

Chapter 1

“Oh, by the way . . . I think I might have killed him.”

I stop in the queue, thunderstruck, and press my phone to my ear. Maybe I’d just misheard in the hubbub of the airport. Good grief, I *hope* I’d just misheard.

“You . . . You did *what?*!” I gasp into my phone.

“It happened last night. At the house party . . .” My sister laughs uncertainly.

I press the display so tight to my ear that I can hear the blood rushing. Someone at the back of the queue is trying to tell me something, but I don’t turn around. My sister’s voice is practically oozing guilt. “We had a few too many Moscow Mules, I’m afraid. We ran out of ginger beer and went to get some more . . .”

“This isn’t about the ginger beer,” I pant. “*Who* did you kill?!”

“Oh, Liv, I’m so sorry! I know how much you thought of . . .”

A wheelie suitcase is rammed into my calf from behind.

I stumble forwards, almost drop my phone but catch it just in time. I press it back to my ear, my hands sweating and glance back at the queue in confusion.

An older lady with a sweet hat and a pink perm bares her false teeth at me. “Miss! You’re holding up the queue!”

There was something to say for her modern false teeth: the pearly-white gnashers looked like they were capable of killing somebody too. I hastily clamp my phone between my head and shoulder, kick my duffle bag towards the check-in counter and simultaneously try to get my documents and passport out of my rucksack, so as not to hold the queue up any further.

“. . . and then it was too late,” my sister quietly concludes.

“What was too late?! I didn’t hear what you said in between.”

The steward at the counter professionally raises his eyebrows to signal that I need to get a move on.

Out of sheer desperation, I pull all of the papers that I can find out of my rucksack, and slap a thick wodge onto the counter – which unfortunately turns out to be the wrong move.

Because right at the top of the pile there's a half-naked man stretched out on shiny paper. I quickly retrieve the glossy magazine, only to reveal another copy underneath. And this time the naked man on the cover isn't even wearing shorts.

The airline employee's eyebrows meet his hairline.

"They're nude studies," I blurt out. "I'm an art student."

"You *were* an art student," my sister unceremoniously corrects me. "For three whole months."

Her words are like a gut punch. I try to ignore it and stuff the magazine back in my rucksack and show the steward my drawings as proof. "Here, look, a charcoal sketch of the musculus rectus abdominis."

The fact that my studies mainly centred on male abdominal muscles doesn't seem to impress him much. He looks up from my sketches and looks at me coolly. "Your ID, please."

"I'm old enough to buy the magazines!"

"For God's sake, Liv. He just wants to check you in," my sister groans. "I shouldn't have let you go to the airport on your own. Mum was right; you're still a baby. Are you sure you're ready for an audition abroad?"

"First of all, I'm eighteen!" I slap my passport onto the wodge of papers and watch as the steward scans it. "And secondly, it's not an audition, it's a competition. People from across the world competing for one place. It's an absolute honour to even be in the first round."

"You won the ticket for the first round in a bottle top."

"And I had to drink fifty-two litres of Love Pop Soda," I huffed. "*Fifty-two litres!* I felt sick for three whole days."

“Your flight leaves in forty-five minutes,” the steward informs me.

I sigh. “Good, at least I don’t have very long to wait.”

He passes me the boarding card flashing a perfectly rehearsed smile. “Boarding is nearly closed. You’ve still got to go through security, through the duty-free maze and get to the last gate that this wonderful airport has to offer. You’ve got exactly fifteen minutes to get there. If you run, you’ll manage it in twenty.”

W-what?!

“Mum told you three times that you had to check in two hours before departure,” my sister added.

Mum had a lot to say about me losing my university place and flying to Greece to take part in a competition that had no guarantees. But just after “*You’ve got to stop chasing pipe dreams, and get a real job,*” I stopped listening. I must have missed the airport bit.

Okay, you’ve got fifteen minutes. You can do it, Liv!

I kick my duffle bag onto the belt next to the counter, snatch up my documents and skid Hollywood-style through the nearest barrier tape. At least that’s how I imagine it. In reality, the old lady with the pink perm is laughing herself silly at me almost scalping myself, dropping all of my papers and fumbling about on the floor to pick them all up and stuff them back in my rucksack. Then I manage to race away at a speed that would indeed be worthy of an Oscar.

“We need to talk later! I pant into the phone. “I need to know who you’ve killed!” *And I hope to God that you didn’t mean it literally!*

I hang up and try to put my phone in my trouser pocket, but my sequinned arm gets caught on my just-as-sequinned stomach. When I glance down, my hair gets caught in the sequins too, which leaves me limping through security like a red-haired hunchback. On the bright side, the sequins are so flashy that all the other passengers just get out of my way.

A security lady kindly frees me. She seems hypnotised by my chest, which makes me laugh. The sequins aren't just for decoration. They're the centrepiece of my secret mission. A mission that will pay dividends, even if I don't make it into the actual competition – which, by the way, would be rather unlikely. Because it's not about that for me. It's about all of the cameras that are going to be there.

My sister is going to be so impressed.

Mum will burst with pride.

And the university chancellor will choke on her English tea when she sees me grinning out of the television screen surrounded by international reporters, the sparkling lettering glittering on my top. Or to put it another way: I will prove, in front of her very eyes that I can rebuild my life, which was falling to pieces thanks to her. Everything will be all right – just as long as I don't miss the flight.

A loudspeaker announcement interrupts my thoughts.

“Final boarding call for passengers Reeve Flemming and Livia Woodward. Please report immediately to your gate.”

That's me!

I thank the security lady, grab my rucksack from the belt and launch myself into the dazzling world of duty-free shops that lie between me and my future.

The steward hadn't been exaggerating; my gate really is at the other end of the airport. With my sleeves rolled up and my hair wafting, I fight through wheelie cases, wandering children and tired-looking passengers. What the steward neglected to mention was the broken escalator just before my gate.

It is cordoned off with yellow tape, funnelling all of the passengers up a narrow staircase. Normally there would have been enough space, but a triple buggy, which is stuck in the middle and being pushed and pulled by a dozen willing helpers, has caused a bit of a blockage. Which would cost me minutes that I didn't have.

My eye darts to the only lift. It's tiny and the queue in front of it is at least as long as the one for the stairs. A strongly built woman with two wheelie suitcases tries to squeeze inside, but the lift beeps because the doors can't close behind her. So, she takes a step back, revealing enough space for half a person. A space that nobody else seems to want to take,

There's no time to think.

With a rallying cry, I rush forwards. "Wait! I'll fit in there!"

I've no idea if the occupants didn't hear me – or if nobody could reach the right button in time – but the doors are already closing and I only just manage to dive in sideways at the last second, throwing myself unceremoniously at the broad chest of another passenger.

"Sorry! But I'm about to miss my flight!" I blurt out. "Just imagine I'm a sexy model or something, then I'm sure the next sixty seconds will fly by. And in return I promise not to touch you up."

Only then do I notice the tailored designer jacket beneath my hands. It's so well tailored that I can clearly feel my fingers resting on the hard bulges of the musculus rectus abdominis that I've been studying so closely over the past few weeks. As if in slow motion, my eyes wander up over numerous zips, whose only purpose seem to be to wrap the guy in front of me in an incredibly sexy outfit. An outfit that's usually worn by two types of men: men who overestimate their own attractiveness. Or those who are acutely aware of just how good they look in it.

I'm not sure which one I was expecting. But as I look up at him, it takes my breath away.

His black hair is long enough to reach his cheekbones and accentuate them in such a way that I want to reach for a pencil to draw him right away. Behind the dark strands of hair, I can only glimpse the twinkle of his eyes. A good twenty centimetres above me, his mouth forms a mocking smile.

Of the two of us, he's the sexy model.

"There's a huge piece of dandruff in your hair," he relishes informing me.

I feel for it on my head and am about to tell him that it's not dandruff, but a stray sequin, when the lift doors open and the passengers at the back push us out. I pull away from him, but my sequins get caught on his zips and make him trip over me. His weight drags us both to the floor.

My rucksack cushions most of the blow. And the rest his forearms, which land hard next to my head and catch him just a few centimetres above me. The impact winds him. I feel his warm breath on my lips, and his hair tickles my cheek for a moment.

He immediately tries to get up. He *tries*, but can't. His zips have got caught up on my sequins and pull my top up with him.

"Stop! Don't!" I scream and pull my top back over my bra.

Before I can explain the predicament with the sequins and the zips to him - or anybody else for that matter - the triple-buggy-helpers reach the top of the staircase and select me as their next project. Or to put it another way: the people completely misinterpret the whole situation and five of them go for a guy, who, in their eyes, is trying to rip my clothes off.

Under any other circumstances I would admire their civil courage, but all I can see is the guy's confused face above me, who hasn't done anything wrong, but is being torn off me and detained like a criminal. There are still half a dozen glittering sequins caught on his jacket.

"It was my fault! It was my top!" I hastily pick myself up, shove my phone, which fell on the floor in the confusion, into my trouser pocket and raise my hands defensively. *"Sorry! But I've got to go! Sorry!"* *Sorry, but the clock's ticking. If I miss this flight, I don't have a plan for my life anymore!*

I'm really sorry, but I can't apologise to everybody properly. I have to go. I cast a distraught final glance at the guy, then spin around and race through the terminal to the gate.

The flight attendants are already packing away their things.

"Wait, please! That's my flight!" I get to the counter completely out of breath and have to pull everything out of my bag again because in the chaos I've shoved my boarding card in there somewhere.

As I rummage through an assortment of glossy pictures of abs, they tell me that I've actually already missed the flight, they're usually very strict about the flight times and they're only letting me board because they're waiting for a very important passenger. When I step foot on the plane five minutes later, I let out the biggest sigh ever.

I decide to focus on the positives. Because all of the passengers are already in their seats, I can easily get to my seat. Somebody has nabbed my shrink-wrapped headphones, but that's okay; they probably thought I wasn't coming. I sit next to a woman in a beautiful sari and smile at her. She seems a bit annoyed, says something to me in a language I don't understand and shouts something over the seat in front. A man wearing a turban stands up from the middle row, where he's obviously been fastening in a band of babbling children, walks purposefully up the aisle and speaks to me in a foreign language too.

I don't understand a word.

"I'm sorry, but I come from a long line of ignorant Brits, who unfortunately didn't see the need for their children to learn a second language," I joke. The man repeats himself, waves his arms about and looks at me expectantly. "Sorry, I really don't understand. Would you like the headphones?"

The woman rants at the man. The man turns around and rants at a flight attendant, who's rushing up the aisle. He patiently listens to the couple's complaint, reaches his hand out towards me and asks for my boarding card.

I pass it to him and feel a bit embarrassed at how wrinkled it is.

Hopefully they haven't accidentally double-booked the seat. I have no desire to sit on the floor for three and a half hours. That's if they even let you sit on the floor in an overcrowded plane, which I doubt.

"This isn't your seat," the flight attendant tells me. "This is economy class seat 38."

I blink cluelessly at him.

"Your ticket is for business class, seat 3B," he clarifies.

“Business class? I . . . I won the ticket,” I stammer in bewilderment. “Sorry, it didn’t even cross my mind that I could sit in business class.”

“No problem. I’ll take you to your seat. Please follow me.”

The flight attendant leads me along the aisle towards the front, which is separated from the rest of the plane by some curtains. As I leave the densely packed rows of economy class behind me and see the huge seats in business class, an unexpected feeling of joy awakens in me.

I have never flown business class before, but as far as I am aware the service is supposed to be far better and the drinks are served in real glasses. The competition organisers really are letting the participants travel in style. With hundreds of hopefuls that must be hellishly expensive. The Prize of Fame isn’t the most coveted literary competition in the world for nothing. It makes its only winner not just famous, but filthy rich.

All the stress instantly melts away. I feel my mouth form a broad smile. Whatever the next few weeks might bring, at least I’ll enjoy the next three hours and the anticipation of being on one of the most beautiful islands in Europe.

The attendant points to my seat: poshly upholstered in a classy beige with a snow-white pillow and a lot of leg room. “Please excuse the inconvenience.”

“No problem, it was my mistake,” I respond, quickly sitting down so as not to delay take-off any further. “Everything will turn out okay in the end, won’t it?”

“And if it’s not okay, it’s not the end,” the person sitting next to me finishes the quote. For a second, I’m happy – somebody seems to like reading just as much as me – but then my brain registers that I’ve heard that voice somewhere before. I turn my head.

It’s the stomach-muscle model from the lift.

My sequins are still glinting on his jacket. But his eyes are glinting even more. He sweeps his black hair to one side and glares at me in a way that ties my stomach in knots.

Palace of Ink & Illusions (Band 1): Der Kuss der Muse

Palace of Ink & Illusions (Vol. 1): Kiss of the Muse

by Sabine Schoder

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“Nice to meet you again,” he hisses through his teeth. “Because of you I almost got *arrested*.”

Chapter 2

He flashes his eyes at me.

If looks could kill, his would be the look of a sniper taking aim at me from the roof of a skyscraper. I instinctively want to back away from him, but the flight attendant spots that I haven't fastened my seatbelt, pulls the belt across my tummy and shackles me next to a guy who just told me that I almost got him arrested.

I give him a risky smile. "I heard the peanuts are free in business class."

His eyes narrow.

Maybe he doesn't like peanuts.

"An airport police officer was just about to handcuff me," he growls so deeply that it rumbles in his throat.

I keep the comment that it sounds pretty hot to myself. He'd look pretty good in handcuffs, too. Okay, okay, someone like him would look good in a pink nightie. When the gods were handing out the chiselled cheekbones and the thick eyelashes, they definitely tripped over this guy and gave him everything they'd got.

He raises his eyebrows. "Are you wondering whether you should apologise to me?"

He, he. Not exactly.

But I should apologise. I really should.

I clear my throat. "I'm sorry that you got into trouble because of me and I'm glad you didn't miss your flight."

I shoot him a winning smile.

His eyes narrow even more.

Our screens spring to life, showing passengers the safety announcement and demonstration. I can see the reflection of orange life vests in his eyes, which are still stubbornly directed at me. They are

the deep golden colour of amber, mixed with a slightly unsettling tinge of red, and they are smouldering beneath his jet-black hair like glowing embers.

Normally I prefer to use charcoal and pencil for my drawings, but his eyes awaken the urge in me for strong colours. Would it be rude to ask for a photo? For purely artistic purposes, of course.

The fiery expression on his face tells me that I should perhaps leave that question until the free drinks arrive.

My phone pings.

On the screens, we've just been asked to put all electronic devices into flight mode, so I quickly get it out of my pocket and check the message.

My sister has sent me a voice message.

But that's not the only thing I notice.

There's a razor-thin crack across the screen. It must have happened when we fell over in front of the lift. I remember with a queasy feeling in my stomach that my bank account has been as dry as the Sahara for weeks, and very carefully press on the glass to see if the touchscreen still works. I accidentally click on the voice message in the process. My sister's voice blabbers away at full volume. I try to stop it, but the screen isn't responding anymore.

"Liv, I've got to go soon, so a few quick things: Firstly, I hope you didn't miss your flight. I promised Steve your bed for the next few weeks. See it as a favour, he'll cover some of your rent, which – I might remind you – was due a month ago. Since you've lost your bursary . . ."

I repeatedly poke the screen with my finger, but the bloody thing just won't switch off.

". . . you should be grateful that I haven't sent you back to Mum. If she gets you back under her wing again, she'll undoubtedly make you do business studies, or some other soul-destroying course. Which brings me to point two: good luck for this audition thing. It's probably your last chance to avoid spreadsheets, which would send someone like you mad in five years at the most."

People in the rows around me are shushing me.

“Just fucking turn off!” I pant, pressing my finger so hard on the display that the crack gets worse.

I remember my headphones. I drag my rucksack onto my lap and rummage in the depths for a cable.

“And if it doesn’t go to plan, please don’t go on the rampage in the uni,” my sister fleshes out her weird fantasy. I can feel the guy next to me looking at me. He doesn’t say a word, which I can only assume means he’s listening to all of my recent transgressions with a deep sense of satisfaction.

“I have to admit that I thought you were exaggerating a bit to start with, but Steve showed me the TikTok video of you being thrown out. Somebody secretly filmed the chancellor humiliating you in front of a full lecture theatre. That woman shouldn’t be in the teaching profession. Just because you draw naked men . . .”

Okay, this bloody thing needs to shut up!

Now!

I drop my rucksack onto the floor and press the off button.

In the meantime, the message is rambling on. “It seems like the video is going viral. That’ll teach the old trout. The university will have to do something about it. And please don’t take to heart what she said. I firmly believe that you’ll make something of yourself. You’re still young.”

My phone finally responds and gives me two options: restart or switch off. I press the off switch so firmly that the tip of my finger glows white.

“You have my full support; I’m your big sister, after all. Please keep that in the back of your mind when I say what I’m about to say: we ate Ginge at the party yesterday. I realised too late that they’d got him out of your room. By the time I got to the kitchen, the best part of him was already gone.”

The phone switches off.

My sisters voice falls silent.

I can hear the passengers around me muttering in irritation. Cold sweat coats my forehead. Only then do I think of the volume controls on the side of the phone.

I peer at the guy next to me.

He's still staring at me.

We look into each other's eyes for a full three seconds without even blinking, then the plane starts moving and he jerks away from me. Behind him I can see the lights on the runway drifting past through the grey London fog. He fumbles the safety card out of the net in front of him and concentrates a bit too keenly on the images of oxygen masks and evacuation slides.

I feel the need to set a few things straight. "I'm working on a webtoon. You know, an online comic. There's lots of street fighting in it. I don't just draw random naked men. I focus on anatomically correct representations of ripped drug dealers in tattered shirts. There's a huge difference."

"Okay," he says to the safety card, without looking at me.

It's the kind of okay that means nothing is okay at all.

I thrum on the armrest between us with my fingers. Should I say something else or just leave it? But then, I've never been the kind of person who could keep my mouth shut.

I take a deep breath. "Chancellor Eleanor Payne, ever heard of her? Luminary of the London University of Experimental Arts? Only a handful of people manage to get onto her course, and half of them don't make it to the end of the first semester. She's pretty controversial, but also very successful. I have no idea why she accepted me on the course if she dislikes my work so much. I was the first sacrificial lamb of her first infamous cull this year."

"You shouldn't take it to heart," he says stiffly to the safety card.

"I'm not. I see it as a challenge to prove her wrong. Have you looked at my chest?"

He shoves the safety card back into the pocket and clings to the armrests. "Sounds like a trick question to me."

“I mean the writing on my top,” I say. “I spent five hours sewing these sequins on, which is rather a lot considering needle and thread aren’t exactly my best friends. In fact, I don’t think they even like me. But, apparently, red sequins on a white background are unmissable on TV. What do you think?” I turn to him, as far as the seatbelt allows and stretch the sparkly top out for him to see.

He groans and squints at me sceptically. “*Meowfia.paw?*”

“It’s a combination of *meow* and *mafia*. I’ve bought the domain. Cost me three days of involuntary fasting. Hopefully the free nuts will arrive soon.”

He looks away from me.

I let go of my top. “It’s the web address for my webtoon. I’ve been working on it for more than five years. At the moment, the views could do with some improvement, but hopefully that will soon change.” *Just as soon as my stealth advertising is on every channel in the world. Chancellor Eleanor Payne will be so mad!*

The plane has reached the runway and the engines start up.

Instead of answering me, the guy closes his eyes and I can hear his breathing speeding up. His fingernails are digging into the armrest. The veins on his hands are raised. I spot the edge of a tattoo peeking out of his sleeve; it looks like flames. I wish he would take off his jacket. As an art student I have a professional interest in any kind of illustration. *And as a heterosexual woman, it wouldn’t hurt if he took off his jacket either*, an amused voice in my head adds.

I suppress a smile. “Why are you so stressed? Is it because Ginge got eaten? I can explain.”

No response.

His eyes are still closed.

His hands are clenched.

“My sister isn’t a cold-blooded killer or anything. A few weeks ago, I bought some fresh ginger and left it lying around for too long. The root sprouted and was putting so much effort into growing that I

couldn't bring myself to eat it. So, I planted him in a pot, named him "Ginge" and put him on my desk. And yesterday he was made into Moscow Mules. There are worse things than ending up in a glass full of vodka. Don't you think?"

He doesn't react.

Is he still upset about the lift thing?

The pilot announces that we're about to take off and accelerates. The whoosh of the engines fills the whole cabin. The plane darts along the runway, pressing us back into our seats. I can't quite make out what he's saying next to me, but it sounds like *fuck*. He's frowning and his lips are pursed.

Is he afraid of take-off?

His arms start to shake and his lips are moving as if he's saying a silent prayer. The wheels lift from the tarmac and the weightlessness presses on my stomach like a stone. As the plane points skywards, its engines roaring, he lets go of the armrests and covers his face with his hands.

Shit. That's not just a touch of take-off nerves.

That's a real fear of flying.

I keep an eye out for the flight attendant, but they're fastened in their seats further forward. Nobody can help him. Nobody apart from me. And I owe him. Since I've also got my seatbelt fastened, only one thing comes to mind that could distract him.

I take a deep breath and raise my voice above the din of the engines. "Sorry to disturb you all, but I'd like to set something straight! The passenger next to me was nearly arrested at the airport for lifting up my top..."

The flight attendants are immediately on alert.

The guy next to me lowers his hands from his face and stares at me in disbelief.

"Which I would like to clarify was absolutely not his fault! It was the sequins on my top..."

A woman across the aisle in front of us turns to me. “It’s never your fault when a man touches you without your consent!”

“And it’s definitely not because of what you’re wearing!” someone shouts from further forward. “Don’t believe that shit! If men can’t keep their hands to themselves, that is entirely on them!”

EEK, this isn’t how it was meant to go!

“No, no!” I say quickly. “You’re getting it all wrong! I pressed too closely against him in the lift, and ...”

“Oh God,” the guy next to me groans and massages the bridge of his nose. “Please stop talking.”

The woman across the aisle in front of us turns bright red. “The fact that you wanted a bit of physical contact doesn’t give him the right to tear your clothes off!”

“Maybe she didn’t tell him to stop,” a third person interjects.

“I mean, I did say stop,” I mumble in confusion.

The woman opposite balls her hands to fists on her armrests. “What you did or didn’t say is completely irrelevant! If I shoot a man on the street just because he didn’t tell me to stop, he’s not complicit in his own murder!”

The flight attendants get involved. “Please try to stay calm! Miss, if you would like, we can organise a different seat for you after take-off, and inform the ground personnel. Everything else would be sorted out after landing.”

I wave the offer away. “No, no, there’s no need. I’m fine sitting next to him!”

Someone further forward is getting worked up. “How can she stay sitting next to someone like that?! It sends completely the wrong message! We should throw the scumbag out of the plane!”

“I’ll throw myself out of the plane in a minute,” the guy next to me groans.

It’s all getting a bit out of hand.

I take a deep breath. “Please let me finish! You’ve taken everything completely out of context. His jacket just got caught on the sequins on my top. It was a stupid misunderstanding.”

“I just don’t get it. Now she’s defending him,” says someone further forward.

The woman across the aisle in front of us gives me a meaningful look. “You don’t need to be afraid of him. If you want, I’ll go to the police with you at the airport. I promise.”

Next to me, the guy slides as far down into his seat as his long legs allow. He’s covering his face with one hand.

“Thank you for the offer,” I answer the woman. “But that really won’t be necessary. I completely understand why he’s a bit angry with me. I should have cleared everything up there and then.”

The guy next to me mutters something that sounds like: *Kill me now*.

I lean towards him. “Sorry, I don’t think they can hear me properly with the noise of the engines. As soon as the fasten-seatbelt signs go off, I’ll ask the flight attendants if I can use the intercom to set things straight.”

He looks over his hand at me, horror-stricken. “Anything but that.” Then, he shoots a panicked look past me and adds: “That woman just took a photo of me. I’m not going to make it off the plane alive.”

I turn around and catch the woman taking another photo and frowning at it. “Haven’t I seen him somewhere before? Maybe on a wanted poster? What’s his name?”

I turn back to him. “No idea. What’s your name?”

He stares at me. “You really think I’m going to tell you that now?!”

I lean closer to him and can’t suppress a grin. “Maybe out of gratitude?”

“Gratitude?!”

I chuckle. “Because of your fear of flying. We’re over the worst of it, don’t you see? We’re at cruising altitude, and the plane is horizontal again. From now on, it’ll be quieter. You haven’t thought about the take-off for the last five minutes, have you?”

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His face changes dramatically.

He looks at me like I'm a completely different person.

Somebody who he might want to tell his name.

"Time for some complimentary drinks, I'd say." I reach up my arm and signal to the flight attendant. "Two Moscow Mules, please!"

Chapter 3

“Did you just ruin my reputation to distract me from the take-off?” the guy next to me asks in disbelief.

I reach out towards the flight attendant to take the drinks that he’s quickly prepared for me. As he passes them to me, he taps discreetly on a serviette with writing in biro on it. Written on it is: *If you need help, ask for cashew nuts.*

Ah. Shit.

Reading it makes me really want some cashew nuts, but I don’t dare ask for them now. Is there some kind of international nut-based codeword system that I have no idea about? Are peanuts still safe, or would I be alerting them to a bomb threat? To be on the safe side, I forgo the nuts and thank the flight attendant for the drinks. He discreetly tucks the serviette away and looks the passenger next to me up and down before making his way back to the front.

I offer him one of the glasses. “Here, for you.”

He gawps at me. “No, thanks. I think it’d be safer for me to stay sober in your presence. Who knows what you’re going to do next.”

“Fair enough. Things didn’t quite go as I’d planned. Don’t worry, I’ll sort it all out later on, I promise.”

“You’d better hurry up. That woman’s probably posting my photo now. With the hashtag #lynch-him-at-the-airport.”

I wave away his concern. “Impossible. Flight mode, don’t you remember? You’re safe until we land.”

“In business class there’s complimentary Wi-Fi.” He emphasises each word very clearly. “Could you please tell her that I didn’t do anything to you?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying the whole time!”

“You completely twisted the story,” he complains. “It’s no wonder they all misunderstood. You should have started out by saying that your top accidentally got caught on my zips and neither of us realised in time.”

“Then I would have revealed everything too soon and nobody would have listened to me for longer than five seconds. I was trying to distract you from your fear of flying. I had to drag it out a bit.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. You have to give some context first, otherwise people get a completely false impression. Once you’ve established the basis for a humorous story, with no false associations, then you can get to the point.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Are you mansplaining storytelling to me?”

He hesitates for a moment. His eyes land on the drink that I’m still holding out towards him, and he grabs it. “Do you know what? Maybe I do need it after all.”

I smile at him and raise my glass. “To the three-and-a-half-hour flight!”

He downs the drink far too quickly.

I sip it and savour the sharpness of the ginger fizzing on my tongue. “Where were we? Oh, yeah, your name. I’m Liv, by the way.”

He looks out of the plane window, seems to decide that for somebody afraid of flying it isn’t a particularly good alternative to the sight of me, and turns rather stiffly back towards me. “My friends call me Flame. I don’t know what my enemies call me yet. Any suggestions?”

“Flame? Is that a nickname?” Now that he’s turned his head towards me, I can see that the tattoo goes up to his neck. He’s got elaborately tattooed flames in fire-red and midnight-black coiling around his tanned skin up to his jaw. “Because of your tattoos?”

He turns his head so that I can’t see the tattoos anymore.

He’s going to be a hard nut to crack.

I signal at the empty glass with my chin. “Do you want another? I’m feeling generous today.”

He glares at me. “The drinks are free.”

I grin. “Believe me, I know. Otherwise, there’s no way I’d be able to afford it. I won the business-class ticket. Lucky, huh?”

“Yeah, I can hardly believe my luck.” He rummages around in the magazine pocket and leafs through the woeful offering.

The fasten-seatbelt signs go off.

I loosen my seatbelt, put my leg up and get comfy. The ice cubes in my drink clink gently, the engines rumble in the background, and the quiet babble of the passengers has something pleasantly comforting about it. I’m really starting to enjoy the flight.

Unlike Flame.

None of the magazines seem to appeal to him. He shoves them back in the pocket. An emerald-green island, surrounded by snow-white sandy beaches and a turquoise sea is on the cover. With the title: *Corfu – The Emerald Isle of the Ionian*.

It’s our destination.

I make another attempt to lure him out of his shell. “What are you doing in Corfu? City sightseeing? Or beach and bars? I heard that in the south there are miles of sandy beaches. Makes a nice change from the grey London drizzle, huh?”

He scowls at the safety card that’s right at the front of the netted seat pocket, and lets the elastic ping against it. “Would it be possible for you to stop talking to me?”

I lower my drink onto the armrest. “Of course it would. But I wouldn’t advise it.”

He looks at me in disbelief. “Is that some kind of threat?”

“Let me establish the right context for you, yeah? This flight takes over three hours. You’re not exactly crazy about flying. And I can’t switch my phone on. We’d be doing each other a favour if we had a little chat. It’s a win-win situation.” I beam at him triumphantly.

He doesn't seem convinced.

His eyes darken "I'll watch a film."

"Are you sure that it's a good idea to put soundproof headphones on and let me out of your sight?"

He stares at me. "Oh my God. You're *evil*."

I laugh and pat his arm. "Only joking! Relax! You should have seen your face. The moment of realisation when you thought you were stuck on a plane with a psychopath." Giggling, I lower my leg to the floor and sit up straight. "No problem, I'll leave you in peace. Enjoy your film."

I pull my rucksack onto my lap and pull out my drawing things while he unpacks his earbuds and starts scrolling through the TV listings on the screen. My fingers are itching to draw his chiselled cheek bones. But I'm afraid he would really think I was a psychopath then. So, I content myself with sketching the profile of the helpful woman across the aisle in front of us. As soon as the drinks trolley is out of the way, I'll give it to her and clear up the misunderstanding. That's probably why Flame is so grumpy.

For a while there's silence next to me.

Then he starts to fidget about restlessly.

He changes the film. Sighs. Switches to the music channels. Sighs even more deeply. Looks at our flight route on the world map. Sees that we're over France. Rips the earbuds out of his ears, shoves them in the seat pocket and pulls out his phone. For a while he taps away on it, seemingly annoyed, then he calms down. Finally, he even lets out a little chuckle.

I surreptitiously peer over through my hair, but he's holding the screen in such a way that I can't make anything out. It seems he was right about the free Wi-Fi, anyway. To be on the safe side, I rip my sketch out of my pad and explain everything to the helpful woman before she can post anything online. Back at my seat, I sit down pointedly so that Flame might ask me something. But he's staring at his phone, seemingly hypnotised.

I drum my fingers on the armrest. “Everything’s sorted now,” I blurt out. “Your reputation is restored. She deleted the photos too. I watched her do it with my own eyes.”

“Thanks,” he says into his phone.

At least he responded.

But that’s about it.

I give up and go back to sketching.

Three whole hours pass, and we don’t say a single word to each other. And still I can’t get away from him. Even though I’m focused on my sketch pad, I can feel his presence next to me the whole time. The fasten-seatbelt signs light up, and I have to pack away my things for landing. I rustle my papers a bit, just to give him the opportunity to ask me about them.

But he doesn’t.

His eyes remain trained on his phone, until a flight attendant asks him to put it away. He’s barely put it away when his expression completely changes. His features harden, his hands grip the armrests. He looks out of the window, where green island formations loom beneath us in the sea, and quickly closes the blind. Around us, lots of people are gasping at the resplendent beauty of Corfu. But he’s not having a bit of it. His arms start to shake. Wherever his thoughts have wandered, it would do him good to be distracted from them for a while.

“Do you want to hold my hand?” I offer.

He looks at me in disbelief.

I shrug, grinning. “It was worth a try.”

The plane tilts downwards. The engines get louder. The whole interior of the plane is vibrating. Even for someone like me, who has no worries about flying, it’s a little nerve-wracking. Flame’s breathing is heavier and he’s clawing at the armrests. Sweat beads on his forehead. He suddenly leans over to me and blurts out hurriedly: “Tell me what happens after chapter thirty-five.”

“Huh? Chapter thirty-five?”

He presses his eyes shut and it seems to take all his strength to concentrate on saying the following words: “Ratsy has been released from the drug lab and bitten Meow’s tail. What happens next?”

Ratsy and Meow?

For a few seconds I’m completely incapable of giving him an answer. I have no idea what sort of expression might be on my face, but I wouldn’t be surprised if my eyes looked like they were about to pop out of their sockets. “Have you . . . read my webtoon? Up to chapter thirty-five? But . . . But, that would have taken you at least . . .”

“. . . three hours,” he confirms. “What do you think I’ve been doing this whole time? By the way, I do think that Meow’s forbidden feelings for the lab rat come out of nowhere a bit. You need to flesh that out a bit.”

He really read my webtoon?!

Okay, now my mouth is gaping.

“You can take constructive criticism, can’t you?” He peers at me with one eye. He still seems really tense. “The drug deals are a bit repetitive, but I found the rest of it really funny.” He looks at me for a while, maybe because he’s waiting for a response. When none is forthcoming, his eyebrows raise in irritation. “Are you feeling okay? You look a bit pale.” And then, with a wholly unexpected and cheeky little twitch in the corner of his mouth, he adds: “Do *you* want to hold *my* hand?”

My heart is in my mouth.

Not because of the hand-holding offer. Well, not entirely because of that. But because of the fact that this guy, who I thought didn’t want to talk to me, spent a full three hours of his life reading *my* story.

My. Story.

He snorts in amusement. “Don’t tell me I’m your first.”

“My first?”

“Your first reader, of course. What else?” He obviously finds the double entendre incredibly funny.

What on earth is happening?

Is he flirting with me?!

And why can't I make a peep?

His expression gets more intense, which makes the red flecks in his amber-coloured eyes shimmer. “I find Meow's inner conflict about falling for a prey animal pretty interesting. But he should still have a reason for it. I mean, why didn't he fall in love with any of the previous lab rats? Why this particular one? What sets her apart from all the others?”

My mouth feels like sandpaper. “She . . . she's not scared of him.”

“That would just drive his hunting instinct,” he responds. “Love is much more than that. How does she awaken his true feelings?”

“Err . . .”

Holy shit. That is a good question!

He leans towards me. His eyes shimmer like embers beneath his black hair. But that isn't what's quickening my pulse. It's nothing to do with his appearance. It's what he's saying. “You've got to have her do something that surprises him,” he whispers to me. “Let him think she's betraying him, And just when the betrayal is at its most painful, turn the tables. And let him know that she did it to save him.”

The plane touches down and we're forced against our seatbelts.

The landing strip must be short; the pilot is really jamming on the brakes.

Flame clings to the seat. Before I can respond, he looks up at the cabin ceiling as if he's going to say a prayer, but he says something completely different. Something that makes my heart beat in my mouth.

“Thank you.”

I swallow. “For what?”

Palace of Ink & Illusions (Band 1): Der Kuss der Muse

Palace of Ink & Illusions (Vol. 1): Kiss of the Muse

by Sabine Schoder

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He unfastens his seatbelt before the sign goes off and pushes past me into the aisle. For a moment his shadow falls over me. His zips clink in front of my face. The intensity in his eyes pins me to my seat.

Now *I'm* the one clinging to the armrests.

His voice is rough as sandpaper and sends a shudder down my spine.

"For saving me."