

CHAPTER 2

Friday, November 29

America Airlines flight 1561 leveled off at thirty thousand feet. They had just left O'Hare, heading westward, SFO-bound, and senior flight attendant Susan Bottomley was working the first class cabin with Derek Walton, her first choice on this run. They were playing their favorite game—*What's My Line?*—whilst prepping the drinks trolley.

"Child molester," said Bottomley, as she peered at the sixty year old white man in 2B. "Look at the way he sucks his pen top. Definitely a pedophile." In her late thirties, Bottomley was blond and fit, and still looked like a million bucks in her uniform.

The plane hummed in the background.

"Well, he could molest me any day," Walton said. A slim man in his mid-thirties, Walton sported a well-trimmed mustache, short brown hair, and milk chocolate brown eyes. "I think he's cute."

"You think everyone wearing Armani looks cute. How about 3C?"

"Recently escaped from a Turkish prison where he was serving a twelve-year sentence for drug possession."

Bottomley laughed. "Drug possession?" The man in question looked more like a priest—thin, almost gaunt, with a sallow complexion and deeply pocked skin.

"Hashish," Walton insisted. "Look at the tell-tale, bloodshot eyes. And his fingers are stained."

"He could just be a cigarette smoker."

Walton paused for a moment, a pair of Coke cans in each of his hands. "What's up with you?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?" Bottomley leaned over to fetch a few more sodas from the locker.

"Look at you. You're positively glowing. Was Peter in town? Did you finally get laid?"

"Derek! I know it's a slow snowy night and all, but the natives are restless. If we don't serve them some alcohol soon—"

"Wait!" Walton dropped the Coke cans back onto the trolley and snatched the senior flight attendant by the hand. "Don't tell me. He didn't, did he?"

Bottomley smiled an impish smile but still didn't say anything.

"He did, didn't he? Why, you sneaky little bitch! Well," Walton huffed. "Show me."

Bottomley reached into the pocket of her navy blue uniform and pulled out a ring.

"Oh, my God!" Walton gasped. "What a rock!"

The diamond was at least two and a half carats. It glimmered hypnotically in the harsh airplane light.

"It's beautiful," Walton said. "Put it on. Put it on. Let me see."

Bottomley slipped the ring on her finger. She held out her hand for him to admire. "The setting is platinum. It was his grandmother's ring."

"Gorgeous." Walton leaned forward, as if holding a loop to his eye, and examined it closely. "Looks like something one of Kim Kardashian's brooches might have farted out after breakfast. It's about time that bastard proposed."

"He's not a bastard. That was last week, Derek. Well, last month, really. Now, he's my honey-lamb."

"I think I'm going to throw up." Walton reached for a vomit bag. Then he smiled, issued a tight little squeal, and threw his arms around Bottomley. "Congratulations . . . honey-lamb," he said. "I guess this means you're going to break up our award-winning *What's My Line?* team, huh?"

Bottomley extricated herself from his grasp. "All good things come to an end. I've been doing this for almost two—" She smiled. "For a long time, Derek. I'm tired of being a frequent-flyer punching bag. And I'm not getting any younger. If I want to have a baby . . ." She stopped talking abruptly and turned toward the porthole in the emergency door, when the plane pitched suddenly portside.

Bottomley screamed as she was thrown to the deck. The jet roared, rolled and shuddered as the fuselage ripped apart like a can of sardines.

The last thing she saw was the man from 2B being sucked through the opening. Then fire as Walton flew by with a scream. Then nothing but cold as she floated through emptiness, surrounded by thousands and thousands of twinkling stars, each winking as brightly as her brand-new engagement ring.