



CHAPTER ONE

CLAIRE

Sometimes you gotta fall before you fly.

—UNKNOWN

Passengers mistakenly assume I know what I'm doing simply because I'm wearing a flight attendant uniform. They couldn't be more wrong. I know how to arm airplane doors for departure. I know how to put on an oxygen mask. I know how to make a pot of coffee. I do not know where to find the S terminal at the Seattle airport. I've never been here before in my life.

Glancing heavenward, I spot a sign with letters and arrows. The letters must represent terminals, whereas the arrows clearly offer direction.

The S is a little faded against the blue background, so I don't blame the frazzled middle-aged woman for missing it. Maintenance needs to repaint the letter white to make it more legible.

As for my new career, I may not officially be on the clock, but the job starts now.

I smile at the woman wearing a plaid blazer and sporting a hairstyle Princess Diana made trendy in decades past. She's carrying a garment bag, and I hope she's heading to a wedding and not a funeral. Either way, it explains the stress she must be under.

I point past the food court with the giant wall of windows overlooking the runway and mountains of evergreens in the distance. "That way."

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“Thank you.” She squeezes my arm and takes off at a jog, dodging other passengers. “I’ve only got a few minutes,” she yells back over her shoulder.

My eyes bulge with concern. Maybe she was a track star in college.

With a shake of my head and a deep inhale of earthy-scented coffee brewing at one of the many Starbucks, I glance back at the sign overhead for directions to baggage claim. Once I’m working trips, I’ll pack everything in a carry-on, but today I’m moving into my crash pad and needed to bring some extras.

I head in the direction the arrows point me. Wheels on my roller bag click against tiles until I reach a double set of sliding glass doors leading to the outside world. The doors whoosh open, but I stop.

Passengers part from behind me to cross through the threshold ahead. They probably have friends waiting to pick them up. They might even be going home. As for me, I’m on my own in a new city.

My pulse thumps harder. I should call my boyfriend, Wyatt, before I leave the safety of airport security. I want to give him my full attention, and the moment I exit the safety of the sterile area, my attention will be on my surroundings.

This is where my true-crime obsession comes in handy. I constantly watch for suspicious-looking characters. I’m always practicing to help police find a getaway car by memorizing random license plate numbers. And flight attendant training taught us how to defend ourselves by making a weapon out of a can of soda in a sock.

As for my checked luggage, it could take up to twenty minutes to arrive at the carousel. I’ve got time.

I sidestep so as not to impede the flow of humanity any longer and pull my phone from my crossbody bag. The contact list displays Wyatt posed in front of the Golden Gate Bridge, the wind lifting his messy blond curls, and sunglasses concealing his icy-blue gaze. He’s not smiling, but he wears the knowing smirk that intrigued me in the first place. He possesses the confidence that I’ve lost.

I tap the old-school phone icon, then hold its modern version to my ear. The ringer trills. I bite my lip.

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Another ring. I glance at my watch.

At least Wyatt and I are in the same time zone for the moment, so we don't have the complication of trying to catch each other at different hours of the day. It's almost four thirty, meaning he could be in one last meeting or trying to beat the rush-hour traffic home.

The call beeps that it's been disconnected moments before my phone vibrates an alert of an incoming message. I read Wyatt's text. He's in a meeting.

I needed to hear his encouraging words. Even if he was distracted or rushed, I could have found strength in the sound of his voice, in knowing I'm not alone.

I didn't used to mind being alone so much. I was fiercely independent. Determined to succeed.

Until I failed.

Glancing around, I make sure I'm still not in anyone's way before typing out a quick response.

Landed. I'll call again when I get to my crash pad. Love you.

I love him enough that I wish I'd given up this job to be with him right now, but as a former ballerina who dropped out of college to join a dance troupe and currently can't even demonstrate technique in teaching, I don't have many choices. I mean, I could be a barista, but serving coffee in the sky comes with free flight benefits. So here I am with hopes of a honeymoon in Maui. Though if I'm not transferred home to be based at SFO at the end of the month, the free flights are not worth our time apart.

After stuffing my phone inside the pocket of my company peacoat, I lift my chin to face the world. I won't delay my journey any longer.

With a deep breath, I merge back into foot traffic, making my way into an open area of ticket counters and winding TSA lines. An escalator

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lowers me to baggage claim. I pause at a monitor to check which carousel will spit out the luggage from San Fran.

“I missed my flight.”

The back of my neck prickles at the familiar tone. I’m in a foreign city. No tones should sound familiar. Unless it’s the woman I’d directed to the S terminal.

Glancing over, I spot her plaid jacket. At least she’s on her phone and not talking to me. My stomach still churns in anxiety for her.

“I won’t be able to make the wedding now.”

A groan escapes my lips right as a pilot strides between me and the passenger. He pauses, facing me, and his expression of surprise blocks my view.

“You okay?” Concern darkens his eyes to the color of French roast, but he offers a hopeful smile. And somehow he carries off a clean-cut look even with a five-o’clock shadow. Could be his perfect eyebrows.

“I’m fine.” I lean forward to explain in confidence. “I just overheard a passenger say she was going to miss a wedding.” I nod past him toward the woman on the phone. “I gave her directions to Terminal S, but evidently her plane left without her.”

His head tilts. “Terminal S?”

I scrunch my nose. “I knew she was cutting it close, but I still feel bad.”

He faces me completely, one hand resting on the top of his suitcase handle. His uniform is fancier than mine. Gold stripes line the shoulders of his black sweater, and if that’s not enough, it’s worn over a white button-down and black tie. He also has a thick diver’s watch on his wrist, which I kind of admire. In the age of smartwatches, he’s an analog guy.

“Are you based here?” he questions.

“Yes. It’s my first day in Seattle.” I blow out my breath to get rid of jitters. “Is it that obvious?”

“Well.” He rubs the stubble on his cleft chin. “Had it been your second day, you might have known Terminal S is closed for construction.”

My heart thumps to a stop, and I grip my chest in the same way as a victim of cardiac arrest. “She asked me to point her toward Terminal S. I saw a sign.”

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He glances up at the sign nearest us.

I follow his gaze to find the blue *S*, hard to read once again. It must be purposely colored in to hide it, like camouflage. The Lady Di wannabe is missing a wedding because of me.

“Oh no.” I’ve barely started my new career, yet I’ve already failed this one as well.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself.” One corner of his mouth quirks up. “She would have had to take a shuttle to get to the temporary remote location, and if she was already running late, it’s not probable she would have made it anyway.”

Though the two of us both wear crew uniforms, he’s the employee passengers should be asking for directions. I only wore mine to get through security with a full-sized bottle of shampoo.

“Hope your day improves.” The pilot nods goodbye, then heads toward the exit.

As soon as he moves, I’m exposed.

The woman ends her call and scans the area.

My stomach churns as if I’m about to get caught doing something wrong. Unfortunately, it’s too late to fix the mistake. My best bet is to escape confrontation.

I trot to catch up with the pilot and use him as a shield from the passenger’s gaze. Then, because I need a disguise to keep from being recognized, I rip my caramel brown hair from its standard bun and shake it free to hang down past my shoulders.

He stops again. “What are you doing?”

I stop with him, digging inside my crossbody bag for sunglasses. There. I slide the tortoiseshell frames up my nose. “I don’t want her to spot me.”

He takes me in. “You do realize it’s October in Seattle, right? Wearing sunglasses in the rain will only make you more conspicuous.”

I twist my mouth in concession to his logic, but I refuse to remove my shades. “Maybe people will simply assume I’m a celebrity trying to conceal her identity.”

He blinks. “In a flight attendant uniform?”

My shoulders sag. This dress is going to be the death of me.

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“Hey.” He touches my upper arm. “You tried to help. You did your best. What are you afraid of?”

I snort. If sending travelers to a gate that doesn’t exist is my best, then I should be fired before I even begin. “I’m afraid she’ll be angry with me.”

He crosses his arms like he’s buckling in for the duration of my flight from this passenger. “You’re a people pleaser, huh?”

I’ll take People Pleasing for \$500, Alex. With a side of self-criticism and some unwanted psychoanalysis.

I roll my eyes, though he can’t see them behind the dark lenses. “It’s my job to make passengers happy.”

“It’s never your job to make *anyone* happy.”

Okay, now I’m more lost than the traveler looking for a gate that doesn’t exist.

He obviously reads my confused expression, because he explains. “As a flight attendant, your job is to do what’s best for customers, even if it makes them unhappy. Think of all the unhappy people when a flight is canceled due to mechanical failure. Yet it’s better for them if they don’t fly on the plane until it’s fixed.”

If only. “A mechanical failure is a lot different from my failure.”

“Okay, you failed. Now go apologize and make it right.”

I rip the sunglasses off my face to make sure he receives the full impact of my crazy eyes. “I can’t get her on a plane that’s already taken off.”

He clicks his tongue.

“Oh, there you are.” The woman I’d been hiding from circles the pilot/therapist to confront me, and I’m not sure which will be worse—his reprimand or the rebuke I’ve got coming. “You look different with your hair down.”

The pilot lifts his dark eyebrows, as if waiting to see how I respond. Or maybe he’s questioning my previous response. Probably both.

I cringe inwardly, wishing I’d ducked into a bathroom stall rather than behind this guy. Though this guy did give me advice for awkward situations.

I swallow down my dread. “Ma’am, I’m very sorry you missed your

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flight. Today is my first day in Seattle, and I didn't realize Terminal S is under construction."

She trills in laughter.

I eye the pilot to see if he'd expected such a reaction. *I sure didn't.*

He rubs his mouth, perhaps attempting to hide amusement, but his straight white teeth are too bright to be hidden.

I frown at him before focusing on her.

She adjusts the garment bag over her shoulder. "My nephew got cold feet and canceled his wedding. If I'd made it onto the flight, it would have been a waste of the whole weekend."

My lips part, but I remain speechless. I guess today could have been worse. I could have been the jilted bride.

Waving off my shock, she attributes our circumstances to "God's mysterious ways and all that." Then she plants a hand on her hip and looks around. "Could you help me retrieve my checked luggage?"

My jaw continues to hang open. I slide my gaze toward the pilot. He knows more about this stuff than I do. "I don't think you're asking the right person . . ."

He straightens his tie and shoots me another dazzling grin before stepping in. "You'll want to head to the customer service desk." He motions toward a booth between carousels. "They'll take care of you."

"Oh, thank you." The woman squeezes his arm, then reaches to squeeze my hand as well.

I awkwardly grasp her cold fingers. This is definitely not how I expected our interaction to end, and if that's part of God's mysterious ways as well, then I'm grateful. Though I've never really stopped before to give Him thanks. "Take care."

I watch her run off.

The pilot lifts his chin, as if to say, *I told you so.*

I jam my sunglasses back on rebelliously. "What?" For all he knows, I really am a celebrity in disguise.

He extends a hand. "Nathan Stuart at your service."

I hesitate before accepting his handshake. Yeah, he helped me out, but I don't want him to think I welcomed his lecture.

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He drops his hold, but that quirky corner of his lips slides up and down a couple of times. “After all that, you’re not going to properly introduce yourself?”

I push my shades atop my head to meet his mocking gaze directly. “You’re the one who told me it’s not my job to make others happy.”

“Well, you’ve failed.” Nathan’s half smile opens into full bloom. “Because it makes me happy that you’re taking my advice.”

My icy glare melts under the warmth of his beam, and I can’t help laughing at the irony. “As a people pleaser, I call this a win-win.”

“Touché.” Nathan studies me, his smile thinning into contemplation. “And what do I call you?”

This is where I either tell him my name or escape into anonymity. Though I’d claimed to feel like a winner, it’s still been an embarrassing first day that I’d prefer to keep from becoming airline lore.

My longing to succeed wars with my desire to make others happy, but as Nathan already stated, not trying to make him happy still makes him happy. Thus, I’ll bid him adieu and hope that we never work a trip together and he never learns my identity.

“Claire Holloway.” My name echoes over the loudspeaker.

I startle. So much for refusing to introduce myself. “What’d I do now?”

Booming voice: “Please claim your luggage at carousel eight.”

Oh. Of course.

Nathan grins in triumph. “Nice to meet you, Claire Holloway.”

I give a resigned shrug. “Why settle for a proper introduction when I can wait for yet another embarrassing moment?”

He chuckles. “Go get your luggage. I’ll watch your carry-on.”

I narrow my eyes. They say you’re not supposed to leave luggage with people you don’t know. Then again, I suppose we’ve been introduced, however awkwardly.

Still cautious, I walk backward toward carousel eight. “Are you just trying to keep me from causing more chaos on my first day?”

He grins. “Somebody has to.”



CHAPTER TWO

NATHAN

*A certain amount of opposition is a great
help to a man. Kites rise against,
not with, the wind.*

—JOHN NEAL

I've met incompetent flight attendants before, but that's not the word I'd use for Claire Holloway. She apparently obsesses about being competent. In fact, I'd wager she's used to being so completely competent that it's thrown her to try something new. Why else would she consider herself a failure for making one mistake?

Inexplicably, I've never seen a passenger so happy to miss a flight. "That was a pretty amazing response to giving bad directions," I call after her. "Someone's looking out for you."

"You?" she challenges.

I'm only keeping an eye on Claire in order to make sure she has a plan to get her oversized suitcase to her crash pad or wherever she's staying. I don't want her to beat herself up more when she fails to wrangle all that luggage onto the light rail—or worse, uphill in the rain.

"Someone besides me." I nod up toward heaven.

"Well, I'm watching you." She does the warning where she points to her eyes, then points to me.

I can't help smirking. It's been a while since I noticed a woman this

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way. She got my attention when she shook her hair out like a supermodel and put on her sunglasses like a movie star.

As soon as she's within hearing range, I motion toward her giant pink suitcase. It would be much easier for me to pull two carry-ons than for her to try to wrestle hers alongside that thing. "Want some help getting to your crash pad?"

"Why?" she asks with suspicion.

Did she miss the whole thing about God watching out for her?

I should probably be offended, but it wasn't long ago that I was in her shoes. Well, not her high-heeled Mary Janes, but starting a new job in a big city. So I'm aware that her distrust comes from rational apprehension during transition. And I'll settle for knowing her people-pleasing behavior doesn't override stranger danger. "Because I'm a nice guy."

She narrows her eyes. "So are many serial killers."

Her response startles a guffaw from me. "You know a lot of serial killers?"

"I watched *Forensics Files* every night during training." She says this in the same way Will Turner informed Jack Sparrow that he practiced with swords for the sole purpose of killing pirates. "It's taught me to be suspicious."

Serious is the new hilarious, though I smother my laughter for her sake. "How are you getting all these bags home, Sherlock?"

She pulls out her phone and studies it. "My condo isn't far. The crash pad owner said it's a short walk."

"Hmm . . ." I probably know the place. Lots of pilots and flight attendants stay there. "The Tudor-style complex with red doors?"

She draws back. "How'd you know?"

I'm tempted to tell her that's where I find all my murder victims, but then I wouldn't be living up to the nice-guy claims. "I rented out beds in my own crash pad there."

She lifts her chin to look down her pert nose. "And none of your roommates ever went missing?"

I once again consider messing with her, but she's about to discover that what the crash pad advertisement dressed up to look like a charming

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village more closely resembles a postapocalyptic version of Bavaria. “Not a single one. Come on.”

I lead the way without offering to take either of her bags the way I normally would. She obviously needs to feel in control even though she’ll be putting her life in a pilot’s hands every single day on the job.

“Where are you going?” she calls.

I glance over my shoulder to find her studying the signs that got her into trouble in the first place.

“My email says to follow arrows to the train, then cross a sky bridge to the street that I can take uphill.”

Yeah. In the rain. “I’ve got a drier route.” I step onto an escalator leading to a sky bridge.

“Just because you’re a nice guy doesn’t mean I’m going to follow you,” she insists, even as she follows. “I know how to make a weapon out of a can of soda in a sock.”

I step off the escalator and pause to visualize such a weapon. “How does that work exactly?”

She joins me, then swings an imaginary sock. “You put the can inside and use it as a nunchuck.”

Now I’m nun-chuckling. Because even if a skilled martial artist had a soda in a sock, it’s still a soda in a sock. And I doubt she’s skilled in martial arts. “Did you learn this from watching *Ninja Turtles*?”

The sky bridge leads to a parking garage where passengers can stay dry while waiting for pickup. We don’t have to worry about precipitation, but we do need to worry about missing our shuttle and having to wait another fifteen minutes for the next one. So I grab one of Claire’s bags to hurry her toward our destination.

She jogs after me, apparently more concerned about convincing me of her fighting skills than about the threat of having to fight me. “They taught us in flight attendant training.”

Okay, it’s too sad to be funny. “Is that how you’re supposed to defend the cockpit from hijacking?”

We reach another escalator, this one taking us back down to ground level. She steps on and twists her lips in thought. “If I have to.”

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“Poor terrorists.” And this is why I’m an FFDO—a Federal Flight Deck Officer. I’m licensed to carry a firearm in case my flight attendants aren’t able to halt hijackers with a knee-high sock and ginger ale.

“What do you suggest I do?”

I roll our bags off the escalator and next to a bench, and check the street for a white shuttle displaying the Marriott name in cursive script. It comes by every fifteen minutes. With the way her day is going, we probably just missed it.

“We’ll wait here for one of the many shuttles that will take us to the hotel next to your condo. Drivers don’t mind giving flight crew a ride if we tip them. Rideshare apps charge an airport fee, which makes a half-mile ride much more expensive than it should be.”

“Oh.” She parks her luggage, then looks up and down the roadway filled with vans and buses. She faces me again. “Okay. But that’s not what I meant. How do you suggest I fend off an attacker instead?”

She really wants a self-defense lesson right now? “What else did they teach you in training?”

She shrugs. “They basically turned on the song ‘Kung Fu Fighting’ and let us practice beating up dummies.”

From now on I’m giving all flight attendants the fundamentals before we take off. “You know about a knee to the groin, right?”

She nods vigorously. “Want me to demonstrate?”

“No!” I reflexively step backward and cross my forearms to block. “Uh, no. It’s very effective, so I just wanted to make sure you’re aware of it.”

She brings her fists up in front of her face and bounces in place for a moment. Then she stops and shakes out an ankle, like she twisted it. “What else?”

“Well, a knee is great if you have the room. Same with a palm strike. It’s easier on your arm, and also, the attacker won’t be expecting it the way he would a closed fist.”

She uncurls her fingers into jazz hands. Unless she’s performing a fight scene in *West Side Story*, she needs more help.

My lips twitch. “We’re not singing showtunes.”

“I’m a ballerina, not a singer. Or, I was.”

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“Makes sense.” The grace. The bun. The entertainment. “May I?” I step behind her and gently wrap my arm around her neck to demonstrate a choke hold.

“Please.”

Her response concerns me for her safety even more than the sock-and-soda thing. But at least she’s not accusing me of being a serial killer anymore. I adjust my elbow underneath her chin without squeezing.

She smells sweet like cherry blossoms, and suddenly it’s spring on the UW campus. Much more inviting than the exhaust that normally scents the parking garage. I can’t help wondering if there are cherry trees where Claire’s from and if that’s why she picked this scent. My ex preferred lavender from the farms we visited during their annual festivals. I exhale the bad memories to keep from actually choking Claire.

“If your attacker comes closer, you don’t have the room for a full palm strike. So you use your elbow. It’s the sharpest point on your body.”

Claire flaps like a chicken, which could also work. She’d be able to break free because her attacker would double over in laughter. Or be swept off his feet by her overwhelming adorableness. I resist the urge to do both.

“Put the full force of your body into it. Step one foot behind you and pivot with an elbow out.”

She splits her stance and braces herself.

The Marriott shuttle hisses to a stop in front of us. Its accordion door squeaks open.

“Get off her.”

For the first time I realize how we must look.

I barely have time to glance up before a large Samoan driver charges down the steps with vengeance in his eyes. Protecting myself from him is going to be a lot tougher than from Ninjarella here.

Releasing my hold, I jump back, hands wide.

He continues like a linebacker. If I don’t explain fast enough, I’m going to find myself on the ground with little Seahawks flying circles around my head.

“Wait.” Claire jumps in front of me, reflexes quicker than I expected given her history with jazz hands. “He was training me in self-defense.”

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The linebacker slows. His eyes narrow to warning slits directed my way before sliding to check on her. “You want self-defense? I can demonstrate self-defense.”

A nervous laugh startles from her lips. “Not necessary.” She smiles over her shoulder at me, as if sharing a joke, but much like our hypothetical bad guy, I am not seeing any comedy in this situation. She catches a glimpse of what is probably an alarmed expression on my face, sobers, then turns to defend me once again. “No. Really. I think I’m good with my soda-in-the-sock technique.”

“Your what?” The driver doesn’t give her time to respond, but that’s okay, because there’s no appropriate response to such a question. He drops his chin with the look of a disappointed parent. “Are you two together?”

“We just met,” Claire says, though that answer isn’t going to do me any favors either. “I have a boyfriend.”

I straighten with a little disappointment of my own. Claire’s significant other should have flown up to help her settle in and taught her to protect herself. It would have saved me a lot of trouble, at least.

I motion toward the menace. “It’s Claire’s first day in Seattle, and she’s a little overwhelmed. I was trying to help.”

“By choking her?” The driver crosses his beefy arms. “Get on the shuttle if you want a ride. I assume by your uniforms that you’ve got crash pads.”

I just finished a two-day trip, and my entire body aches from being cramped inside a cockpit. I need a workout. I need sleep. I need to eat a home-cooked meal. I don’t need to argue anymore with a guy twice my size over a woman I’ve just met.

“Thanks, man.” I grab my suitcase and nod to Claire as I pass. I assume she’ll follow, but if not, she’s capable. She’ll be fine, soda in a sock or not.

Preferably not.

Glancing back, I find her watching me climb the steps, uncertainty clouding her countenance. I’m not sure whether she’s thankful for my help or sorry for almost getting me pummeled. I’m not even sure I’ll ever see her again. Seattle is a big base, and if she has a boyfriend, it’s probable she’ll transfer to a base closer to home as soon as possible.

Meeting Claire has been memorable and will make an entertaining

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story. But nothing more. Even if ballerinas who watch *Forensic Files* and smell like cherry blossoms turn out to be my type.

I stash my suitcase and attachable cooler on the shelving unit, then drop into a sideways-facing seat and wait. Our driver continues to question Claire outside as if she's an assault victim. If I'd truly been strangling her, does he really think I would've climbed on his shuttle?

I rub a hand down my face. From now on I should Uber.

The bus rocks. Claire drags her carry-on up the steps. She'll have to make another trip for her other suitcase.

I stand to take her first bag so she can retrieve the second. "Here."

The driver appears behind her and tosses her oversized suitcase onto the top shelf of the luggage rack, as if it were as light as a wallet. "Sit," he barks.

All right then. I drop back down and pinch my mouth closed, the perfect passenger.

Claire presses her lips together too, but with the way her shoulders shake, she's got to be holding back laughter. Her gaze sparkles my way.

Maybe I'm overtired, but as the events of our ridiculous circumstances parade through my mind, I have to avoid eye contact to keep from chuckling along. Just the timing of Claire's gasp when I walked in front of her by the baggage carousel is hilarious. I'd been concerned for her, while she'd only wanted to use me as a shield from a traveler she'd sent in the wrong direction.

Though I'm still refusing to look at her for sanity's sake, I know she sits directly across from me by the sound of seat cushions puffing. Our driver takes his spot with a grunt, yanks the door shut, and merges into traffic.

"Home, James," Claire says, loud enough for only me to hear.

Mirth drops my head backward, crown to the cool glass. Our shuttle is far from a limousine, and Claire is far from home. Hopefully, "James" can't hear my laughter over the sound of traffic. I wouldn't want him to think I'm laughing at his expense.

The shuttle rocks to a stop. I jerk upright, afraid I'm about to give Claire an actual demonstration of self-defense moves as I get thrown off the shuttle.

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But we're only pulling to the curb for more passengers. As they climb on, my gaze meets Claire's, and we both bust up again.

A family struggles past, shooting us curious looks as if expecting us to share our joke. But I'm not sure how to explain. I don't even think I could repeat "Home, James" without laughing harder. And strangers wouldn't find that funny at all.

It's one of those feelings you wish you could bottle for all the other times when reality gets too serious. It's the prescription I've needed to get on with my life. Now the medicine cabinet is unlocked, and my day feels lighter. Despite these clouds.

We stop once more for another flight attendant, a blonde who's curvier than Claire. She beams at me as if she's used to getting all the male attention, but had she been the one I put in a headlock, the physical touch wouldn't have felt so innocent. Surprisingly, I prefer the way Claire obliviously performed a chicken dance.

Claire nods to the new crew member, then smiles at me once more before letting her giggles fade away.

I watch her watch the city pass outside the water-droplet-covered windows. Driving to the hotel winds us through a longer route than we'd have taken had we walked, but even with traffic, it probably takes the same amount of time. Plus Claire gets to see more of her new base.

I can't help thinking she needed this too. She arrived feeling like a failure and absurdly afraid of serial killers, but a little laughter has helped loosen her up, and she now seems comfortable with the uniquely urban mix of hotels and homeless tents.

We circle the parking garage back to the sky bridge we would have taken if on foot. Playing tour guide, I point to the elevated light-rail station. "You can catch that train directly downtown to the Space Needle or to board a ferry for Bainbridge Island."

"It's pretty here," she says. "Similar to San Francisco, but greener."

"That's why we call it the Emerald City," I respond automatically. But I'm logging this new info that she's from the Bay Area.

If I'm right, she shouldn't be afraid of big cities. Unless she's worried

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about getting killed by Sasquatch. That's more of a Pacific Northwest thing.

Up the hill, we reach the Marriott right before her condos and the mix of older neighborhoods. Many of the split-levels and ranch-style homes are painted in bright colors, which I figure are meant to balance out the rainy skies of winter. I personally opted to paint my bungalow a dusty blue, like the view of twilight from above the clouds.

Once our driver pulls under the hotel's portico, the family files off first.

I stand and grab Claire's bags. I'll make sure she gets safely to her condo.

"Don't," our driver snaps. "My sister was a flight attendant until she got mugged on her way home and had to have retina surgery. Nobody is getting their retinas scratched on my shift."

Claire flinches. "That's awful. Is she okay?"

He shrugs. "She lost peripheral vision in one eye and kept scraping up one side of her car when she drove, so I became her driver." He turns to glare at me, as if I'm the cause of his sister's car accidents.

I hold up my palms in innocence. "My fingernails aren't long enough to scratch someone's retinas."

"You get off here anyway." He points a beefy hand toward the open door. "I have time to drive the ladies to their crash pad, and I don't want you to see where they live."

Right. I'm still the threat.

"Bless your heart for taking care of your sister," the other flight attendant draws. "And bless your heart for taking care of us."

This is goodbye with Claire then. Not that saying goodbye in a different parking lot would have changed anything.

"Nathan lives in the same apartment complex." Claire argues my case even though she doesn't have all the facts.

I thank her with a small smile. "Not anymore. I bought a house across the street."

"Oh?" She seems to deflate.

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Did she feel this same connection that expanded in my chest like a breath of fresh air? Of course not. She's connected to someone else.

"Maybe I'll see you around," she offers.

I grab my bag and shoot her a teasing grin. Though we're saying good-bye, I'm in a better mood now than before we met. "Only if I'm looking for trouble."

Her lips soften into a return smile. And I think we're both better off.

The airline industry is both too big and too small. It's usually the opposite of however you want it to be in any particular situation, and in this situation, I admit I would have enjoyed getting to know Claire better. So I doubt I'll see her again.