out?”

“Now listen, I wasn’t trying to hide anything from you. Me and the nice lady aren’t here on business, as you can see.”

“I don’t care why you’re here. Did you bring it with you or not?”

Taylor winced. “No, I did not.”

The man took another step forward. “You fly, you make a delivery. That’s how this works.”

Taylor was obviously scared, but he still stood proud despite his nudity. “I forgot. That’s all.”

“Because we’ve done business together, I’m going to choose to believe you. Maybe you’re just forgetful.” The man stepped forward and grabbed one of Taylor’s wrists. “My abuela used to forget things. She would tie a string around her finger. Every time she looked at the string, it helped her remember.”

The man placed Taylor’s hand on the bedside table, holding it down. Then he pressed the gun against Taylor’s middle finger.

Taylor glanced at me, then at the second man by the door. That’s when I realized: *he can’t fight back because I’m here. If he tries anything, they’ll kill me.*

“I don’t have any string,” the intruder said. “But maybe I have another way to make sure you never forget.” He leaned on the gun, pressing it painfully against Taylor’s finger. All the muscles in Taylor’s neck went tight, and he breathed in quick, shallow gasps.

“Please,” Taylor said. “No, please don’t, I won’t—”

The man pulled the trigger. But instead of a deafening gunshot, there was only a soft click. Taylor froze, and then the man began laughing heartily.

“The next time, I’ll turn the safety off,” the man said between fits of laughter. “But I think you’ll remember now, yes?”

Taylor bobbed his head in a nod. “Message received.”

The man took the gun away. As soon as he did, Taylor stood up straighter, with a defiant glimmer in his eyes.

The man struck him with the butt of the pistol, knocking Taylor to his knees.

“No!” I shrieked.

Taylor stood up again, proud but not resistant. The man raised his palm like he was going to strike Taylor again. Then, he gave him a patronizing pat on the cheek instead. “Put some clothes on, man. Nobody should have to look at that. Especially not the lady.”

He and his associate roared with laughter, then left the room.



Veronica

As soon as the door closed behind them, Taylor came running over to my side. “Are you okay?”

I couldn’t find the words to say yes, so I just nodded.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” He wrapped his arms around me. “Veronica, I never meant to put you in danger.”

I didn’t understand why he was acting so reassuring, but then I realized my arms were shaking. So were my legs. Soon my entire body was trembling violently, steadied only by Taylor’s supportive arms.

“Relax. It’s the adrenaline wearing off. I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

It’s not okay, I wanted to reply. They have a key. They can barge back in here at any moment.

Taylor was right: eventually I stopped shaking. But as soon as I did, my trembles were replaced by incredulity. “You’re smuggling drugs?” I said, pushing him away from me.

“Not exactly.”

“Oh!” I shot back at him. “Not exactly! That’s a great answer!”

“Veronica,” he said calmly, “I can explain.”

“I know exactly what you’re going to say. The cartel got some sort of leverage over you, and now you *have* to transport drugs for them. Is that about right?”

“Yes, but you’re leaving out some important details.”

I grabbed my clothes off the ground. “I’m leaving. I can’t believe I trusted you. You told me Excelsior was bad news, but meanwhile you’re smuggling drugs like a—”

“Not drugs!” Taylor snapped. “Antibiotics.”

I paused with my shirt in my hand. “Huh?”

He gestured at the bed. “Will you *please* sit down and let me explain? Or do you want to run off to the airport and sleep there until the first flight out in the morning? Because I can guarantee you’re not finding a pilot who’s leaving at an hour to midnight.”

I was furious. I was terrified. I was shocked and numb and desperate to leave the room as quickly as possible, no matter what Taylor had to say.

I dropped my clothes and sat on the edge of the bed. “Talk.”

“Six years ago. Twenty-seventeen. I was dating a Puerto Rican woman...” He must have seen the look in my eyes, because he quickly added, “This story isn’t about her, but it’s important context. I was dating this woman when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. She had family down there, and I had a plane, so I cleared my schedule and we hopped down to the island. I figured I could find some way to help.

“Well, after a week or two of clearing debris and repairing buildings, we ran into another problem. The hospital down there didn’t have enough antibiotics. Or at least they did, but they ran out. One of the other volunteers, a local guy, had a contact back in Miami who worked for a pharmacy. They basically had an unlimited supply of this stuff, but needed a way to get it down there without going through a bunch of red tape. I’ve always been the kind of man to ask for forgiveness rather than permission, so I jumped at the opportunity to help. I flew up there, picked up a delivery of antibiotics, and flew back. I even checked the bottles to make sure they were all legitimate. No narcotics, nothing that could be abused or anything. I felt good about the whole thing.

“A few days later, they ran out. So I made another flight. This time, they insisted on paying for my fuel. I declined, of

course, but when I made the delivery they handed me a bag of cash. They wouldn't take no for an answer." Taylor ran his fingers through his hair. "You have to understand, this was at the hospital. I had nurses and doctors hugging me, thanking me for what I was doing. Every time I tried to give the money back to them, I had four sets of hands pushing it back to me. And I was a struggling pilot with a lot of bills to pay, and gas ain't cheap, so I accepted it.

"Worst mistake of my life. When I got back to my plane, I opened the bag. There was ten grand inside. Which is a hell of a lot more than it cost me to fly down there. I knew something was wrong with the situation, but I didn't really think about it. I flew home and went on with my life. Me and that woman flamed out after another month. I continued flying. Used the money to make some much-needed repairs to my plane, and give me a little buffer room in case I hit some rainy days. I thought life was good."

"Until..." I whispered.

Taylor smiled ruefully. "Until about a year later. I get a call from that other volunteer, the one who got me to make the first delivery. He wanted me to do it again. Now, this was long after the recovery efforts were over. Puerto Rico was still hurtin', but it's not like they needed someone like me to fly emergency antibiotics to the island. The real adults were in charge. So I turned him down.

"About a week later, I get an envelope in the mail. Inside this envelope were photographs of me down there, delivering the antibiotics and accepting a bag of cash in return. They also included a huge stack of legal documents explaining all the ways in which I had broken the law. It was like a damn college textbook, full of highlighted passages and bulleted notes on all the ways I was *fucked*. I was looking at three-to-five years in prison. And even if I somehow got a lenient judge, at a minimum I would lose my pilot's license."

All this time, Taylor had been staring down at his feet while explaining everything. Now he looked up at me, and there were tears in his crystal blue eyes. "Flying's all I know, Veronica. It's who I *am*. Without that... I knew what I was

doing was wrong, but I couldn't let them do it. I couldn't let them take the *sky* from me."

I rubbed Taylor's back. Any anger I had felt had melted away. "Oh, Taylor..."

"I thought I was still in control back then, so I made a deal with them. I'd make six more deliveries whenever I happened to be in Puerto Rico. Then I would be free. Over the next two years, I made those deliveries. Even during COVID. After the sixth one, I thought I was done. But of course, that ain't how this works. They told me to make one more delivery. Just one. So I did that, this time flying to Cancun. Their operation was spread throughout Mexico and the Caribbean, apparently. But then I had to do another one. And another. And now six years have passed, and I'm still doin' it. I'm still their delivery boy."

"I don't understand," I said. "All of this for antibiotics?"

"Apparently they're cutting-edge pills," Taylor replied. "The kind reserved for special cases, not available to the public. They're re-selling them at a huge markup, I suspect. They actually tried to get me to ship narcotics back into America at one point. Antibiotics south, cocaine north. But I drew the line there. Said I would rather lose my pilot's license than become a *real* drug dealer. I guess they could tell I wasn't bluffing, because they never asked again."

Taylor took my hand and squeezed it. "I never meant to get you involved in all this, Veronica. I'm so sorry."

I gave him a funny look. "You didn't get me involved in anything. I'm the one who convinced *you* to help me stop whatever is happening on Excelsior flights."

Taylor shook his head. "I didn't have the best of intentions. For one thing, I agreed to help you because I liked you. I wanted any excuse to spend time with you, more time than just happenstance run-ins at the private terminal in Houston. But the other reason I agreed was to try to balance my karma out. I thought if I helped you with this, and we caught some *real* bad guys doing *really* horrible things, then I could finally call myself a good man again."

“You *are* a good man,” I insisted. “Transporting antibiotics isn’t the same thing as narcotics, even if it *is* illegal. And besides, you got roped into all of this because you were trying to help after a natural disaster. The karma police won’t be arresting you anytime soon.”

I kissed him on the cheek, but he winced and pulled away. “Sorry! I forgot he hit you with the gun.”

Taylor lightly touched his cheek. “Do I have a shiner yet? Is it bad?”

“Um.” I hesitated. “It adds some flare to your rugged charm.”

“So that’s a yes.”

“I don’t mind. I’d still bang you.”

Now Taylor grinned properly. “Well, then I don’t mind either.”



Veronica

After a long discussion with Taylor, we decided not to notify the hotel or police about what had happened. But I still didn't feel safe in that room, and Taylor agreed, so we packed up our bags and drove back to the airport. Taylor's plane was parked on the runway, and we climbed into the rear seats and closed the door.

"Not the first time I've slept in here," he told me as we snuggled up together. "But it's the first time I've shared it with a beautiful woman."

"How many times have you shared it with an *ugly* woman?" I asked.

"Oh, now that's a different story," Taylor replied while stroking my hair. "If we're counting butterfaces, it's five or six."

"I was joking."

"There's Clara, the fisherwoman from Juneau. Then Lexi from San Juan..."

The airplane seats were cramped, but we were comfortable snuggled together. And more importantly, we were safe from anyone barging in and threatening to shoot Taylor's finger off. We woke up with the sun streaming through the glass cockpit windows, my head resting on Taylor's shoulder.

"You don't have a coffee maker in here, do you?" I asked.

He stretched, then reached forward to open a compartment in the front. "Got a bottle of caffeine pills. Never was one for coffee."

I scoffed at him. “You don’t drink coffee? That’s worse than trafficking drugs.”

The airport terminal had a private lounge area for pilots, which included unisex showers. And despite being at an airport in Mexico, they were pretty nice. I cleaned myself off, changed into some fresh clothes, and then helped myself to some coffee and muffins in the breakfast area.

“Brought one for you,” I told Taylor when I rejoined him in the plane. “And a bottle of water, since you’re too good for coffee.”

“I’d never claim to be too good for anything,” he replied smoothly. “I just hate the taste. It’s like water that’s been filtered through mud.”

“Coffee has a rich and complex taste!” I argued.

He nodded patronizingly. “Uh huh. You go on and enjoy your hot bean water. I won’t judge.”

We didn’t have to wait long; the Excelsior flight landed thirty minutes later. Taylor’s plane was parked facing the opposite direction, so we didn’t have a great view of the plane as it taxied and the passengers got out. But we did see them push the bag cart all the way across the tarmac to a waiting pickup truck, unload all of the suitcases, and then drive away.

“And now we wait,” Taylor said, glancing at his watch. “Since we have nothing else to do, how about a cockpit quickie?”

I gave him a playful glare.

He grinned broadly. “Can’t blame a man for tryin’.”

Time seemed to slow down while we waited. I pictured the truck driving to the tequileria, then loading up with bottles. I imagined them adding perfect bricks of cocaine to the bags, hidden underneath the tequila. That was horrible enough.

And then I imagined women or children being stuffed into the suitcases.

Eventually, after what felt like hours, Taylor elbowed me. The truck wasn’t within view, but it must have returned

because Broussard and his associate were pushing two carts full of suitcases across the tarmac. Both were so heavy that they had to lean into them, like CrossFit trainers pushing a weighted sled. To make sure we weren't seen, we ducked down in the cockpit.

"All right, we're in business," Taylor said.

After a few minutes, I snuck a peek. We still couldn't see much of the Excelsior plane; even when twisting around in our cockpit, the plane's cargo hatch was facing the opposite direction. I could just barely see one of the carts nearby, slowly being unburdened.

Then they finished, and pushed the carts back over to the loading area with the other equipment. I held my breath, waiting to see what they would do. If they went inside the terminal, it meant they might hang around. But if they returned to their truck...

"Bingo," Taylor said, pumping his fist a little bit. "They're headin' back to their truck. That means they're going to get food." He set a timer on his phone, then gave me a serious look. "You ready?"

I nodded.

"You sure about that? Because this isn't just a game anymore. As soon as we open that hatch..."

"It can't be any more dangerous than having two armed men barge into our hotel room," I said with a nervous laugh.

Taylor stared at me for three long heartbeats, then opened the cockpit door.

We climbed out and began walking across the tarmac toward the Excelsior plane. It was only a hundred feet away, but it felt like walking across no-man's-land on a battlefield. Anyone could see us. Taylor stood tall, striding across the tarmac like he belonged there. Which, for the most part, he did. I tried to mimic his confidence.

We reached the plane and went around to the far side. One nice thing about the cargo hatch facing away from the terminal is that it meant we were shielded from anyone seeing us. The

only thing behind us was the open runway, where planes were taking off and landing.

“You got the key?” Taylor asked.

I pulled the Excelsior key out of my pocket. “There’s no going back now.”

“We passed the point of no-return the moment we started walking toward this plane.” He took the key from me and unlocked the cargo hatch, which opened vertically. “Here’s hoping all of this wasn’t in vain.”

Inside the hatch was exactly what we expected to see: stacks of passenger suitcases. Taylor began grabbing suitcases and sliding them closer to the edge so I could open them. I took hold of the first one, finding the zipper along the side. It wasn’t even locked. For some reason, that made me chuckle. They were so confident that they didn’t even bother locking the bags.

“What’re you waiting for?” Taylor asked while climbing into the cargo hold to grab another suitcase.

I took a deep breath, then pulled the zipper around the exterior of the bag. When I flung open the top, what I saw was completely expected.

Eight bottles of specialty tequila, carefully packed in Styrofoam peanuts.

“Fuuuck,” I said.

Taylor opened another nearby bag. Eight more bottles of tequila. He let the flap close shut. “Well, at least we checked.”

I moved the suitcase aside and pulled another one closer. “I want to look inside a few more.”

But the next suitcase was the same. So was the one after that. Taylor opened two other bags, then shoved them away in resignation.

“We should probably head back,” he said.

“In a bit.” I climbed into the hold, feeling my heart begin to race. I was panicking. I had done so much, spent so much time

and emotional energy worrying about this. It couldn't have been for nothing. It couldn't have!

“Veronica...”

“These bags aren't cold.” I began feeling each suitcase with my palm. “Why aren't they cold?”

Taylor frowned, but climbed into the hatch with me and started patting down suitcases himself. When he got to the second stack, he suddenly exclaimed, “Found one! This one's as cold as ice!”

He slid it over to me. I could feel the cold air emanating from it before I even touched the zipper. A ray of excitement shone inside of me, one last glimmer of hope that all of this wasn't for naught. I shared a look with Taylor, then opened the bag.

The interior was layered with packing material. The top layer was a thin plastic sheet. I removed that to reveal a rectangular block of dry ice, about two inches thick, perfectly cut to fit the suitcase. Taylor pulled a rag out of his pocket and used that to grab the dry ice, carefully sliding it away and revealing the contents underneath.

It wasn't a person. It wasn't drugs. And it wasn't tequila. I squinted, then gasped when I recognized what it was.

“Is that...” Taylor said.

A voice behind me nearly made me jump: “Veronica?”

I whirled to see the last two people I expected: Luke Hendricks and Adam Mandalay. They were both wearing the nondescript uniforms of Excelsior crew.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

Luke gave a start. “I could ask you the same question. This is our plane!”

I turned and grabbed the suitcase, tilting it so they could see. “We caught them,” I said. “They're smuggling...”

“We know,” Adam said, grimacing. “We already found out.”

Luke nodded. “They're smuggling *turtles*.”



Luke

I was in love with Veronica.

Deeply, hopelessly, madly in love.

After spending a lot of time thinking about little else *besides* her, I was certain of that now. Our few weeks apart had made it crystal clear to me. At first, I doubted my emotions. A drug addict would go through withdrawal and miss the needle after being clean for a week, but that didn't mean the drug was good for them. Maybe I just needed more time.

Yet the longer I went without being with her, the more glaring her absence became. She was the last thing I thought about when I closed my eyes at night, and the first thing I thought about in the morning. At times, when my aircraft was humming along at our cruising altitude and there was only blue sky and white clouds all around, my thoughts drifted to her.

And when we were on the same flight crew together? It was torture. Sure, seeing her in the flattering Gulf Air uniform was part of it. She was a goddess in a skirt and high heels. But it was so much more than physical. Every time I heard her laugh at something Dexter said, or when I caught her smiling at Adam, it felt like my heart was being wrung out like a dishrag.

Once I stopped denying it, I started thinking about how I could get her back. The biggest wedge between us was her strange conspiracy about Excelsior. I still didn't think I believed that anything fishy was going on; real life was rarely as exciting as the scenarios our imagination could come up

with. But regardless of what I believed, I could support her by finding a way to help.

So I turned to an unexpected ally.

“Let me get this straight,” Adam Mandalay said while we sat down for coffee. “You don’t think anything weird is going on with Excelsior Air.”

“Right.”

“But you want me to help you investigate them anyway.”

“That is correct.”

“Because you want to get back together with Veronica.”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to help,” Adam said, “even though this goes against my own personal interests.”

“I just want to support Veronica,” I said. “Even if it doesn’t reverse her feelings, I want to help her.”

He sipped his coffee and stared at me from across the table. I got the impression he was trying to decide whether or not I was messing with him. I stared back coolly.

“I’m doing this either way,” I said. “But I know you’re dating Veronica too, and thought you might want to help. But if you don’t, then that’s fine.”

Adam took a sip of coffee, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll help.”

Next, I reached out to Bernie Langston about bringing on Adam as a backup flight attendant. I expected him to push back against it since he seemed to exclusively hire attractive women for the job, but to my surprise he didn’t require any convincing.

“Sure, we’ll give him a try for a few flights,” he told me. “Consider this a favor.”

“I owe you one,” I said, realizing now why he had agreed so quickly. I just hoped the favor he eventually called in was easy to fulfill.

Adam and I came up with a plan that involved the two of us being assigned to one of Alan Broussard's flights. After calling in another favor to one of the other Excelsior pilots, I was able to move some assignments around and get on a Broussard flight to Cabo along with Adam. The flight attendant who was currently dating Veronica was a consummate professional, treating Broussard like he was any other rich customer without acting suspicious.

It was an early flight, and we landed in Cabo before noon. Broussard and his associate unloaded their plethora of suitcases from the plane and pushed the bag carts down the tarmac.

"You want to get some food?" my co-pilot asked, checking his watch. "I know it's early, but I'm starving."

"You go on ahead without me," I replied. "I need to do some shopping for a friend."

"Do you mind if I tag along?" Adam asked me, bolstering our cover story. "My sister is having a Cinco de Mayo party and I promised to bring souvenirs."

Adam and I got in a taxi and told him to pull around to the entrance to the private terminal, where Broussard was still loading his pickup truck. "When that truck leaves, I want you to follow it," I said.

The taxi driver gave me a bewildered look. "Tell me where to go."

"I don't know where we're going. Just follow that truck."

He gestured at his watch. "This is prime taxi time. I'm losing fares by sitting here."

"The meter's still running," Adam pointed out. "You're getting paid."

"For minutes, not miles! Every second we're parked here, I'm taking a pay cut!"

"Oh for fuck's sake..." I pulled out some cash and handed it to him. "Happy?"

The driver was cooperative from that point on. He even seemed like a professional as he followed Broussard's truck, staying several cars behind and never losing sight. We followed them through Cabo, eventually turning off the main road and pulling up to a souvenir shop close to the touristy area.

"Cool," Adam said. "Our cover story actually lines up now. I'll go in and buy something."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "I don't want them to see you. It might make them suspicious."

"You think something is going on at a souvenir shop?" the driver asked us with a laugh. "There's a tequileria in the back. Legitimate business. Are we sitting here, or are you going to get out so I can get another fare?"

I grumbled, but handed him some more cash.

"I'm getting some sugar candy for my son." The driver turned off the car. "I'll be back."

"Wait!" I said. "We need to be ready to leave when they do."

"Stop worrying. I'll be back real quick." He exited the car and walked inside.

"I hope he's not ratting us out to Broussard," Adam said. "He could probably get paid by tipping him off."

I blinked. "I didn't think about that."

"Too late now." Adam pointed. "They didn't unload all the suitcases. There are still four more in the bed of the pickup truck."

"They'll probably get them after loading the others."

"Yeah, probably." Adam checked his phone. "You talked to Veronica lately?"

"A couple of days ago," I replied carefully. "She told me she had COVID."

"Right." Adam looked away. Was he hiding something?

"Veronica is a special woman," I said.

“I’m quite aware of that,” Adam replied.

“It’s funny how things work out. She had a reputation for not dating coworkers. Especially pilots. But she had to say yes when I asked her out because of a promise she made to Dexter, and she ended up really liking me. I’m assuming that’s the reason she said yes to you, too?”

“Yeah,” Adam chuckled. “We kind of had a fight over it when we first went out. I thought she was also saying yes to make you jealous.”

“She probably was. We were in the middle of a little fight ourselves, if I remember correctly.” I shook my head. “I really messed things up.”

Adam looked sideways at me. “You really like her, don’t you?”

“Of course. Do you not?”

“I like her a lot.” Adam checked his phone again. “More than you can possibly know.”

“Well, now,” I said slowly, “I think I know exactly how you feel.”

We stared at each other in the back seat of the taxi.

“I shouldn’t be helping you,” Adam finally said. “All I’m doing is increasing my own competition.”

“Then why did you agree to this?”

“Because she’s been obsessing over this Excelsior thing for *weeks*,” Adam replied. “I’ve been worried about her because of it. If there were a way to prove definitively, one way or the other, it would put things to rest and allow her to move on. I know that’s the best thing for Veronica, even if it gives you an opening to start dating her again.”

I eyed Adam approvingly. “You’re a good guy, you know that?”

He gave me a confused look. “Okay.”

“Veronica deserves a man like you who puts her needs first.”

“What about a man like you?” he said challengingly.

I shrugged. “I think she belongs with me too. Which creates a unique problem.”

“Yeah. It does.”

“We’ll worry about it when we get home,” I said, gesturing. “Broussard and his buddies are coming back.”

We watched them exit the souvenir shop with a suitcase slung between them. It was very obviously heavier than it was before. Four more men came out of the shop carrying suitcases, and helped load them back onto the truck. They went back inside, and came out with a second load of suitcases.

“Hey!” Adam hissed. “Look!”

Two police officers came sauntering up to the pickup truck. Broussard greeted them with big smiles and handshakes. The officers gestured at the pickup truck. It looked like they were questioning what was going on.

Broussard opened one of the suitcases and tilted it toward them so they could see. It was filled with bottles of expensive tequila.

“That confirms it,” I muttered, aiming my phone and snapping a few photos for evidence. At the very least, we could show Veronica what we had discovered.

Broussard snapped his fingers at one of his associates, who went running inside. He returned with two more bottles, one for each officer. They grinned, shook Broussard’s hand again, then walked away.

“Bribes,” Adam said. “The price of doing business.”

“Guess we’ll head back to the airport,” I grumbled. “Big waste of time for everyone involved.”

“No,” Adam suddenly said. “We should keep following them.”

“Why?”

“The other suitcases,” Adam said, grinning. “They never unloaded them from the pickup truck.” He pointed. “And they’re shifting them around so that they stay on top of the pile.”



Adam

I was skeptical of this entire thing from the start. Not that I didn't trust Veronica's judgment; she was an extremely intelligent woman whose opinions were usually level-headed and well thought-out. But when she spoke about Excelsior Air, and specifically this Alan Broussard guy who flew frequently, she sounded like a conspiracy theorist.

I didn't like that side of her. It worried me to see her becoming so obsessed. And despite my—and Dexter's—gentle comments, she wasn't going to stop believing that something illegal was going on. That was why I agreed to help Luke, a man who was essentially my rival. That, and the fact that it would give me a chance to make some extra cash working an Excelsior flight or two. Veronica had spent so much time gushing about how cushy the job was that I was all too happy to see for myself.

And to the surprise of nobody, Broussard's actions all had reasonable explanations. He was buying lots of expensive tequila and shipping it back to the United States. Maybe that was illegal, and maybe he was avoiding paying customs taxes or something. But it wasn't the same kind of illegal as drugs, or human trafficking.

But then I saw the four suitcases that they left on the pickup truck. *Why didn't they take them inside?* Maybe they had brought too many, and didn't have enough bottles of tequila to take home. That seemed unlikely, though.

Especially when I saw them loading the bags of tequila onto the truck, and rearranging the suitcases so that the four empty

ones remained on top.

The taxi driver complained about it, but he followed the truck some more. Our suspicions were immediately confirmed when the truck drove west into another part of Cabo, instead of north back to the airport. Eventually, they arrived at a residential area with large houses. One of the rich parts of the city. Our taxi driver parked in an alley as Broussard's truck drove through the gates of a large house. It was more like a compound, with brick walls around the perimeter topped with barbed wire.

"Something is going on," Luke said. "Good catch."

"Thanks."

Whatever they did inside took half an hour. Then the truck was driving out the gate and back toward the airport. We followed them the whole way, and my eyes were glued to the four bags on the top of the pile.

"They're cold," Luke suddenly said while we were stopped at a light. "See the condensation on the outside of the red bag?"

"Ohh," I said. "Now *that's* suspicious."

"Why would it be cold?" the driver asked. "Transporting fish?"

Luke handed him some more cash. "Stop asking questions."

The truck returned to the airport. We had the taxi driver drop us off at the regular entrance, and then we walked through employee security by scanning our badges. The truck was on the side of the terminal building, just out of sight of the tarmac where the aircraft were all parked. But we could see it from the side entrance window.

"Here's the plan," Luke said, peering out the window. "We play it cool. Let them load the plane. And then when that's done, and they leave, I'll open the cargo hatch and pop one of those suitcases open."

"What makes you think they'll leave?"

“They usually get lunch after loading the plane,” he explained.

“Usually? What if they don’t do that today, and hang out around the plane?”

“I...” Luke searched for an answer. “I don’t know. Maybe when we land in Houston we’ll have a chance to...”

“No,” I insisted. “I have an idea. Be ready to check the bags.”

Luke’s eyes widened. “What are you going to do...”

Before he could argue, I opened the door and strode out into the warm Cabo sunlight. Broussard and his associate were unloading suitcases from the truck and placing them onto two baggage carts.

“Oh, hey there!” I said with a friendly wave. “You all have a lot of bags. Here, let me help with that.”

“We don’t need any help,” Broussard said bluntly.

“I don’t mind! And I want to make sure you get the full Excelsior experience. I’m new to the airline, but I’m a hard worker.”

The two men were in the middle of carrying a suitcase between them. “Don’t touch that!” Broussard said as I reached for the next suitcase on the truck. “I said *don’t*...”

Before I could even touch the bag, Broussard’s grip slipped on the one he was carrying. The suitcase fell to the ground, landing on one of the corners with the unmistakable sound of glass shattering.

That was lucky, I thought. Now I don’t have to accidentally drop one of the other bags.

“Oh no!” I said, covering my mouth with my hands. “That sounded expensive.”

Broussard let out a low growl and unzipped the suitcase on the ground. One of the bottles had smashed, spreading a pool of tequila on the ground. Broussard’s shoes and the cuff of his pants were also soaked. But the other bottles were still intact.

“Here, let me help,” I said, crouching down.

“NO.” Broussard’s voice was like a whip as he pushed me away. “You have done quite enough.”

“What’s going on here?” Luke suddenly asked. “I hope Mr. Mandalay here isn’t bothering you.”

“Actually, he is bothering us,” Broussard snapped. “We dropped one of our bags thanks to him. A bottle of tequila shattered, and now there’s glass everywhere.”

Luke shook his head. “Adam is new to the Excelsior family. He doesn’t understand how we operate. I’ll make sure we discuss this with Mr. Langston when we land in Houston.”

“See that you do.” Broussard looked around, then gestured to the other man. “I need to dry off. Go find something to clean this up. We can’t leave any trace.”

“Where?” his associate asked. “I don’t know this airport as well as the others...”

“Mr. Mandalay,” Luke snapped. “Go help our passengers find whatever they need to clean this up. I’ll stay here and watch your bags.”

Broussard looked at Luke, then at the luggage.

“Don’t worry,” Luke assured him. “Unlike *some* people, I know to keep my hands off things that don’t belong to me. I’ll make sure nobody comes near.”

Luke had flown with Broussard plenty of times before, so he must have been trusted. Broussard nodded, then stormed into the terminal with me and the other man on his heels. As soon as we were inside, Broussard went straight to the men’s bathroom.

“The cleaning supplies are that way,” I said, pointing toward the far end of the terminal. “Want me to get them for you? I can clean up your bags, make sure they’re spotless...”

A flicker of fear shone in the other man’s eyes. “No! I’ll do everything.” He looked around the terminal suspiciously. “Stay here and watch the door. Make sure nobody goes near our bags.”

“Message received,” I said.

The man walked away to look for the cleaning supplies. I turned and peered out the window. Just as I had hoped, Luke was checking suitcases, patting them down—presumably to feel for which ones were cold.

“Hurry,” I muttered to myself. “They’ll be back any minute...”

“What did you say?” Broussard suddenly asked.

I whirled around. Broussard was standing a few feet away clutching a handful of paper towels. He sat on a bench and removed one of his shoes.

“I was trying to give myself a pep talk,” I said, hamming it up for dramatic effect. “I know I screwed up. I’m really sorry. This is my first flight with Excelsior and I wanted to make a good impression.”

Broussard held the towels against his sock and said, “You made an impression, but it wasn’t a good one.”

Resisting the urge to peer out the window, I said, “Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”

“No.”

I need to warn Luke. If he gets caught...

“I understand,” I said. “I’ll leave you alone, then...”

As I turned and put my hand on the door to go outside, Broussard said, “Oh no you don’t. I don’t want you going anywhere near my luggage. Stay right here until I’m done.”

I managed to sneak a peek out the window before turning back around. Luke had another suitcase open, and was gawking at the contents. *Hurry.*

“I won’t go near your luggage. I’m going straight to the jet, where I’ll stay until we take off.”

“Don’t leave my sight,” Broussard said in a cold, dangerous voice. The kind of voice I didn’t dare argue with. For the first time since agreeing to all of this, I wondered if I had gotten myself into something more dangerous than I expected.

I stood there numbly, praying that Luke would get what he needed. I couldn't see him out the window from where I was standing, and Broussard was staring daggers at me, so I didn't dare move to sneak another peek. He was already suspicious enough. Soon, his associate returned with a dustpan and a broom.

"Let's go," Broussard said. "The sooner we get everything loaded onto the plane, the better."

I pushed open the door and loudly said, "Here! Let me get that for you!"

Luke was standing guard over the luggage, arms crossed. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Broussard and the other man loaded the carts up with the bags, pushed them to the plane, then loaded everything into the luggage hold. Luke and I watched nearby, lingering by the stairs in case they needed anything. As soon as they were done, Luke cleared his throat and approached.

"I wanted to apologize again for Mr. Mandalay's behavior. I assure you this will not happen again."

"I certainly hope it does not." Broussard held out his palm. "I want your keys to the hatch, please."

Luke scowled. "I don't think that's necessary..."

"The keys. Or I will have *two* complaints for Bernard Langston when I return to Houston."

I handed him my universal key. A moment later, Luke did the same thing.

"I need to finish drying off. See if you can get an earlier runway slot. I want to leave as soon as I'm back."

"Yes, sir," Luke said.

The two of us went inside the plane. "Well?" I demanded. "Did you figure out what was in the suitcase?"

"You won't believe it," Luke said. "Turtles."

I blinked. "Turtles?"

“Turtles. About the size of my outstretched palm. I only opened one of the suitcases, but there were a dozen of them packed in ice.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Why would they smuggle turtles? Are they worth a lot of money or something?”

“I’m a pilot, not a turtle expert,” Luke replied. “But that’s what’s going on.”

I pulled out my phone and did a quick Google search. “Oh wow. In the last ten years, 24,000 freshwater turtles were trafficked around North America. Apparently they’re endangered.”

Luke must have been Googling the same thing, because he was staring at his phone. “Baby Wood Turtles sell for \$800 a pop. Apparently adults go for two or three times that much. And based on the size, those were adults in the suitcases.”

“Two grand per turtle. That’s \$24,000 per suitcase.”

“Six figures per trip,” Luke said, whistling. “Who would’ve thought?”

Suddenly, we heard a noise outside the plane. The luggage hatch was opening; Broussard must have wanted to check to make sure his bags were all still there.

But when we exited the plane and went around to the other side, it wasn’t our two passengers we saw rummaging around in the cargo hold.

Luke gasped. “Veronica?”



Veronica

“We know,” Adam told me, grimacing. “We already found out.”

Luke nodded. “They’re smuggling *turtles*.”

“I’m so confused right now,” I said.

“They’re endangered, and apparently worth a lot of money,” Adam explained. “Yeah, we’re just as surprised as you are.”

“You’re dressed as though you’re an Excelsior flight attendant,” I said.

“Everyone’s tryin’ to get a cushy job with them,” Taylor said.

“No, it’s not like that,” Adam replied. “Luke convinced me to do it, but not for the money. We did it to try to help you.”

“To gather evidence to prove that you were right,” Luke chimed in. “Or wrong.”

For a few seconds, it felt like my heart was lighter than air. Adam and Luke were supporting me. They were *helping* me. I gave them both thankful smiles, struggling to find the words.

“Wait a minute,” Adam said to Taylor. “Who are you?”

“I’m somebody who thinks we ought to hurry up here. Let’s grab one of these suitcases. My plane is over... aww, hell. They’re coming back.”

I zipped up the suitcase and closed the hatch quietly before Broussard and his associate came around the side of the plane. He gave a start, then looked suspiciously at the four of us.

“What’s going on here?”

We’re screwed, I thought.

“I was chatting with Taylor here. He’s another pilot,” Luke said. “I was looking for an alternative flight attendant for the flight back, since Adam was so troublesome.”

Adam was troublesome? I had so many questions.

Broussard looked like he bought the explanation. But then his eyes settled on me, then widened with recognition.

“You...”

Shit.

He was looking around, panicked now. “The four of you, give us a minute. We need to discuss something privately.” He and his associate stood by the loading hatch, waiting for us to walk away.

“What do we do?” I whispered to my three men. “We have him caught red-handed.”

“You two get out of here,” Luke said to me and Taylor. “I’ll do my best to calm the situation and convince him that everything is all right. We’ll regroup in Houston.”

I gave them a final grateful smile, then Taylor and I returned to his plane. We walked slowly, in the hopes that our calm demeanor would make Broussard relax.

But when we got into Taylor’s plane and climbed into the cockpit, we were greeted with a depressing sight: Broussard and his friend were pushing a luggage cart across the tarmac, back in the direction of their pickup truck. And there were four suitcases on the cart.

“They’re getting rid of the evidence!” I exclaimed. “We have to do something!”

Taylor sighed back into the pilot’s seat. “We missed our chance, Veronica.”

“We can call the local authorities!” I insisted. “If they come right now...”

Taylor put his hand on my leg and squeezed it. “Veronica. It’s over. We can report everything we’ve found to the authorities when we get home, but we’re done here. It’s time to go home.”

As we taxied, I got a text from Luke.

Luke: Don’t do anything yet. We’re going to land and then figure it out.

Me: Okay. I’m so upset that we didn’t catch him red-handed.

Luke: I know.

Luke: I tried telling you what I was doing, but you didn’t want to talk to me. I wish I had known you were flying down here on your own. A little communication and we could have worked together on this.

I couldn’t bear to respond to him.

“We were *so close*,” I said when Taylor and I were in the air.

Even though we were sitting two feet apart, his voice came through the headset I was wearing rather than through the air. “He’s probably going to be extra cautious now, and more than likely lay low for months.”

“Or he’ll stop trafficking animals altogether.”

“Nah, probably not that,” Taylor said. “If the money is as good as you say it is, they’ll find another way eventually. Maybe we can catch them, then.”

I pulled up a news article that I had loaded before we took off. “Thousands of dollars per turtle. And they aren’t just smuggled one-way. Some are brought into the United States, but other breeds are smuggled into Mexico before being sent along to China. I guess that explains why some of the suitcases going *to* Mexico were full.”

“There’s a silver lining here,” Taylor said. “Animal trafficking is bad, but at least they weren’t moving drugs, or humans.”

“I guess so. I’m still bummed out.”

“Yeah,” Taylor agreed. “Me too. It would’ve balanced out my karma to catch them.”

“Don’t think like that. Your karma doesn’t need balancing. And even if it does, you have plenty of time to find another way to make things right.”

“Maybe,” he said, but it didn’t sound like he believed me.

“There’s one good thing that came from this trip,” I said, changing strategies.

“And what’s that?”

“You and I hooked up for the first time.”

Taylor grinned over at me. “I guess it’s not a total loss.” His smile faded. “Unless this is just a fling. Veronica, I have to tell you, I don’t know if I—”

“It’s not just a fling,” I told him. I didn’t know how I felt until that exact moment, but the words rang true as I said them. “I want to see you again. And again.”

He stared out the cockpit glass, his smile returning. “Well, now isn’t that something?”

I was in a sour mood by the time we made our descent into Houston. But then I was greeted by something totally unexpected: there were dozens of police cruisers waiting at the private terminal, with lights flashing.

As we landed, I recognized Luke and Adam standing outside one of the Excelsior planes. Their jet aircraft was faster than Taylor’s old prop plane, and they had beaten us home.

“Oh no!” I said in anguish. “What are they doing?”

“Looks like a drug bust,” Taylor said. “Shit.”

“There’s no evidence!” I said. “They unloaded the plane in Cabo! No!”

Taylor taxied over to the private terminal area, and then we got out of the plane and ran to Luke and Adam. Both of them were smiling, which took me by surprise.

“What’s happening right now?” I demanded. “They didn’t bring the turtles with them. We don’t have any *evidence*.”

“Is this for the tequila?” Taylor asked. “Because that’s small potatoes. Low level tax crimes. Probably won’t do any jail time.”

“It’s not for the tequila,” Adam said, smiling wider.

“We *do* have evidence,” Luke explained. “Before they loaded the bags onto the plane, Adam here distracted Broussard, which allowed me to take a few photographs.” He held out his phone, showing me a picture of the turtles encased in ice. “I sent those to a few contacts of mine, who passed them along to the authorities.”

“Apparently, animal trafficking is a *huge* deal. Especially when the animals are an endangered species,” Adam said.

“Oh snap!” I said.

“Is that a turtle joke?” Luke asked.

“If so, it’s a bad one,” Taylor said, tucking his thumbs into his belt.

“I didn’t mean it to be,” I admitted, “but let’s pretend I did!”



Veronica

We met with the investigator, who we discovered worked for the Environmental and Natural Resources Division of the Department of Justice. I told them everything I had seen since working for Excelsior, beginning with my suspicions and ending with my trip to Cabo with Taylor. Then those investigators left, and a new set of officials came and asked me the same questions. By the time everyone was done with me, I had repeated my story at least half a dozen times, and it was dark outside.

“You did a good thing,” the last official told me. “Yeah, it’s not as flashy as drugs or human trafficking, but this is still a very big deal, and we treat it with the utmost seriousness.”

That made me feel good about the entire thing.

After they all left, the private terminal at Houston was deserted. The last flight had departed hours ago, and even the front desk was empty. I found Adam, Taylor, and Luke sitting in one of the private lounges, eating pizza straight out of the box.

“Adam had the foresight to order grub an hour ago,” Taylor said, flipping open the two boxes. “We’ve got one pepperoni, and one meat lovers.”

“Ohh, pepperoni please!” I said, accepting a slice from Taylor and then dropping onto the couch next to him. “Thank you!”

“I told them it was your favorite,” Luke said.

“Thank you, too,” I added. *Uh oh. They’re not getting competitive, are they?*

“Should we even be in here?” I asked. “Rita’s not at the front desk, and all the other lights are off.”

Taylor jangled a set of keys. “I’ve got access. We’re allowed to be in here as long as we need.”

“I’m surprised they gave you a set,” Luke said slowly, “but not the real pilots.”

Yeah. They’re competitive all right.

“Nothing you say could possibly ruin my mood right now,” Taylor said, biting into another slice. “But if you need a peace offering, I’ve got one in my bag.” He gestured with his slice of pizza.

“All right!” Adam said, pulling out a bottle of the expensive tequila that was being transported. It was still mostly full. “How’d you get your hands on that?”

“Me and a friend snuck into the tequileria last night.” Taylor winked at me.

“You snuck into...” Luke trailed off, shaking his head. “You’re more reckless than your reputation.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“We should be celebrating,” I said, retrieving four glasses from the bar area. I placed them on the table next to the pizza boxes and filled them with tequila. “We did something great today. Even though we didn’t realize we were all doing it together.”

I passed around the glasses of tequila. Luke sniffed his, but put it back down on the table. “We could have been working together.”

“Hmm?”

“If you had told me what you were planning, we could have worked together,” he said. “The four of us make a good team, even if we didn’t realize it. But you lied to me. You said you had COVID.”

“I didn’t want anyone knowing what I was doing, where I was going.”

“But you *should* be able to trust me that way,” he insisted. “And if not me, then Adam. You didn’t tell him what you were doing, either.”

I glanced at Adam, who was staring into his tequila glass.

Damnit. They’re right.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “The last two months have been tugging at my emotions. And my brain. I knew something was going on with Excelsior, but nobody believed me! I felt like I was being gaslighted, and I thought if I told you what I was doing, you would have called me crazy.”

“We weren’t the most supportive, were we,” Adam muttered.

“But you were!” I said. “Eventually, I mean. That’s why we’re all here today, because you eventually supported me. I’m grateful for that. And I promise not to keep anything from you in the future.”

Luke picked up his glass. “I’ll toast to that.”

“And from now on,” Adam added, “we’ll trust you from the start.”

“Hey now,” Taylor said smoothly. “I trusted the lady the moment she came to me. Canceled my plans and flew her down to Cabo, no questions asked.”

The other two became quiet.

“I know what you’re wondering,” I said. “And the answer is yes. Taylor and I... well, I don’t know *what* we are, but we’re something.”

I expected them to get upset, but neither of them reacted angrily. “That’s what I get for taking so long to come to my senses,” Luke said.

“I knew we weren’t exclusive,” Adam explained. “Not with Luke sort of in the picture, and with you needing to say *yes* to one more man who asked you out.”

Taylor cleared his throat. “Actually, I never asked her out. Veronica asked for my help, and then we hooked up while we were down there. It was a freebie, outside of that weird agreement she made.”

Adam groaned. “I can share you with two other men, but a third one in the future? That’s too many.”

“Agreed on all counts,” Luke nodded.

“We’ll see,” I said, raising my glass. “But for now, cheers to us for stopping an international turtle-smuggling ring.”

“Never thought I’d hear those words in that order,” Taylor muttered.

We clinked glasses, and drank the tequila. Then we drank some more. The four of us sat around the table discussing everything that had happened that day, and what had happened to Taylor and I yesterday when we tried catching Broussard in the act.

“Hot damn,” Luke said after receiving a text message. “Bernard Langston was just arrested at his house. One of my pilot buddies was having dinner with him when the cops barged in.”

“Broussard must have flipped on him,” Adam speculated.

“Which means he was actually part of the scheme,” I said. “And not just turning a blind eye to whatever his customers were doing.”

“Figures,” Taylor said. “He wouldn’t let those flights take off with just one or two passengers. He’d want a cut of the profits.”

“He was already a multi-millionaire with his own private airline,” I said. “And he wanted to make *more* money? Just goes to show you: greed never pays.”

“Speak for yourself,” Taylor said, hefting a piece of pizza. “I greedily took the last slice of pepperoni, and it feels good.” He took a bite. “Real good.”

Luke was staring at him hard. “You’re good at swooping in at the right time, aren’t you?”

Taylor smiled around a full mouth. “Sure am.”

“Luke...” I warned.

He turned to me. He wasn’t slurring his words, but he was almost there. “Veronica. I want you to know that I made a mistake, but I learned my lesson. I care about you. *So much*. I won’t let go of you again.” He glanced at Taylor. “Even if it means sharing you for the time being.”

“Time being,” Taylor muttered. “Sure thing, pal.”

“No ultimatums from me,” Adam chimed in. “I won’t make you choose. I think I can outclass these two guys, so I’m going to ride it out.”

“Fine by me!” Taylor said, holding up a palm to high-five Adam. “I’m not one to turn away from friendly competition.”

Adam looked at his palm. “Who says it’s friendly?”

“It had better be,” Taylor replied, “if we’re fighting over this lovely lady. I don’t think she’ll tolerate any other kind.”

Adam nodded, then high-fived Taylor. “In that case, the last slice of meat lovers is mine. Unless you want it...”

Luke shook his head. “All yours.”

“See?” Adam gestured with his slice. “We’re good at sharing.”

“Easier with pizza than with a woman,” I said. “But I have to ask... are you guys sure you want to do that?”

They all looked at me.

“Do you not want to be shared?” Adam asked.

“No!” I replied. “I mean, no, I *do* want to be shared. But I’m surprised you guys are okay with that. Men are usually...”

“Possessive?” Luke suggested.

“I was going to say real sons of bitches,” Taylor chimed in. “But possessive is a good word, too.”

“Some of us finished our stint in the armed forces,” Luke said casually. “And the education that comes with it.”

Taylor laughed. “I’m sure your ass is real tired from all that sitting y’all do in the Chair Force.”

I tensed, but Luke roared with laughter. “Better than being stuck on a boat all day with a bunch of seamen.”

“You’ve got me there,” Taylor replied.

I relaxed at seeing them tease each other. It *almost* seemed good-natured. Almost.

Adam finished his slice of pizza and glanced at his watch. “I should head home. It’s been a long day.”

Taylor let out a long sigh. “You can say that again.”

“You riding with me?” Luke asked. “Or do you want to meet at my place?”

“Your place?” Taylor asked.

“My place,” Luke replied, deadpan. “As in, the place Veronica and I are going.”

Taylor turned to me. “I don’t see why he gets to claim you tonight.”

“Because I asked first. And Veronica and I have to make up for lost time.”

“That sounds like a *you* problem.”

“There’s no need...” I tried to say, but they kept talking over me.

“It’s *not* my problem, because she’s coming home with me,” Luke insisted.

“Seems like you’re the only person here who thinks that,” Taylor replied. “If you ask me, you shouldn’t be rewarded for spending the last month *not* supporting the lovely lady here.”

“What about dibs?” Adam said helpfully. “Calling dibs is crude, but might be the best method.”

“Or a shared Google calendar,” Luke said.

Taylor snickered. “A shared calendar to decide Veronica’s evening lover? They have weird ideas of romance in the Chair Force.”

“Got any better ideas?”

“Sure,” Taylor said, gesturing at me. “We let the lady decide.”

With all three pairs of eyes boring into me, I gulped down the rest of my tequila. “There’s no way I can decide between you three. But...” I smiled hopefully. “I’m open to persuasion?”

Luke, Taylor, and Adam all exchanged glances. An unspoken agreement seemed to pass between them.

Then they turned back to me and smiled.



Veronica

Luke was the first one to rise from his seat, stretching his arms wide after sitting for so long. He was tall and handsome in his pilot uniform as he took my hand, pulling me off the couch with polite formality. I expected him to kiss me, but he took three long seconds to look me up and down, admiring my body. Taking me in.

Then his entire demeanor changed and he threw me up against the nearby wall, smothering me in a passionate kiss that I felt with my entire body. His desire for me, his *need*, was so palpable that it took my breath away.

And then, as quickly as he had kissed me, Luke ripped his lips away and shoved me to the left. I tumbled into Adam's waiting arms. He picked up the kiss where Luke had left off, tongue forcing its way into my mouth possessively while holding my hands out to my side.

"I don't know about these two," Adam whispered, "but I'm good at sharing."

Next to him, Luke made a hungry noise deep in his throat. I felt his eyes raking over my body while Adam had his way with me. And when I opened my eyes for a moment, I saw Taylor still leaning against the back of the couch, watching with a cool smile. Not in any hurry.

I've never done anything like this, I thought. I never even dreamed about it.

I closed my eyes and surrendered to Adam's kisses. Then there were two new sets of hands touching my body. Hands

that removed my top, unbuttoned my jeans, and forcefully pulled them down to my ankles. The three of them were working together. All of their movements—Luke, and Adam, and Taylor—were possessive and hungry tonight, like a pack of wolves fighting over dinner. It sent goosebumps across my skin.

Adam didn't want to stop kissing me, but Taylor ripped me from his arms to take his turn. I surged upward with need as he kissed me, holding the back of my head with one hand and digging the other into the front of my panties. I moaned as the fabric pushed inward, and longed to feel more of him inside me.

Luke fell to his knees behind me and gave me my wish. He pulled my cotton panties down with so much force I was surprised they didn't tear—although I wouldn't have cared if they did. The only thing I cared about was the way my three men were fighting over me.

As soon as my panties hit the ground, Luke put a hand on my lower back and pushed me forward so he could bury his face in my pussy from behind. I groaned while two tongues pleased me from both ends—Taylor's in my mouth, and Luke's in my wet heat.

While they worshipped me, I caught a glimpse of Adam to the side. His lean frame was silhouetted by the window as he slowly undressed. First his shirt went over his head, then he unbuckled his belt and let his pants slip to the floor. The stiff rod of his cock hung in the air, proof of just how much he wanted me. Watching him undress was like another level of foreplay added to everything else that was happening to me.

“God, I've missed the way you taste,” Luke murmured into me. “I don't even mind sharing you with them.”

Before I could respond, he plunged his tongue deeper inside my pussy. I broke away from Taylor's kiss to crane my neck and moan loudly into the empty lounge.

“What if someone sees us?” I said. “Cameras...”

“No cameras in here,” Taylor said while bending down to nuzzle my neck. “I checked.”

Adam approached and gently pulled me away from the other two. He gave me a quick, rough kiss, then stared deep into my eyes.

“I can’t wait. I have to have you.”

“Get in line,” Luke growled.

“Looks like he’s jumpin’ to the front of the line,” Taylor said, pushing me toward Adam.

I gasped as he bent me over the front of the couch. I was putty beneath his arms as he pushed me lower to get just the right angle. I surrendered to his whims, and there was a beautiful, erotic trust that came with surrendering to him. I would take whatever these three men gave me. I was theirs, and they were mine.

Adam’s crown pressed against my entrance, and then both of us moaned a duet of pleasure together as he gripped my ass with his palm and buried himself inside of me in one long, forceful stroke. The force of it sent shockwaves of tingling ecstasy through my body, and I lost my balance and fell forward. Adam came with me, ensuring that he didn’t slip out, until he was on top of me on the couch.

I was as wet as could be, and Adam couldn’t hold himself back. He covered me with his body, wrapping his arms around my chest and cupping one breast, as he began gyrating into me. I was vaguely aware of Luke and Taylor undressing while Adam slammed his hard length into me, intense and wonderful from this prone angle, our skin rubbing together with perfect sensuality with every thrust.

His breath was hot against my ear as he said, “I’m not greedy. Let me prove that I can share.”

Adam grabbed a handful of my hair and tugged, forcing my head up. Luke was kneeling on the cushions in front of me, his own massive cock already as hard as it could be. I opened my mouth wide and accepted him eagerly, wrapping my lips around the tip. I couldn’t move my head—Adam held a vice-

like grip on my entire body as he continued to pound me—so Luke had to move his hips back and forth.

I'm being double-teamed.

Luke was tentative at first, like he wasn't sure how rough he could be. But soon my moans were so loud, even muffled by his hard length, that he knew I was loving every sweaty second of it. He pushed Adam's hand away and took hold of my hair in his fist, holding my head in place so he could relentlessly fuck my mouth.

I closed my eyes and savored the sensation. Being filled from both ends by them. I was their sex toy, to be used however they saw fit.

And I didn't want it any other way.

Adam pumped me from behind, let out a sigh, then slid out of me. Taylor took his place immediately, sitting back on his haunches and then pulling my hips back so that I was in a kneeling position on his cock. I began riding him like this, guided by his hands on my hips.

"There we go," he purred, a little extra twang in his accent. "That's *real* good."

The position was awkward while still leaning forward, so Luke rose to a standing position at the edge of the couch, pulling my head up with him until I was riding Taylor properly in the reverse-cowgirl position. Luke lessened the grip on my hair, so I took the opportunity to grab hold of his hard length, stroking him rapidly while sucking on his tip. Luke responded by craning his head back and letting out the deepest, most satisfying moan I've ever heard in my life.

I sped up, jacking him off into my mouth while bouncing on Taylor's cock.

Adam stood next to me, pulling my head away from Luke and toward him. His cock jumped the moment I wrapped my lips around it. I gave him a long suck, taking as much of him in my mouth as I could, then moved back to Luke and did the same thing. Back and forth I went, sucking one and then the other, all while stroking them with each hand.

Three of them. The thought drifted across the pleasure of my mind. *Three at the same time.*

Even though I was on top of Taylor, he was fucking me just as much as I was fucking him—thrusting his hips upward, meeting me stroke for stroke. The slapping of our skin grew louder the faster he went. We were all a sweaty mess, arms and chests glistening with moisture from our combined efforts. Luke grabbed one of my breasts and squeezed it possessively, so of course Adam grabbed the other one and did the same thing.

Finally Taylor wrapped his arms around my chest and pulled me away from the other two. He held me in a bear hug from behind, kissing the side of my neck, before throwing me forward on the couch. As if it were a choreographed dance, Luke rolled me over and then sank between my legs, burying into me from base to tip with slippery, lubricated ease.

I lost myself in the hungry arms of my men, grabbing and grasping and *pushing* into me from all sides. While Adam was fucking my mouth, Taylor pawed at my breasts and wrapped his lips around my nipple, biting down with *just* the right amount of pressure. Then Adam pushed my head to the side and made me take more of Taylor's cock for a few seconds. I accepted it all with eager enthusiasm, surrendering to the mindless drive of our bodies.

My orgasm was sudden and powerful, a trembling sensation that surged through my entire body. I clamped myself around Luke's cock, milking him while I came. He sped up to match my cries of pleasure. Even Adam and Taylor tightened their grips on my body, holding me down while I was racked by wave after wave of pleasure.

With three men around me, and keenly aware that I was having the first foursome of my life, my climax went on and on. Pleasure slammed into my body as roughly as Luke's hard length into my pussy. I arched my back and moaned around Taylor's cock, then around Adam's, then Taylor's again as they passed my head between them. Sharing me better than I ever could have expected.

Finally I felt Taylor shuddering inside my mouth. His fingers clawed at my neck, then my cheek, grabbing onto whatever he could as he rumbled with his own orgasm. Adam wasn't just a bystander—he tightened a fist in my hair, holding me down as Taylor exploded in my mouth.

“Take it,” Adam said, grinning down at me lustily. “Swallow every drop.”

I wrapped my lips around Taylor as hot ropes of his seed pulsed again and again. I swallowed him down, gripping his cock between my fingers like I could squeeze every drop from his rigid length.

“Oh my God,” Luke said while bottoming out inside of my pussy. His hand pawed at my breast, squeezing with a desire so powerful it bordered on pain. “Veronica... *Veronica!*”

A jolt of new pleasure shot through my spine like electricity as Luke came inside me. His roar of pleasure was so loud I almost didn't notice Adam climbing up over me, straddling my chest while gripping his own cock in a meaty fist.

Adam's eyes locked onto mine, dark and lustful and loving, and then they clenched shut as he blew his load all over my chest. I felt the strands of his come hit my breasts, my neck, my shoulder. Taylor finally pulled his cock out of my mouth and pushed me forward, allowing Adam to shove the tip of his dick into my waiting lips, giving me the last couple of spurts of his love. The two of them were moaning along with me, with a backdrop of Taylor rumbling laughs of approval.

“Atta girl,” he said. “I think she likes being shared.”

All four of us trembled, and our cries died down, and then we were still.



Veronica

Dexter gawked at me in the forward cabin. “You did *what?*”

Lowering my voice, I said, “I had a foursome with—”

“I heard you,” he snapped. “I was asking you for dramatic effect. You had a fourway!”

“Keep your voice down!” I hissed. “I’m not trying to broadcast it to the world!”

“Who cares if the two women in first class hear? They’ll probably be jealous.” He leaned toward me. “I. Want. Details.”

“I’m not the kind of girl who kisses and tells,” I said.

“You should have thought about that before you told me,” he replied. “Now it’s your duty as my best friend to give me every sweaty detail about what happened. Start spilling. Whose penis went into what orifice?”

I laughed and promised to tell him when we *weren’t* on a plane descending into Miami. We landed, opened the door to the jetway, and then began saying goodbye to all the passengers as they deplaned.

“That was a smooth landing, Captain Hendricks,” Dex said when the cockpit door opened.

Luke gave him a suspicious look, then turned to me. “He knows, doesn’t he?”

“It’s possible that I told my best friend what happened,” I said. “In very broad strokes.”

“Oh, I heard it’s *broad* all right,” Dex said with a wink.

Luke grumbled something and returned to the cockpit.

I got lunch in the Miami airport with Luke, which frustrated Dex, who had hoped I would get lunch with him and tell him all about what happened. But later that night after returning to Houston, we got drinks and I spilled all the details. Even the ones I didn't originally plan on sharing.

"It's official," Dex said. "You're my hero."

The next two weeks were a flurry of activity. Luke and I were questioned by the authorities several times, since we had been present for many of the flights where animals were illegally trafficked. Just when I thought we were done being grilled, we would receive *another* request to meet and discuss new details of the whole operation.

Eventually we discovered why: they were building an airtight case against Broussard, and had to continuously come back to us to verify minor details against what he was telling the authorities. Soon after that, he pleaded guilty to the entire operation.

It looked like Bernard Langston would hold out longer; he was hiring a team of lawyers who probably cost more per day than I made in an entire year. Luke and I were told that we might have to testify in court. But more evidence must have come out, because he, too, pleaded guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence. Luke and I breathed a sigh of relief at the news; it was officially over.

But it wasn't over for all of us. One night, while the four of us were at dinner, Taylor confided in the others all the trouble he was in.

"I don't understand," Adam said. "Antibiotics?"

"Probably a whole black market for that sort of thing," Luke speculated.

Taylor pointed at him and nodded. "Exactly. They're in short supply down there, especially these new antibiotics. They're expensive, and they aren't as strictly monitored as narcotics. But what I'm doing is still technically illegal."

"Do you have any options?" Adam asked.

“None that are good. Aside from continuing to deliver them.”

“Which is something you can’t keep doing,” I insisted. “I don’t want armed men barging in on my hotel again.”

Luke nodded. “I’ll share Veronica, but not with a man who puts her in danger.”

“I know, I know,” Taylor said. “I have to do something. The longer I put it off, the worse it’ll be for everyone.”

“Then let’s come up with a plan,” Adam said.

We talked it out that night. Went through all the pros and cons—and went through a few bottles of wine in the process. Eventually, we came up with a plan for Taylor. Luke knew some old Air Force buddies who now worked for one of the three-letter agencies in Washington. He called in a few favors, and before we knew it, Taylor was meeting with them and spilling his guts. He turned over names, numbers, addresses.

The government typically worked slowly, but in this case they had a sting operation planned and prepared within two weeks. Three separate deliveries were arranged—one to Puerto Rico, one to Cabo, and a third to Cancun. They had to happen in quick succession to keep word from spreading about the sting. Two seaplanes similar to Taylor’s were brought in for the operation, as opposed to Taylor flying his plane to each location.

I wasn’t privy to the details of the sting, but apparently it went off flawlessly. Arrests were made in each location, and even back in the United States with the two pharmacists who were supplying the antibiotics for delivery.

Taylor didn’t get off undamaged, though. Part of his plea deal was having his pilot’s license temporarily suspended, pending review from the board after one full year.

“I’m so sorry,” I told him when he received the news. The four of us were at my place watching football on Sunday. I hugged him tightly. “Having your license suspended...”

But Taylor was grinning from ear to ear. “You kidding me, Veronica? I’ve spent the last few years thinking I would be

permanently grounded if I ever got caught. I can handle one year without flying. Hell, that's a nice vacation."

I kissed him and wrapped him in a tight hug for a completely different reason. "You're going to have too much time on your hands."

"Afraid I'll be in your hair?"

"I'm afraid you'll be in Luke's and Adam's," I replied. "You have to share me with them!"

"Don't go worryin' about that," he said. "I'll find ways to spend my time. Plenty of good fishing out on the gulf. I can't fly my clients out to the water, but I bet I can rent a boat and make it work for a year." He looked over my shoulder. "Luke, got a second? Wanted to chat with you."

The two of them went over into the side hallway. I tried not to look like I was eavesdropping, but I was curious about what Taylor wanted to say—and a little worried, too.

"You didn't have to help me," Taylor was saying.

"Sure I did," Luke began to reply, but Taylor cut him off.

"*No*. You didn't have to help. In fact, it went against your own personal interest to help me out of this situation. My life would've crumbled and I would have become a mess of a man. The kind of man who isn't good enough for Veronica."

"I think you would have bounced back somehow," Luke said carefully.

"Stop downplaying what you did," Taylor insisted heatedly. "You're a good man, Luke. Even if you *are* former Chair Force. I owe you one, pal. And as long as you don't ask me to step aside and let you have Veronica, I'll be forever in your debt."

"No debt here," Luke said. "I told Veronica I could share her, and I meant it. Helping you was just the first step in proving it to her." He hesitated, then added, "Besides, you're a good guy. Even if you did learn your sloppy style of flying from dusting crops."

“I can still out-fly you seven days of the week, and twice on Sunday,” Taylor boasted.

Luke snorted. “Not with a suspended license.”

It almost seemed like they were about to fight. But then they embraced each other warmly in a long bro-hug, clapping each other on the back. When they pulled away, I was shocked to see tears in both of their eyes.

Maybe they can share me after all.

For a few days, it felt like all the drama was over. The guys fell into a nice groove sharing me. One night Luke crashed at my place, and the next I spent with Adam. On the third night, Taylor and Luke both came over and we had our first threesome. It felt vaguely funny to have a foursome before a threesome, but then again, life was full of funny little things like that.

Life was good.

But then the consequences of our actions came back to bite us in the ass.

Details of the animal trafficking case began to come out. More specifically, Gulf Airlines discovered that Luke and I had been moonlighting for Excelsior. The interview was quick, but short—I was terminated effective immediately.

Both of us went to bat for Adam, insisting that he hadn’t done any *legitimate* freelance work for Excelsior; he had only signed on for one flight to help catch Broussard. The people in charge at Gulf Airlines didn’t care, and he was let go, too.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Adam said while the four of us ate dinner at my place one evening. “It’s not your fault.”

“Actually, it quite literally *is* my fault,” I replied. “I was the one who kept insisting something shady was going on with Broussard’s flights.”

“Which you were correct about,” Luke said.

“I didn’t need to drag him into it, though,” I muttered.

Adam leaned across the table and kissed me. “Even knowing what I know now, I wouldn’t do it any differently.”

“Still, though,” I said.

“If you want to play the guilt game, I can take a turn,” Luke pointed out. “I’m the one who convinced you to start moonlighting at Excelsior, so I basically got you fired.”

“I knew what I was getting into, though,” I said.

Adam snapped his fingers and pointed. “Exactly. Me too.”

I blinked. “Oh.”

Taylor chuckled. “They’ve got you in a pickle. Might as well give up and stop feeling guilty.”

“I’ll try, but it will take a while,” I muttered.

“She’s cute when she pouts,” Adam said.

“Like a sad puppy,” Luke agreed.

“Besides, there’s no use in *any* of us dwelling on it,” Adam added. “We can probably get jobs at one of the other airlines. There’s a shortage of pilots *and* cabin crew. We’ll be fine.”

“Y’all could always take a page out of my book and become your own boss,” Taylor said with a grin. “Just, uh, skip the part about illegal antibiotic shipments.”

“Funny you mention that,” Luke said, pulling out his phone. “I heard through the grapevine that Bernard Langston’s entire fleet of private jets is being auctioned off.”

Adam looked at the screen and whistled. “Wow. That’s a lot more than I expected a plane to cost.”

“And that’s a heavily discounted price,” Taylor muttered. “It’s an expensive hobby to get into. My seaplane may require a lot more maintenance, but she’s cheap.”

“Too bad we don’t know any millionaires,” I joked. “We could pool some investors together and buy the planes, then recreate Excelsior for a fraction of the cost.”

“Yeah,” Luke said. “Too bad.”

Taylor perked up.

“What?” I asked.

“I think,” he said with a spreading smile, “that I have an idea.”

Epilogue



Taylor

One Year Later

“Okay,” I said, “now grip the yoke with both hands. Hold it firm, but don’t squeeze too tightly.”

“That’s what *she* said,” Veronica giggled.

I gave her a playful glare. “You’re not taking this seriously, love.”

“Sorry. Sorry.” She cleared her throat and took hold of the U-shaped control wheel. “Okay. I’m ready.”

I disengaged my own yoke slowly, letting her take control. Her eyes were wide like a child’s.

“Am I doing it?”

“You’re totally in control right now. Give it a little push. That controls the pitch. Just a little bit, now. Don’t go crazy on me.”

Veronica did as she was instructed, pushing the control wheel forward. The plane responded by pitching downward a tiny degree. She pulled it back quickly and let out an excited giggle. “I’m really flying!”

“You sure are.”

The flight board had met yesterday to review my application for reinstatement. I must have appeared like an innocent soul, or else I dazzled them with my charm, because they unanimously agreed that I could fly again. After spending a day making sure my plane was in flight shape, I had insisted on taking Veronica up.

Feels good to be back in the clouds, I thought with a huge smile. You can't take the sky from me.

“This is so different than just being a passenger,” Veronica said. She was breathing heavily. “It’s exhilarating.”

“Now you know why I love it so much.”

“Okay, I think I’m done.”

“You sure?” I asked. “I was going to tilt my seat back and take a nap.”

She bobbed her head. “Yes. I’ve had enough. I’m starting to get freaked out.”

“Easy there. It’s all right.” I took control of the yoke. “I’ve got it, now. You can relax.”

She let go and began panting as if she had just finished a marathon. I knew what she was feeling, because I had felt the same thing the first time I flew. Hell, I felt it after the wheels went up on *this* flight after being grounded for a year. That adrenaline rush never got old.

Let’s see how much more adrenaline we can squeeze today.

“All right, that was fun,” I said. “How about we head back home now?”

“Sounds good to—AHHH!” Veronica screamed as I threw the yoke forward and sent us into a steep dive. I rolled the plane at the same time, corkscrewing down and around until we were flying in the opposite direction as before. The maneuver was pushing the limits of what this old bird could handle, but she still made it through without falling to pieces.

“Oh, that feels good,” I said while leveling the plane out.

Veronica was staring daggers at me. “Why did you do that!”

“Just stretching my wings.”

“Next time warn me!”

“Sorry about that. So you want a warning before we, oh I don’t know, do a loop?”

Her eyes widened a fraction. “Don’t you *dare*.”

She barely got the last word out before I was yanking the yoke and sending us into a long loop.

I had fun teasing Veronica, but it was such a *pleasure* to fly again. Especially with the woman I loved. I'd said the words to her months ago, when we were sitting on the couch watching TV. I can't even remember the exact circumstances; she made a funny joke that had me in stitches, and I just sort of said it.

I love you.

It was weird being in love with a woman who was also in love with two other men. But weird in an intellectual sense, not in an emotional sense. In truth, the weird little polyamorous love-rectangle we had going along with Luke and Adam was pretty damn great. First off, everything in the bedroom was really hot. I never knew I enjoyed sharing a woman *that way*, but oh boy did it hit all of my sexual buttons. But even outside of that, Adam and Luke were two of my best buddies now, and the four of us hung out together more often than not.

It helped that we were all in business together.

A year ago, after having my pilot's license suspended, I reached out to all the rich contacts I had made over the years. Retired cropdusters in Iowa and farmers in Nebraska. Rich fishermen in Alaska. Oil men around Houston. I scraped and scrounged and begged.

And when we had enough investors, we bought several of Langston's old jets and founded VAULT Airlines. Originally it was just VALT, one initial for each of us, but Adam insisted VAULT sounded better. And really, it was just two planes—not quite a fleet, but hell, anything more than one plane felt like too many to an old flyer like me.

Luke and one of his old buddies were the primary pilots, while Adam and Veronica were flight attendants. With our two planes and flexible flight schedules, we were able to neatly fill the vacuum that Excelsior Air had left. It was even easier to pull off since we had a lot of contacts among the legitimate customers who had flown Excelsior over the years.

Granted, it was still early. We had only been operational for a few months. But the future looked bright.

Eventually, I stopped making Veronica scream in terror and flew back to the airport. One of the VAULT aircraft was sitting on the tarmac outside the private terminal; that would be Luke returning from a flight to Turks and Caicos, delivering a newlywed couple and family to their honeymoon.

“He’s not on board,” Veronica said, checking the calendar on her phone as we hopped out of my plane. “They landed half an hour ago. He and Adam are almost home.”

“Ask them if they want us to pick up tacos,” I said. “I’ve got a craving.”

We picked up dinner and drove home. Although we all had our own places, most nights we crashed together at Luke’s house, since it was the biggest. It also helped that he had a king-sized bed, which was important for *other* logistical reasons.

“How’d it feel?” Luke asked while we all ate dinner around the kitchen table.

I grinned broadly. “Like ridin’ a bike. Almost feels like the last year was just a bad dream.”

“You ready to do some real work?” Adam asked. “Don’t get me wrong. You’ve been a fine manager on the ground. But we all know that’s not where your heart is.”

“I never was good at math, but it seems like we’ve already got a full pilot roster.”

“Bobby knows he’s just been keeping your seat warm for you,” Luke said. “The other pilot position is all yours.”

“VAULT wouldn’t even be an airline without you,” Veronica pointed out. “It was your idea to buy two of those jets, and your investors that made it a reality.”

I leaned back in my chair. Life was good when you were surrounded by love and support.

“Well, I can’t say no to that. I’d love to fly one of those fancy planes.”

“I thought you said jet engines were overrated?” Luke asked.

I snorted. “I only said that ‘cause I wasn’t flyin’ one!”

“Then it’s settled?” Veronica asked hopefully. “You’ll take Bobby’s spot on the second plane?”

I looked around the table. All three of them seemed hopeful and excited. They *wanted* me to join them. I wasn’t just a competitor to the two men anymore. Sure, we had grown close over the last year, but seeing how much they wanted me to fly with them...

“Hell,” I said, “I can’t think of any group I’d rather fly with.”

Luke extended a hand toward me. “Welcome aboard, partner.”

I slapped his hand away and rose to give him a big hug. Then I did the same to Adam and Veronica.

It felt official.

“It’s a Friday night,” Adam said. “Let’s go out and celebrate.”

“Good idea!” Veronica added. “I’ll invite Dex.”

We headed out to our favorite sports bar and ordered a round of drinks. Dexter showed up not long after that and ordered a second round for everyone.

“To me!” he toasted. “I’m the one who brought all of you together, after all.”

“You may have brought us together,” Luke said, “but Veronica is the glue that’s keeping us together.”

“Well, that and the airline we all partially own,” Adam added.

“Right,” I said with a grin. “Looks may fade over time, but Limited Liability Corporations are forever.”

“Tell that to Excelsior,” Adam said. “Besides, I don’t think Veronica’s looks will ever fade.”

Luke gave me a sideways smile, then told Adam, “I was talking about you, pretty boy.”

Adam scoffed. “My hair is thicker than ever. I might go gray, but this hair will always be luscious.”

“Regardless of what may or may not fade,” I toasted, “I don’t think my feelings for Veronica are going to change.”

“Seconded,” Adam agreed.

Luke raised his glass. “To strong love, strong friendships, and even stronger tequila.”

“Preferably *legally* traded tequila,” Veronica added with a laugh.

We all toasted, then downed our drinks. Veronica went to the bar to get more. I smiled and admired her from across the room, leaning over the bar on her tip-toes, ass sticking out a little bit. Even after a year, the sight of her filled me with a kind of lust that was shocking. I wanted to take her into the bathroom and have my way with her right now.

A man stepped up to the bar next to her and held up a finger to the bartender. Then he turned to Veronica and said something. She laughed, and shrugged.

“Poor guy,” Luke said to me. He was admiring Veronica too. “He has no idea he has three of us to compete with.”

“Good thing Dexter’s deal isn’t still in effect,” Adam said.

I blinked. Dexter’s deal.

Oh no.

I jumped up from the table so fast I almost knocked the chair over, then hurried to the bar on long strides. The guy was turned sideways to talk to Veronica, and I caught the last bit of what he was saying: “I don’t want to be too forward, but do you—”

“*Veronica*,” I interrupted. “Will you go on a date with me?”

She blinked in surprise. “What, like tomorrow? There’s that new movie showing that I wanted to see...”

“I’m formally asking you out on a date.”

Veronica snorted. “We’ve been on, like, a hundred dates.” She turned to the other man. “You seem nice, but I’m taken. *Very* taken.”

The man winced. “Sorry for the trouble.”

“No trouble. You *almost* scored a date with this fine lady.”

Veronica gave me a confused look. “Taylor. I think you know more than anyone that I wouldn’t say yes to—”

“I never asked you out,” I explained.

“Huh?”

“You and I started seeing each other a year ago, but I never actually asked if you wanted to go out with me. Your agreement with Dexter is technically still in effect. So: will you go out with me?”

Her eyes widened with realization. Then they narrowed at me. “I don’t know. Now that I know I have options...”

“The next time we fly together,” I warned, “I’m gonna spin the plane in aileron rolls until you’re emptying your guts all over our passengers. I don’t even care if we lose their business.”

Veronica turned away from the bar and gazed up at me. “Taylor, I would love to go out with you.”

I grinned, slid my fingers around to the back of her head, and pulled her into a long kiss.

“I don’t understand what’s happening here,” the guy at the bar said. “Is this some weird fantasy thing you two do?”

“It’s not fantasy,” I said, smiling down at the woman I loved. “It’s the real deal.”

Bonus Scene



Want to see how our four airline lovers are doing in the future? Click the link below (or type it into a browser) to receive a special scene that was deleted from the original copy of the book!

<https://tinyurl.com/23kn84ub>



If you enjoyed this book, you're going to love this other Reverse Harem Romance from Cassie Cole: *Match Point*. You can [click here to buy it](#), or keep reading for a special sneak peek!



Miranda

March 2009

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Ellie asked as we tip-toed down the hallway.

“It’s fine,” Hailey replied.

“We’re going to get caught!” Ellie insisted.

“Oh, stop it. Miranda isn’t scared.” Hailey glanced at me over her shoulder. “Are you, Miranda?”

I hesitated.

“Oh, come on,” Hailey hissed at me. “You’re going pro any day now. You need to have some fun before you leave us.”

“I’m... I’m not going pro,” I protested. “At least, I haven’t heard anything from my coach.”

Hailey gave me a skeptical look. “Do you want to go back to your room and go to bed before curfew, like a good little girl?”

“Nope,” I lied.

Hailey nodded and continued on. Ellie gave me a betrayed look.

There was a curfew at the Lafayette Tennis Academy in Trenton, New Jersey. That curfew passed two hours ago. But there was a party in the boy’s wing of the dormitory, or so the rumors said, and we didn’t want to miss out on the action.

At least, that was the idea when we left our rooms. A chance at some excitement to break up the monotony of daily practices and workouts. But now that we were nearly to the party, and at risk of getting caught by the Academy supervisors, I was having second thoughts.

Ellie looked at me as if to say, *we never should have left*.

We crossed beyond the invisible barrier that separated the girls’ wing of the dormitory with the boys’ wing. Now we were in an area where we weren’t allowed to be. Now we were doing something forbidden. The thought thrilled my sixteen year old mind as much as it terrified me. I had never gotten in trouble in my life.

All the rooms in the dorm looked identical, but Hailey seemed to know the way. We rounded a corner, walked for a bit, and then came to a door just like all the others. Up close, I could hear the soft thumping of music inside. Hailey collected herself, then knocked.

The music dimmed, and then the door opened a crack. “Yo, it’s Hailey and her friends,” a male voice said inside. The door opened the rest of the way and we were hurriedly ushered

inside. As soon as the door was closed, the music was turned back up.

I gazed around the open communal space. There were nine or ten other students here; our arrival brought the male-to-female ratio close to even. And they were some of the best tennis prospects in the world, many of whom were close to going pro. There was Dominic deGrom, one of the few American boys who looked like a man fully grown despite just turning sixteen. Tristan Carfrae, Australia's best tennis prospect since Lleyton Hewitt, was playing beer pong against a pair of girls. Several others were crowded around the fridge in the kitchen, arguing over what drink to get. Two girls were making out on the couch while all the nearby guys pretended not to watch.

So this is what a party is like?

The host, a guy named Marty who Hailey knew, welcomed us and offered us drinks. I had never had beer before, so I accepted a Mike's Hard Lemonade instead. It was tart, and had a strange aftertaste unlike anything I'd drunk before, but it wasn't bad.

A TV in the corner was playing the Australian Open. Even though it was late at night here in New Jersey, it was daytime in Melbourne, and the Grand Slam event was well underway. Federer was about to defeat an unranked opponent in straight sets.

"Stop watching TV," Hailey scolded me. "We're at a party. Let's have fun!"

We watched beer pong for a little while. I had never seen it played in person; only on cheesy TV shows. With his messy blond hair and square jaw, Tristan reminded me of Heath Ledger—who had just passed away last year. The swoony Australian accent certainly added to the illusion. Hailey openly ogled the tall boy.

When one team lost, we jumped in and played a game. It was simple: throw a ping pong ball at the beer cups across the table. For the next hour, I stopped thinking about the enormous pressure I was under and allowed myself to relax. I drank, and

teased, and flirted. Things I had never been allowed to do considering how my life had gone.

I had been playing tennis since I was six. As soon as I showed any aptitude, my parents devoted their lives to helping me become the best player possible. The last ten years had been nothing but tennis camps, and private lessons, and weekend tournaments. All that hard work paid off and I was one of the top-ranked Junior Tennis athletes in the country, and was poised to go professional soon. Every minute of every day I felt the pressure to perform, to continue winning and advancing and improving.

So it was nice to stop thinking about all of that, even if it was just for one night.

After beer pong, everyone at the party—fourteen of us by now—got together and played *Never Have I Ever*. After that, someone announced that it was time to play *Spin The Bottle*. We gathered in a circle and placed an empty bottle of Mike's Hard Lemonade in the center. One or two people stepped away and said they weren't going to play.

At this point, I was delightfully buzzed. Everything sounded like a good idea to me, including this game, so I sat down and eagerly waited my turn.

The girl next to me spun, and the bottle came to a stop in Marty's general direction. The two of them knelt in the center of the circle to kiss. Yet as they locked lips, someone began calling out tennis scores. "Love! Fifteen! Thirty! Forty! *Game point!* Okay, that's enough you two. Way to start us off."

I bit my lip. I thought we would just be sharing a quick peck on the lips. Not five full seconds of making out. I glanced at the couch on the other side of the room, but decided I didn't want to make a scene by leaving early.

The next guy went, and then the girl after him. My nervousness grew stronger. I had only kissed one boy before, and that was when I was fourteen. A brief peck on the cheek. It hardly counted.

Then it was Tristan's turn. The Aussie hunk grinned around the circle, took hold of the bottle, and gave it a hard twist. The glass spun on the carpet for an incredibly long time, finally slowing down...

...and it stopped on me.

KEEP READING

MATCH POINT



Cassie Cole is a Reverse Harem Romance writer living in Branson, Missouri. A sappy lover at heart, she thinks romance is best with a kick-butt plot!

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