

Chapter One

Coop Masterson, federal air marshal and Lea Harding's worst nightmare, barreled up the airplane aisle, nine millimeter drawn and aimed. At her.

No. Not at her. At the asshole who had her in a headlock with a knife at her throat. The asshole who was dragging her toward the cockpit, spittle spraying her earlobe as he screamed at the air marshal who had, in three short hours, become her nemesis.

She supposed she should feel more warmly toward the hottie who was about to save her skin but Coop had pissed her off earlier. Once pissed, Lea tended to stay pissed until a damn good reason not to be presented itself. This had not yet happened.

Mr. Spittle tightened his grip. His forearm dug into her windpipe and she coughed. "Take it easy, buddy."

"Shut the hell up!" He wrenched her backwards and lost his balance. They tumbled against the carpeted bulkhead. Lea was not one to complain about rug burns on her back but she sure wished she could have more fun getting them.

"Freeze or I'll cut her throat!" the hijacker barked.

Coop kept coming. Looked like Lea was to be the sacrificial lamb.

Nice to know.

She clawed at Mr. Spittle's arm and claimed her reward—a new wrinkle engraved by the blunt tip of the hard rubber knife. Just one little twist and her kneecap would line up snugly against his balls. Except Coop would be mad if she acted against procedure.

She wheezed for breath. Whoa! Were those stars in her eyes? Coop had a stellar presence but Lea didn't think her sudden lightheadedness could be blamed on his looks.

Okay. Frick procedure. Lea curled her body inwards and shoved her knee into the promised land. With a soft oomph, Mr. Spittle folded into a heap at her feet. Still fueled by unsympathetic survivor's instinct, Lea eyed him coldly. That ought to teach him to mess with her! She blew damp bangs off her forehead, brushed her hands together and, turning, set them on her hips as Coop tripped over Mr. Spittle and slammed into her.

"Get the hell off me," she screeched as she hit the bulkhead for the second time.

"Shit," came his tight response.

A heady groping session followed. Lea shoved her hands against a rock-hard chest. Mingling scents of testosterone and power washed over her and every feminine cell in her body sashayed to attention.

Get a grip. You can't stand him. Remember?

Coop yanked his head back, gray eyes raining smoldering ash. "Goddammit, Lea! You were supposed to wait for me during this drill."

They unclumped their bodies and Coop sprang away like she was a bed of hot coals.

"You were too slow. I couldn't breathe!" She brought a shaky hand to her chest and slipped a finger inside the unbuttoned neckline of her white blouse. Wincing slightly, she felt certain she'd have a significant bruise by this evening. Wonderful. She had a date too.

Coop stiffened in alert, gaze flicking along the line of her exposed collarbone. Longish shaggy blond hair framed his unusual face and made him appear more like a medieval knight than a hired killer.

He wasn't what Lea would consider handsome. In fact, when she broke him apart, he wasn't even attractive. But somehow it all came right in the montage of his face.

When they'd been introduced this morning at the bookwork segment of the terrorism training class, her first reaction had been a hearty hubba hubba. After all, what could be sexier than six feet of sleek muscle assigned to protect and defend?

And those eyes—gray with yellow flecks like some intergalactic half-breed. Lea found herself getting lost in them again as they narrowed.

“I heard you gasp before you kneed him.”

Her chin went out. “My point exactly.”

“If I heard you gasp, you could breathe.”

“That was a death rattle.” She was all for keeping the skies friendly and safe, but not if it cost her life.

“You went against procedure. Again.”

So much for “thinking outside the box”. Which had been Coop’s verbal instruction in dealing with threatening passengers. Babe-alicious or not, the man was a walking oxymoron.

With an accent on the moron.

Why did Pan Air always insist on hiring Gestapo instructors? “So it’s *procedure* for flight attendants to die?”

“To hijackers it is.”

He had her on that. But still. This was a training session. Not real life. She opened her mouth to tell him to lighten up. Before she could, the vanquished Mr. Spittle rasped something at her feet. Coop bent down.

“Too hard.”

“I know, man.” Coop slapped him on the shoulder. “I told her to ease up.”

“Me...too...hard,” Mr. Spittle gagged. He pointed to Lea and then formed the universal choking signal with his hands.

Coop pressed the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

“I told you,” Lea taunted.

Mr. Spittle hauled himself up and staggered to a seat. He plopped down heavily, red faced and breathing hard. Lea experienced a moment of supreme admiration when he sent her a lopsided, pain-filled grin.

“Guess I got too into my role,” he said. “Sorry about that.”

She patted his shoulder. “I’m sorry too. I almost blacked out.”

Mr. Spittle let fly a hefty sigh and leaned his head back. The action caused her gaze to focus on a sharply hewn jawline, full masculine lips and pretty darn nice blue eyes. Suddenly, she didn’t mind the spittle quite so much.

“Too bad you didn’t,” he said. “Might have required mouth-to-mouth.”

“Wouldn’t that’ve been a shame.” She smiled. Mentally, she tallied her dates for the upcoming month. Friday after next she had free. She thought. “You’ll have to make it up to me.”

A derisive snort from her left had her turning to Coop.

“This is a war game, not a mating game,” he bit.

Leave it to RoboCop to spoil the moment. How else did he expect her to meet men?

Sure, being an international flight attendant had its perks – like regular access to the rich and famous, world travel, a decent salary – but most times the pickings were pretty slim when it came to single men.

Lea did all right. More than all right according to her best friend Kira Grayson. But though Lea had no interest whatsoever in marriage, she wanted to settle in with someone for some serious serial monogamy. Wouldn’t you know that seemed too tall an order?

Lea sighed.

Nothing on God’s green Earth would make her mother, Muriel, happier than Lea presenting a signed, sealed marriage certificate. The extra income would make that satellite dish Muriel had her eye on – in order to watch more *Wheel of Fortune* reruns – possible.

It was not going to happen though. Lea didn’t need yet another financial dependent. After sending her parents a monthly check, she had barely enough left for car payments, her little brother’s college fund and, oh yeah, food. Good thing she’d

invested some of her beauty contest prize money in a condo several years ago. No mortgage.

And boy had the guilt gods had a field day with that. Were it not for the fact that she'd sprouted a spine in the last five years, they'd be sharing her tiny, but precious, condo with her. As it was, she lived blissfully alone. And that was the way it was going to stay.

She must've directed one hell of a sourpuss at Coop because he frowned, glanced at his watch and said, "Take five, everyone." Delivering one last malevolent glare, he stalked to the back of the plane.

"So, how about it?" Mr. Spittle was saying.

"Huh? What?" Lea flicked her peepers into high beam and directed them at him. The desired effect. Mr. Spittle puddled in his seat.

"You and me, Friday after next," he murmured.

There was a God!

"Sounds great," she cooed. "Let me find some paper and I'll give you my number." As she spun into the galley, she spotted Coop baring his teeth at her from down the aisle. Lea batted her eyelashes at him and he turned away. Good riddance. Now if only the hairs at her nape would relax.

While she searched the metal cabinets for a pen, she wondered why Coop had taken such an instant dislike to her. Usually the opposite occurred. But this time, the minute she'd slid her Prada rip-off under the seat at her desk, arranged her notebook and clicked her official Pan Air pen, it seemed he'd already formed a judgment against her.

At first, she'd attributed his threatening stare to his otherworldly eye color. But as the session droned on, and he answered all her questions in an über snide tone, she'd realized it was personal. Unused to men who didn't like her, she'd adopted a copycat attitude and things had gone downhill at warp speed.

So here they were—him able to shoot straight at full gallop from thirty paces, and her armed with rubbery chicken entrees.

“Here you go.” She slipped Mr. Spittle her number. “You already know I’m Lea. Lea Harding.”

“Jake White.” He extended his hand. “So, come here often?”

She shook his hand and laughed out loud. He was cute! “Wish I did. This is a hoot and a half.”

“Tell me about it,” Jake chuckled. He peered at her phone number. “You live on Long Island?”

Lea nodded. “Long Beach to be exact. It’s close to the airport. I like it.”

“I would too.” He appraised her with a fresh gleam in his eyes. “Too pricey for me, though. I’m in Easton, Pennsylvania. Even that’s getting expensive.”

“Things are tough all over.” Lea shrugged. These days she didn’t brag about her clean sweeps in pageants and the modeling career that followed or mention how well her real estate investment had done. Men tended to get the impression it was just dumb luck, and want her or her property for a showpiece.

Not that she hid her looks. Quite the opposite. A girl had to use her God-given gifts. But she’d been burned enough to realize that once men knew she’d been a publicly acclaimed babe, nothing else about her mattered.

Not straight As in college—the first diploma to ever grace her family’s walls. Not her single-minded pursuit of a career that took more ability than the artful application of lip-gloss. Not of her strength in finally saying *no* to her parents’ sweet but simple ambitions for her. None of that entered the equation once they learned she’d been crowned Miss New York.

Flock you, Charlie.

She'd gotten this far on her own terms and she planned on getting further. As soon as her brother Joe didn't need her to front his tuition anymore. Only four more years. *Law school here I come.*

"Still," Jake said. "How'd you manage a condo on Long Beach? Did you win the lottery?"

Was Lea imagining things, or did Jake lick his lips at the prospect? "I bought a flood-wrecked repo ten years ago. Sunk every penny I had into it."

"Oh." His voice had grown small. Her joy sagged a little until she remembered he'd asked for her number before he knew about the condo.

"The mildewy smell is mostly gone by now."

He grinned and all was right with the world. "Have to say this is a first. Dating a girl who nearly put me out of commission."

"Feeling better?" she asked with a quick but pointed glance at his lap.

"Should be right as rain by Friday after next."

He thought he was going to get some on the first date? Lea's smile froze on her face. "Whoa. Whoa. Back up a second, Jack."

"Jake."

She knew that. What she didn't know was where the hell he'd gotten the idea she was easy.

She loved sex. Loved sex. A day didn't go by when she didn't think about it twenty or thirty times. But she never slept with a guy on the first date.

Must be the smeared lipstick from the tussle with Coop. Lea pulled her purse out from under the seat and unearthed her compact and a tissue.

"Leave it. You look nice that way," Jake intoned.

Hoo boy. She had her work cut out for her.

"Time's up." Coop boomed in her ear. "Everyone to the back of the plane. Lea, take your place in the galley."

Lea glanced at her watch. Five minutes to the second. Figured.

“Communicus Interruptus,” Jake said.

Okay. That was funny. Maybe Jake would be worth a shot after all. After a lifetime of photo shoots, Lea’d grown adept at fielding unwanted advances.

Rising, she straightened her blouse. Coop’s slitted gaze swept her from bottom to top. Whatever his opinion of her personally, there was no mistaking the tiny ember in his eyes that exploded and splattered over the cabin when his gaze settled for a microsecond on her breasts.

He must’ve been preprogrammed at the factory to like big boobs. She wondered briefly what else he was preprogrammed for and a hot trickle of desire dripped into her abdomen. Lea didn’t usually take to A-types like Coop, but their inherent drive for excellence in everything they did interested her immensely. Too bad they didn’t even come close to liking each other.

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Coop watched the frolicksome antics of Ms. Ditz-n-Glitz and Jake with one eye. The other one he kept on his paperwork as he shoved it into his briefcase and prepared to abandon ship. At the last minute, he pulled out a purchase order and scrawled “athletic cups” in capital letters across the front. This he kept in his fist and planned on dropping it off at Pan Air headquarters before hightailing it home.

The last half of the class had finished without incident. But the stress of policing Lea and trying to second guess what stunt she might pull this time had taken its toll.

Prior to today, Coop had a weekly standing appointment with a masseur. Now he considered building a guesthouse behind his pad for the guy. He rolled his neck and felt the stab of a burgeoning spasm between his shoulder blades. To think retirement had been at his fingertips.

He’d enjoyed his twin diesel cabin cruiser for exactly two weeks before the urgent call from Pan Air for a *Security Specialist* had lit up the line. Like the stupid prick he

could be, he'd taken it on, gotten caught up in the altruistic idea of passing on his hard-earned knowledge, maybe saving a few lives along the way... He hadn't planned on having to pound that wisdom into the thick skull of a calamity waiting to happen.

He looked at her and a sound akin to chalk on a blackboard screeched in his brain. The vibration skittered down his spine and thumped in his crotch. The feeling momentarily amused him. Did he need a cup just to look at her?

She was a ball buster on wheels. Delivering misery and oxygen deprivation to the organs of every male within pheromone-sniffing distance. It didn't surprise him in the least that her knee had a built-in rifle sight. He'd met her type before, too many times in too many places. All he wanted for his life now was peace and quiet. Calmness and serenity. Boredom with a capital B. The complete opposite of how he'd formerly made his living.

Too bad Lea Harding scared the shit out of him.

It wasn't just because of her looks, which, he had to admit, rocked—nearly six feet of leg, slim waist and just-fucked red hair—it was also her brittle attitude. As if she'd been there, done that and not only got the wet T-shirt but wore it proudly.

What hardships could a cosseted, perfumed and powdered airhead like her have possibly endured? An emergency midnight foray to the nail salon?

She'd certainly never fought for her life or anyone else's. Yet someday she might. And it was Coop's freshly minted responsibility to prepare her for that.

He was royally screwed.

Shit. She was headed his way. He briefly considered deploying the inflatable escape chute and taking a flying leap. Better yet, he could toss her down it and watch the legs and hair tumble into a wad at the bottom.

Well, wouldn't you know. The thought of her lying breathless and spread-eagled on the tarmac gave him a hard-on the size of Florida. He quickly sat down and pulled his briefcase over his lap. "What do you want now?"

She gave a little snort and kept on trucking. "Keep it in your pants, *Cooper*. I've got to pee."

Blood and heat clamored out of his dick and into his face. Nobody used his full name and lived.

He pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. Of all the cabins in all the airplanes in all the world, he had to walk into hers.