

Fifteen

The Abominable Snow Bunny



“JUST SO WE’RE CLEAR from here on: I’m First Bitch on this *Trek of Wonders*. She can be Second Bitch, or Ms. Abused, or Fawning Fiona, but I’m First Bitch, and no guy, alpha male or alpha half male, puts his fingers on my skin until I put mine on his. And Little Miss Cupcakes there better keep her strings tied up tight and not try tipping any more than I plan to show myself.

“And I don’t give a dead seal what got sketched out in rehearsal—if you can call it that—no one votes me off the *Trek* or they’ll find themselves overboard, off the train, or missing the plane like that Jill in Istanbul (funny she should have such a scary liquid in her carry-on, what was she not thinking?).

“I go all the way to the end, Ares’ Rock in Australia, especially since I’m the only traveler on this junket packing the clothes for every clime. Did we not do our homework, our research? I mean, Shelby trying to make her layers thinner in that nasty heat on the Sphinx’s paws. She looked like the remains of a Theban slave girl who couldn’t solve the riddle. And not just the girls: there was Sean in his wife-beater in the Sahara getting the freckles burned right off his Celtic biceps. Everybody who’s read two whole books in their one whole life knows you wear white shirts with long sleeves in the desert

. . . and then you can open a couple buttons and flash some chest hair through your neck chains if you really want to and if you've got one of those parasol-size safari hats for shade. What in the hell? A wife-beater *and* his DC baseball cap on semi-sideways? How *old* is he anyhow?

"Function and fashion, people. Can't grasp that? Then why don't you just bring your granny's mink coat to the Mayan rubbles? I'm saying I've seen better outfits on Subaru owners, Relay for Life runners, and water gymnasts and they're mostly just heavy legs poking out of the chlorine.

"Hey, guys and dolls, this is a *reality* show and the one *real* thing about it is, your looks count more than you do. So think through the equation: your body plus climate plus good taste equals the right ensemble.

"And the right ensemble does not include sweat. Oh yeah, my man in a sauna, but you guys are not him. You come off looking like you just harvested the entire radish crop west of Annapolis. So shower before the goddamned show and fake a little respect for the viewers who don't care a cat's ass for REALISM. It's REALITY we're doing. There's a difference, people."

Angie was running on again, but not a soul among the world travelers knew how to stop her, and the camera squad encouraged her. Somewhere in her tirade she said she'd out-argued the entire debate team at Sweet Jesus Bible Academy and the travelers half believed her—she could certainly *outlast* an entire debate team. And somewhere between the pyramids and Rome, she had pretty much claimed the roost from the chief cock and muscle man on *Trek of Wonders*, Grinder McGonegal, besides usurping the queen-for-a-day rotation among the surviving girls: Adele, the self-appointed redhead; Sydney, the token granola; Britta, the sour-mouthed lash-batter; Fiona, Angie's Little Miss Cupcakes rival for the sexpot slot; and Diva, (short for Deanne van der Smoothie), a thirty-seven-year-old grandmother of two.

“Gets more *unreal* with every plane ride to every next wonder,” muttered Wayne, the self-proclaimed team player, sideways. “And, to think, I could have been savoring that mission work at the leper hospice in Kenya.”

The muttering drifted left, out of Angie’s range, saving its author from a sure gelding. Most of the muscle on the tour had been more or less unmanned by now in the ill-informed banter with Bitch Number One.

“What’s unreal are all those one-month jobs waiting for us if we get voted out.” Karl smoothed his palm over his gleaming enforcer dome and nearly choked. “Think of it: Roddy driving that water cistern across the hot dust of Egypt. Hell, I’d rather be Holly with three weeks left of her month detailing those very used Fiats in Rome.”

“Sort of makes this next housekeeping job in the ski lodge at the Bering Dam look like a merciful sentence.” Wayne smiled his silliest smile from his large repertoire.

“You know, that’s what I don’t get: there are no mountains there—look at this topo—it’s practically flat.” Karl flashed his phone screen at Wayne. “Mostly foggy, it says. Think we’ll get a view of the dam? Oh, I see, foggy, and dark, dark, dark in winter, but mostly daylight and some clear days right about now. So maybe cross-country skiing, but not a lot of snow in a year. Sounds like a lot of dry ground and wet air. It can’t be water skiing either.”

“. . . and,” on went Angie after a rare breath, “I assumed tanning salons were a promised part of the package at all the stops. Hey, I can manage with just a little sun, always has been good to me, but we’re on TV prime time every thucking Thursday, and look at Adele there, skin bleached out again like she really is a redhead—hasn’t had any living tone since she and Sean got braised in Egypt . . .”

“Don’t get those hopes too hot, Ang, ’cause it looks like this next place specializes in paling salons and cold mist saunas, unless that hotel, that lodge . . .”

“So, Karl, now we’re going to the limits of the habitable world where the tundra sod is bricked to make walls and burnt to heat and eat what’s inside them. Best guess and most likely, they use their old beer-brewing tubs for bubble bath therapy weekday evenings and for laundry before breakfast. Into a wilderness without trees, so thank the gods of these Nordics that I got satellite phone service for this trip because I’ve heard you need your own radio tower up there otherwise . . .”

Karl elbowed in: “How much you want per minute to use that phone of yours if mine won’t connect?”

“An hour’s solid silence from you and . . .”

“I . . .”

“Make it two hours and no shit-faced smirks like the one you just beamed in James’ direction.”

James never said anything on or off camera until the rest of the pilgrims had worn themselves dry-mouthed with bantering and trying to keep up with Angie. But now, with a sigh of both pain and relief, he cut in: “Thought I heard our Anchorage flight announced.”

“12A . . . No, not next to you, I won’t. Like I’m going to let you fake another nap and drop your head against mine. Yeah, Grinder, your over-moussed head drove my cutlass earring into my neck flesh. I don’t care if you have 12B on your boarding pass, James is sitting with me, and you can have his exit seat for those freakish long legs of yours. He’s a gentleman for more hours in an afternoon than you’re awake in a day.”

The twelve surviving pilgrims shuffled up their carry-ons of near record volume and toted and draggled their way toward the podium at Gate C5, Angie at the front of their jumbled wedge. Just past the last screen of ZNN News, one of her usually tidy pink carry-ons dropped a makeup purse and curling iron from a half-zipped pouch. Most of the world trekkers noticed but none said a word or did the good deed.

Halfway down the skywalk, Chaz got to thinking about the next plane, as usual looking past the moment he had not yet enjoyed. “So I thought we’d be connecting in Nome for Wales, but now they’ve got us on a charter straight from Anchorage to the dam—a turbo-prop, probably one of those duck bellies with the wings across the top. It’s a long trip too, six hundred miles, and all that noise from the propellers droning on and on.” He spoke to James, not wanting an answer, but surprisingly one came anyhow.

“That might be the better kind of droning on and on.”

Chaz’s face shaded into a dull curious question. “And the other kind?”

“Oh, nothing really. I’m just hoping this flight won’t touch off another major earache. I can’t fathom why some flights do and some don’t. It’s nothing to do with the kind of plane or the altitude either.” Like many a quiet one, James had a gift for deadpan irony.

Which Chaz missed entirely: “It all depends on how the cabin pressure fluctuates.”

“Yeah, the pressure cooker . . .”

“Not what I said . . .”

“Uh, I’ve been told I’m in 12B and there she . . . Oh, hell, sorry, sir . . . Can I put my flute case on your fishing rod tubes up there?”

“Later, James.” Chaz wedged his way past James toward the last row in the cabin, where his seat back rose flat against the toilet wall.

Perhaps a minute before the door to the plane was to be secured, Angie at her window seat noticed that her beauty tools were missing, and when her overhead call light went unanswered for five seconds, she climbed over James, bruising first his right, then his left instep, while the Janet Evanovich fan in 12C lost both sandals scrambling into the aisle to save her own toes.

Sandals to Alaska, James grimaced, and I’m stuck in the middle.

At the bulkhead in the aisle, Angie collided with her own makeup purse and curling iron in the grips of a well-meaning flight

attendant, who was reaching for an intercom when the impact sent him splayed backwards into a preflight Bloody Mary in first class.

Except for James and the Evanovich devotee still standing imbalanced in the aisle, the rest of the passengers, already buckled in and settled for takeoff, caught only the shrieks. But the other *Trek* pilgrims, recognizing the author of the audio, filled in the visual to their liking.

Somewhere in the air between Ketchikan and Juneau, after a turbulent half a flight, the air calmed, the seatbelt light went dark, and five of the trekkers found themselves wedged together at the aisle's end, going to, waiting for, or coming out of the toilets.

Just out of the lavatory after checking his foot for broken bones and ruptured veins, James jostled against Chaz in a light tail sway. "Next plane, I want a noisy seat right behind a propeller."

"Too bad for the flight crew that the gate crew found Miss Complexion's paint and wand," said Adele, who had just arrived at the back of the plane. "I should have swooped them up for myself, put a little life in my cheeks, but hey, I'm thinking I might vote myself off at the next stop, since I'm hearing I'm close to out anyhow."

James glared at Chaz who smirked at Cody who rolled her eyes more longingly than wisely into Wayne, the team player, who pinched a thought through tight lips: "Actually, we were hoping you might lend us a vote against a better suntan than yours."

A sudden rouge in Adele's cheeks and neck flushed and wavered somewhere between embarrassed and wicked. "Oh, I see. Do you suppose I could flirt another vote against her out of Grinder? That would make six."