

Chapter One

Becca Evans hated flying. It wasn't that she was scared to fly—okay, maybe she was, but she'd never admit it. She simply knew too much, and that made her nervous. Was her fear based on the fact that the airplane she and her sister were about to board weighed approximately one hundred forty thousand pounds and, somehow, all of that aluminum and composite metal would be cruising at approximately three hundred seventy miles per hour at thirty-five thousand feet up in the air?

No.

Becca understood the laws of aerodynamics. How speed and wing shape enabled an airplane to overcome friction so that all that weight could lift off the ground and remain aloft. What bothered her was that this particular airplane, the Boeing 737, had by far the worst record for fatal crashes. In fact, fifteen times more fatal incidences than the other airliners of its size.

Oh, and turbulence freaked her out. It made her feel out of control, and Becca liked—no, needed—to be in control.

If not for her sister, Grace, being a contestant in the Miss Temptation Pageant at the Playground of Paradise Bay Resort, Becca would not be flying. No, sir. But, this was the pageant to end all pageants, a mash-up between *Miss America*, *The Bachelor*, and *Survivor*, and the whole shebang was going to be streamed live.

It was going to be Grace's big break, and Becca needed her to win.

"Are you okay?" Grace touched her shoulder, a worry wrinkle marring the perfection of her forehead.

"Fine," Becca forced a smile. "Why?"

"You're doing that thing you do when you're thinking too hard."

“What’s that?”

“Your lips are moving.”

Becca was about to deny it when a bored voice came over the PA system, “Zone one passengers may begin boarding. Please have your boarding pass and government-issued identification ready to show the attendants.”

“That’s us,” Becca said over her shoulder to her sister. She’d only taken two steps when—BAM!—she ran into a brick wall of flesh and bone.

“Oomph!” Becca stumbled back.

“Watch where you’re going.” A tall, well-dressed, and more noticeably, *extremely solid* man frowned at her before making his way to the priority line at the gate, allowing him to board ahead of everyone else.

Jerk.

“Oh my God!” Grace whisper-squealed. “That was him!”

“Who?”

“Calum Price!” She pulled out the magazine she’d been carrying around the airport and stroked a manicured nail down the cover, which Mr. Price was gracing, wearing an expensive Italian suit and an enigmatic smile. The headline read “Youngest Billionaire, Most Eligible Bachelor.” “He’s even hotter in person,” she gushed. “I can’t believe he’s the judge for the contest. And the prize.”

An all-expenses paid trip to Paris with the billionaire Calum Price was *part* of the prize for winning the contest, but he was certainly not the reason Becca wanted Grace to win. The one-hundred-thousand-dollar cash prize was more like it, as well as the side benefits of being a contestant in such a big production.

Becca tugged Grace toward the lengthening lineup for non-priority passengers. “Stay focused,” Becca said. “Remember why we’re doing this.”

“I know, I know. It’s the prize money and exposure.” The sisters inched forward in line before Grace spoke again. “But, Bec?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you really think I can win?”

There was apprehension in her sister’s tone, something very unusual for Grace. “In twelve years of pageants, have we ever lost?”

Grace pressed her lips together before smiling. “No.”

“Exactly. We are unbeatable, together. And this contest is no different. The stakes are higher, but we will rise to the challenge.” She nudged her sister and grinned. “Together.”

“If I win...” Grace turned to face Becca. “What if I get some kind of contract? What if I need to move to L.A.?”

“Then you move.”

“But what about you?”

Becca took a deep breath. This was the perfect time to tell her sister that she’d be moving as well, but not to L.A. To New York City...

“Why don’t you come to L.A. with me?” Grace said, a flush of excitement making her eyes glow. “You know I can’t do this without you.”

The brief window of opportunity to tell her sister about her fellowship to Cornell University slammed shut.

“We’ll worry about that when it happens.”

Grace fidgeted and then unrolled the magazine she still had clutched in one hand. She straightened it out to study the man on the cover. “What if Calum Price actually falls in love with me?”

Becca glanced sideways at her sister, who was now smiling dreamily, probably imagining romantic scenarios with her and the *rude* billionaire bachelor. Ugh! The guy hadn’t even apologized for bumping into her. No wonder he was still single.

“Next.” The gate attendant held out his hand for their tickets. “Are you two traveling together?”

“Yes,” Grace sang the word as if she was Judy Garland—one of Grace’s *many* favorite actresses. “We’re sisters.”

The man took their tickets and IDs and glanced at them. Frowned. Checked their IDs again and did a double take, giving Grace a once-, then twice-over before casting a bewildered look at Becca. She knew exactly what was coming.

“You’re sisters?”

Yep. There it was. Disbelief. It happened all the time because they looked nothing alike. Where Grace was blond, curvy, and gorgeous like an old-school Hollywood movie star, Becca was...plain. Brown hair. Hazel eyes. Slim figure. Their only similarity was their height, though Grace always appeared taller because she wore heels.

“Sisters and best friends,” Grace announced proudly, linking their arms together.

Neither of those things were completely true. They were *half* sisters, which explained the difference in appearance. As for being best friends? It was more like they were inseparable. Even now, they shared an apartment, and Becca had been by Grace’s side in every pageant she’d entered in the last twelve years. But, it was more of a protector/protect-ee situation. Becca had

been taking care of her older sister since they were kids. First, it was defending her from bullies—Becca had been small but wiry as a kid—and then, once Grace started dating, the bullies became boyfriends. Becca had taken it upon herself to systematically dispose of every single one. It was never hard. Hacking their computers was child’s play. Finding dirt and threatening them had become one of her favorite pastimes.

Come September, for the first time in their lives, Becca wouldn’t be around to take care of her sister. After finishing her grad degree in astrophysics at the University of Wisconsin, she’d been offered a research position in the Physics Department at Cornell. Even though it was her dream position, doing research in the fields of astrophysics, general relativity and cosmology, Becca worried about her sister, because Grace had never been on her own before.

That was why she needed Grace to win the contest. So she’d have something more than pageants, maybe an acting or modeling career. Who knew what opportunities could come from this contest?

Once they found their seats in economy, Grace insisted she sit in the aisle seat (small bladder and all that) which left Becca stuck in the middle. A sense of impending doom stole through her, heating the pit of her belly while conversely casting a cool sheen over her skin, making her forget all about New York and instead, reminding her of the 3,657 people who’d died aboard Boeing 737s in the last decade.

Grace covered her hand. “It’s going to be okay.”

Becca cringed.

“Here.” Grace passed the magazine to her and opened it to an article on sex. “You could benefit from this.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, so you’ll think about something other than flying.” She shrugged. “Plus, you might learn some important information from this article.” She pointed to the title, “10 Health Benefits to an Active Sex Life.” “How long’s it been, anyway?”

“How long has what been?”

“Since you’ve had sex.”

“Seriously!” Becca glanced around to see how many people had overheard.

Her sister tapped her chin, not giving a damn about anyone around them. “Was it Jerry?”

Becca put an angry finger to her lips. “Quiet.”

“And that was, what? A year ago?”

Banging her head against the seat, Becca replied, “I don’t need a boyfriend to be happy. I’m perfectly happy as I am.”

“Are you?” Her sister gazed intently at her.

“Yes, of course I am.”

Full lips twisted to one side. “It’s just you’ve been acting kind of funny lately.”

“It’s nothing,” Becca lied. “Really.”

“Well, something has you wound up.” She pointed back to the article. “And there’s nothing better than a little sexy-time to relax you.” A secret smile touched the corners of Grace’s lips as if she was remembering her last interlude.

Becca bristled. “You’re not secretly seeing Brad, are you?” Brad was Grace’s latest loser.

“No. Of course not,” Grace replied too quickly.

Dammit. Brad was one of the reasons Becca had been forced to intervene in Grace’s life. He was controlling, manipulative, and possessive. It didn’t help that her sister was a serial dater and a borderline nympho.

Sex was her favorite topic and favorite pastime.

Grace was also naive, which was a lethal combination, making her a magnet for misogynists.

“I wonder if Calum Price likes sex.” Grace closed the magazine so she could gaze at the man on the cover. “He looks like he does.”

Jesus.

“Stop worrying about Calum Price—”

“Sex is good for your health,” Grace declared, as if she hadn’t just browsed the article. “It’s good for the metabolism, the hair, the skin...”

“Can we please stop talking about sex?” Becca whispered, not needing to be reminded of how long it had been since she’d had anything more than her imagination and a vibrator to put her to sleep at night.

“Oh, fine.” Grace sighed. “I have to go to the loo, anyway.” She dropped the magazine back into Becca’s lap before getting up and making her way to the rear of the plane past the last-minute stragglers.

Becca opened to the article on Calum Price. She’d already read it, but she needed to distract herself from the fact that the plane had almost boarded and would be taking off soon. Anything other than a conversation about how long it’d been since she’d gotten laid was her preference.

Even articles about rude playboys.

“Seat 44B? Ms. Evans?”

A flight attendant stood in the aisle beaming down at her.

“Um...yes?”

“You are the recipient of a free upgrade, courtesy of Playground of Paradise Bay Resort.”

“What?”

“Please grab your bags and follow me.”

The woman didn't give Becca a chance to explain that the seat was in her sister's name and that it should be Grace who was seated in first class. She glanced toward the back of the plane where Grace had disappeared into the tiny cubicle.

“Please. This way. The aircraft is about to depart.”

On the other hand...

Alcohol was free in first class. A drink might calm her nerves, and lord only knew her nerves needed a little calming. Grabbing her things, Becca jostled her way to the front of the plane, feeling a sense of satisfaction when the curtain separating the two classes snapped closed behind her.

“Here's your seat, Ms. Evans.”

Calum Price was seated in the chair next to the one she'd been assigned, his expression dismissive as he glanced at her.

She settled her carry-on into the overhead bin and then plopped down, tucking a book into the pocket in front of her and her purse beneath the seat. “Well, hello.”

He glanced at her but did not reply—ass—before catching a flight attendant as she was passing by. “What's going on?” He indicated Becca with a nod of his head.

“Upgrade. It's all part of the Playground of Paradise Bay experience, apparently.”

Before the attendant could leave, Becca reached across her seatmate and waved to the woman. “Two mimosas please.”

“I don't want one,” Calum said.

“It’s not for you.”

He tilted his head at this comment and then pointed to a button on the armrest. “Press the button and they’ll walk the five steps required to serve you.”

“Fly first class a lot, do you?”

“No.”

She was surprised.

“I take my own plane. But it’s not certified to land at the resort.” He shrugged. “So, first class it is.”

Unfolding the little table for Calum, the flight attendant set down a cloth napkin, a glass with amber liquid, and a side of sliced pear.

“Scotch?” Becca whispered as she leaned close to sniff his glass, making sure she was calling a spade a spade. Now that she was here, she realized it was the perfect opportunity to determine whether billionaire Calum Price was a decent human being or whether he was just another wealthy, arrogant ass. So far, he was proving to be the latter. “Hmm, a little early for Scotch, isn’t it?”

He turned to her, his face emotionless, apart from a single arched brow. “Says the woman who ordered *two* glasses of champagne.”

The mimosas were served in real crystal champagne flutes. Very nice. Becca took a sip. Delicious. She could get used to this.

Maybe this flight wouldn’t be so bad, after all.

She glanced sideways at the most eligible bachelor *in the world*. Who was he, really?

Sure, the guy was good looking. Okay, he was *very* good looking. Thick dark hair, dark brows framing dark eyes. His lips were nice: full but still masculine. Broad forehead, straight

nose, and a jaw that was covered in that stylishly trimmed short beard that most women went gaga over, but which she hated. Was it a beard? Was it stubble? It seemed tragically caught somewhere in between and screamed high maintenance to her.

Her gaze slid lower. There was a breadth to his physique and a masculinity to his hands that spoke of athleticism. He could have been a hockey player, except he was too put together. Probably spent oodles of time in front of the mirror. Primping.

Ugh.

He slowly swiveled to face her, his expression cold. Becca was undeterred. She had a new mission, to learn everything she could about him in the next six hours. The secondary purpose of her mission—though equally important—was to distract herself from the fact that the plane was taking off.

“So,” Becca said. “I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

“For you to apologize for crashing into me.”

Chapter Two

Oh, for fuck's sake. Of all the people to have as a seatmate, he had to get some mousy Chatty Cathy. If there was one thing Calum Price loathed, it was useless babble.

“I'm still waiting.”

Really? She was the one who had run into him because she hadn't been looking where she was going. But he still had—he checked his Rolex—five hours and forty-seven minutes left in the flight. Fine.

He turned to her and said calmly, “I'm sorry.” Then he shook out his newspaper and opened it so that it shielded him from the woman's blatant stare.

Mentally, he brought up the contract his publicist had made him sign with *Men's Magazine*. Though he'd only skimmed it, he could see each paragraph as if it were an HD photo in his brain. He had no idea how he was able to do it, it was just something he'd always been able to manage. His “super power,” as his mother had called it.

Provision 2.1 The Contest: The Miss Temptation Pageant will commence upon arrival, and the client agrees to engage with all contestants equally, amicably, and without bias...

Little did he know that he was considered to have “arrived” once the flight was in the air. With a sigh of resignation, he folded the newspaper and fit it into the pouch on the back of the seat in front of him.

“Looking forward to Paradise?” he asked with a fake smile.

“Honestly?” She set down her glass—what was that, her fourth glass of champagne?—and shook her head. “No.”

“No? Then, why...? Are you entered in the pageant?”

She snorted.

It was not a feminine sound. It did, however, evoke an unexpected smile from him.

“I’m not really pageant material.” She gestured to herself. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“Oh...I don’t know,” he said, trying to muster up a compliment.

“It’s okay.” She patted his arm. “Don’t feel the need to patronize me.” She pressed the call button again and then wriggled in her seat. When the flight attendant arrived, the woman asked for a blanket and pillow.

Thank God.

Hopefully she’d sleep the rest of the way and leave Cal in peace. Ignoring her, Calum pulled out his laptop and opened it, calling up the legal documents he would be presenting to the shareholders of the resort during the vote at the end of the week.

He’d only agreed to the whole Miss Temptation Pageant as a cover for a business deal, so when Cal negotiated the contract of the web-based production with *Men’s Magazine*, he’d insisted on the location and the timing of the event. His reason? He was buying the property where the contest would be taking place.

After spending eight months searching for his next big investment, Cal had finally found the Playground of Paradise Bay. It was prime real estate on a relatively untouched tropical island. All he had to do was secure more than 50 percent of the shares, take over the board of directors, dismantle the resort, and construct luxury condos in its place.

The return would be astronomical. It was a no-brainer.

He perused the contract again, though he already had it emblazoned in his mind’s eye. However, the constant wriggling and sounds coming from the woman beside him were

distracting. Fluffing out her blanket, taking the pillow out of its plastic, adjusting her seat—backward.

Then forward.

Then back again.

And forward once more.

Jesus.

Once she had finally stilled, the thin blue blanket covering her, the white paper pillow behind her head, Calum realized she'd arranged everything so that she was facing him, eyes narrowly observing.

She had admitted she wasn't a contestant, so he wasn't contractually bound to be nice to her. "Can I help you?" he finally said when he glanced her way and she unabashedly met his gaze.

"You are quite fascinating to watch," she said.

"Oh?"

"Did you know your lips move when you're thinking?"

"Excuse me?"

"Not all the time, just when you're concentrating. Or, maybe when you're annoyed." Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"No, they don't."

"Oh, yes, they do." She pointed to his computer which he shut immediately. "I assume that was some business document you called up. Probably something written in legalese." She paused to see if he would corroborate her words. When he said nothing, she continued.

"Anyway, as you were reading, or thinking—or whatever you were doing—your lips were

moving.” She flashed a smile. If not for the fact that this conversation was at his expense, her smile would have been rather infectious, because it was the kind that reached all the way up into her sparkling hazel eyes.

Though the sparkle in her eyes was more likely a product of four (maybe five?) alcoholic beverages.

Speaking of...Cal swallowed a mouthful of Scotch. He had a feeling he was going to need more than one to help get him through this flight. “Whatever you say.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“No.”

“So, no one has ever mentioned it to you before?”

“Of course not. Because I don’t do it.”

She laughed. “It’s because you’re surrounded by yes-people.”

“What?”

She crinkled her nose. “You must know that people tell you what you want to hear, right?”

“That’s not true. I am surrounded by competent individuals who challenge me all the time. I can be hard to please, but I’m not a tyrant.”

“If you say so.” Her smile widened as she finally turned to face forward. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know.” She shut her eyes.

Cal blinked. Why did a silly comment from an infuriating woman make him feel itchy inside? “I’m not ashamed. Why would I be ashamed?”

With eyes still closed, she said, “I don’t know. You tell me.”

He made a derisive sound. “You’re—”

“Perceptive?” she interrupted. Opening her eyes again, she said, “Listen. I’m not laughing at you. I simply find it interesting—”

“And by interesting, you mean amusing,” he interjected. Her smile told him he was correct.

Lolling her head across the headrest to face him, she said, “I find it *interesting* because I do the same thing when I’m thinking. Though my peers—and my sister—have no problem bringing it to my attention.”

“I assure you, you are mistaken.”

“And I assure you, that I just watched you do it. You sat there, reading whatever it is that’s on your computer, and your lips were moving. It’s no big deal.”

She was right. It was no big deal. Or it shouldn’t be. So why did he feel like he couldn’t let it go? Maybe because no one had ever brought this fact to his attention, though he had a memory from childhood where a bully from fourth grade, Jake Miskey, had made fun of him. A playground skirmish resulting in a bloody nose for Jake had been the end of that.

Did he still do it? Why wouldn’t anyone have said anything? Why did this woman think she was entitled to tell him? For the first time since the plane had taken off, Cal studied the woman beside him. Her hair was a light-brown color and straight to her shoulders. Her face was well proportioned, but there was not one feature that really stood out. Hazel eyes. A regular nose. Lips that were neither full nor thin. She had a slim figure, possibly athletic, but it was hard to tell while she was covered in an airline blanket.

She wasn’t mousy, as he’d earlier thought, she was simply average. Nondescript.

She opened her eyes and caught him staring. Something happened to her when her lips stretched across her face into a smile, however. It was like a light went on beneath the surface of her skin and she glowed.

“I’m Becca, by the way.” She stuck out her hand.

He shook it, surprised by the firmness of her grip. “I’m Cal—”

“I know who you are.” She snorted again.

It was kind of a cute sound.

“So, tell me, *Mr. Most Eligible Bachelor in The Entire Galaxy...*”

She was mocking him, obvious by the way she overemphasized every word of his embellished title. No one mocked him. Ever.

It was surprisingly refreshing.

“Are *you* looking forward to Paradise?” she asked.

“Actually?” He swirled his Scotch before taking a sip. Perhaps it was her candor that made him answer honestly. “No.”

“No?” She could read regret on his face the second the word came out. Fascinating. Almost as fascinating as his honest answer. Becca was strangely impressed.

“I mean, I’m looking forward to it, of course,” he said, backpedaling. “I’m just really busy, and I’ll have to work while I’m there, and I’m not really accustomed to so much...” He stopped mid-sentence, as if he was on the verge of revealing another hidden truth about himself and then thought better of it. He drained his Scotch and said, “The break will be good. I love the ocean.” He flashed a smile.

A fake smile.

Wow. The man did *not* want to go to the resort. In fact, Becca had the feeling he wasn't a big fan of the whole pageant thing, either. Maybe not even of the media attention and the title. This was all important information that she would store away in her memory banks to call up later when she was helping Grace win the contest.

Since he was the sole judge, the more she understood what made him tick, the better.

"You're not a reporter, are you?" he asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"No," she answered. "I'm not a reporter." She carefully observed his reaction.

Tension eased from his jaw. Hmm. So, Calum Price appreciated privacy more than media attention? She liked that.

"So, what is it that you do?" he asked cautiously.

Wow. Showing interest in another human being? Score another point for Mr. Price.

"Guess," Becca said, cryptically. She loved playing this game with people—no one ever guessed correctly.

"Guess?"

"Yes. Let's see how astute your powers of deduction are, Sherlock."

The fact that his lips twisted in genuine amusement, and not some forced smile, gave Becca an unexpected sense of pleasure.

"Hmm." He rubbed his jaw. "High school teacher."

"No."

"Nurse."

"Uh-uh."

"Librarian."

"Seriously?"

“What?” His eyes flashed.

“Are you purposefully spouting off every stereotypical occupation for a woman just to irk me?”

“No.” His smile said otherwise.

“Okay, why don’t we make this interesting?”

“How?”

“A bet.”

“What kind of bet?”

“The kind where you can ask five yes-or-no questions to determine my occupation. If you’re right, you win. If you’re wrong, I win.”

“Interesting. And what are the terms of this wager?” He rubbed his hands together in interest.

She had him. Now to figure out an appropriate ante. She gave herself a few seconds to think.

“Huh, you’re right,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “Your lips do move when you think.”

She shrugged. “It’s a sign of intelligence.”

“Really?”

She poked his arm. “Are you seriously going to deny it, when you do the same thing?”

The man was incredibly sexy when he smiled like he was right now, his lips slanting up at the corners while little crinkles radiated from his dark eyes. Becca gazed at him as if seeing him for the first time.

“Back to the stakes...” he said softly.

The timbre of his voice sent goosebumps racing down her arms. God. She hadn't reacted to a man like this in...well, she couldn't remember the last time.

Must be the mimosas.

"So...what are your terms?" he asked, the left side of his mouth twisting with amused anticipation.

Jesus, the man was sexy. Too sexy.

Remember why you're here, Becca. It's to glean info about this bastard...to help Grace win. Besides, there's no way in hell a man like Calum Price would ever be interested in you, so...

"If I win, you have to choose my sister as the winner of the pageant." There. Mission accomplished.

"No can do."

"Why not?"

"My contract is very clear. I am required to give all contestants a fair and unbiased opportunity to win."

"Top three, then."

He considered for all of two seconds. "Done."

Becca smiled, and yet something in her tummy twisted unexpectedly.

Definitely too many mimosas.

She cleared her throat. "And what is at stake for me?"

"Hmm." He studied her closely.

Becca held his gaze even when her cheeks blossomed with heat under the intensity of his assessment. His lips twitched, whether in a suppressed smile or because he'd mouthed a thought that had just come to him, Becca would never know.

He glanced around to see if anyone was listening and then lowered his voice. “Are you a member of the Mile High Club?”

Thank God she’d finished her last drink, otherwise Becca would have spewed whatever was in her mouth into Calum’s face. “Excuse me?”

“Simple question. Yes or no?”

When Becca didn’t answer, because, quite frankly, she was too stunned by his question to formulate thoughts, let alone words, he answered for her. “Oh. You *are* a member.”

“No-oo.” The single syllable word ended up having two syllables. “Of course I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“Well, let’s see.” She ticked one finger. “It’s unromantic.” She ticked a second finger. “Uncouth.” Then a third. “And, I would imagine, incredibly uncomfortable.”

“That’s a lot of ‘uns.’”

“Not to mention unsanitary.”

He grinned. “So, not interested in joining, huh?”

She didn’t need to mention the fact that no one had ever invited her to partake in such an unlikely activity. Not that Calum Price was doing so now.

He was baiting her. Why?

Why do you think, Bec? He’s making fun of you.

With that, *Mister Wonderful* just lost a whole bunch of points in the “are you a decent human being” category.

If he thought to throw her off by making fun of her, he had another thing coming. She was much too thick-skinned to let a jibe about her lack of feminine wiles get her down.

“Then again,” she said, placing her hand on his forearm where he’d rolled up the cuffs of his designer shirt. “Maybe I’ve just never been asked...by the right partner.”

She waited for him to jerk out from under her hand and withdraw the bet. But his eyes gleamed irreverently. “Good. Let’s play.”