



Dictatorship of the Dress ("Much ""I Do"" About Nothing")

By Jessica Topper

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So when she's mistaken for the bride and bumped up to first class, Laney figures some stress-free luxury is worth a harmless white lie. Until the flight crew thinks that the man sitting next to her is Laney's groom, and her little fib turns into a hot mess.

The last thing Noah Ridgewood needs is some dress-obsessed diva landing in his first-class row. En route to his Vegas bachelor party, the straight-laced software designer knows his cold feet have nothing to do with the winter weather.

When a severe storm leaves them grounded in Chicago and they find themselves booked into the last available honeymoon suite, Laney and her in-flight neighbor have little choice but to get better acquainted. Now, as her bridal mission hangs in the balance, perhaps the thing Laney gets right is a second chance at love.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Dictatorship of the Dress*

"...insightful, charming and romantic." - *Heroes & Heartbreakers*

"...riveting and pitch-perfect...with an honesty and charm that is heartwarming and spellbinding. Topper's tale of loss & love is a winner." - *Publisher's Weekly*

"...a fresh twist on boy meets girl..." - Tracy Brogan, *Crazy Little Thing*

"Topper makes good use of the dress as a plot device and infuses enough fun and suspense into the rollicking storyline to make it a satisfying read." - *Kirkus Reviews*

"Lightning-quick and full of surprising humor...refreshingly daring" - *RT Book Reviews*

"Topper's delightful rom-com features laugh-out-loud dialog, surprisingtwists, and a couple unable to grasp how perfect they are for eachother." -- *Library Journal* (Cool Summer Reads 2016)

***Dictatorship of the Dress* Named One of the Best Books of 2015 by PUBLISHERS WEEKLY!**

Praise for *Louder than Love*

"I was absolutely blown away."—*The Book Pushers*

"Topper is an author to watch!"—Laura Drake, author of *Nothing Sweeter*

"I loved this book...I just found myself enraptured."—*Nocturne Romance Reads*

About the Author

Jessica Topper is an ex-librarian turned rock 'n' roll number cruncher and author of the novel *Louder than Love*, available in digital format. She is a PAN member of the Romance Writers of America, and belongs to the Women's Fiction Writers Association. Jessica lives in Western New York with her husband, daughter and one ancient cat.

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Terminal C Departures

Really, LaGuardia? One of the busiest airports in the country, and you couldn't come up with a better name? You could've skipped Caltogether, like some hotels do when they omit the unlucky thirteenth floor. You know, Terminals A, B, D, E . . .

I'm sure there would still be some clueless tourists in life, scratching their heads, consulting their maps. Pointing and asking, Whatever happened to Terminal C? Where's Terminal C?

“It’s in my bones, Laney Jane.” I could still hear Allen’s throaty whisper and feel his long, strong drummer’s fingers tangle through my hair. “It’s not going away this time.”

If I were an airport architect, I would’ve come up with something better. Because only 25 percent of people make it five years through Allen’s type of Terminal C.

I pushed on, eager to check my luggage: the crappy soft-sided Samsonite I’d had since college, and the invisible, matched “his and hers” mental baggage I had solely inherited two years back. Perhaps Hawaii would be good for something.

The lame heel on my favorite pair of boots finally gave out, sending me sprawling right foot over left. The heavy garment bag I carried twirled with me as I pirouetted like a demented ballerina across the concourse to the closest bench.

Freakin’ A, talk about adding insult to injury. I rubbed my ankle in quick consolation before yanking the boot zipper down the length of my entire calf. They were cheap 8th Street boots, not even worth the fix if it could be made. But they had been my first Big-Girl Paycheck purchase when I moved to the city, and their soles had carried not only me, but also miles of memories. Va-va-voom boots, Allen had christened them upon first sight.

There was no time to mourn them; into the trash they went. I plucked my flip-flops from my carry-on and slipped my freshly pedicured feet into them. Onward.

“Hi, one bag to check, two carry-on items.”

The Windwest Airways desk attendant threw a skeptical glance at the bulky garment bag as she reached for my license and boarding pass. “Are you sure you don’t want to check that now?”

I could hear my mother’s words echoing in my head louder than the PA speakers booming last call for Flight 105 to Miami. Whatever you do, do not let them check it, Laney. Do not hand it off.

“No, thanks.”

Rebel on the outside, mouse on the inside, Allen always used to say. Do you always do what your mother tells you to do, Laney Jane? Only Allen Burnside had the cojones to call me out on that.

“We can’t guarantee there will be room in the overhead. You may have to gate-check it anyway.” The attendant slapped a tag onto my Samsonite and sent it hurling onto the rolling belt, where it was quickly swallowed by two rubber flaps in the wall. She fixed a stare on me that made me wonder whether she got paid a commission per checked bag.

I contemplated the huge midnight blue bag with Bichonné Bridal Couture emblazoned across the front in frosty silver lettering. The metal hook of the hanger was cutting into the skin between my thumb and index finger. It would be so easy just to let it go. I imagined it getting chewed up through the luggage shoot, mangled in the greasy, mechanical gears. Stepped on by the handlers’ dirty boots. Run over on the tarmac by a baggage cart. Left behind in the dust.

I smiled.

“My mother called ahead. The airline told her a wedding dress could be carried on if the bag was under fifty-one inches.”

I watched as the attendant’s demeanor did a complete one-eighty; I’m talking ollie-on-the-half-pipe-at-the

skate-park one-eighty. “Oh, true!” Her left hand fluttered up near her name tag—April R.—and a lone carat of promise on her ring finger glittered in solidarity. Apparently I had said the two magic words. “I would die if anything happened to my dress. I’m June.”

“I’m Laney,” I said slowly. “But your name tag says April.”

She laughed. “I mean my wedding! I’m a June bride.”

And you’re an oversharer, but that’s okay. “Cool, congrats.” I hefted the bag’s bulk to my shoulder and used my free, noncrippled hand to grab my carry-on. Out of available limbs, I had no choice but to pop my boarding pass between my lips. April the June bride was still smiling at me expectantly, so I offered my raised brow as valediction and lumbered on.

People talk about a monkey on your back; well, mine was eggshell white silk and taffeta, beaded and sequined and weighing in around ten pounds. About as heavy as my regret, but nowhere near as heavy as my grief.

And it belonged to my mother, the blushing bride.

Third time’s the charm, or so they say.

• • •

“Shoes in a separate bin, handbags, too. Any metal, loose change . . . take laptops out of their carrying cases,” droned the TSA worker. “Separate bins for everything, keep moving.”

Strangers around me in various stages of undress—belts whipped off, shoes untied and loosened—shuffled toward security. Oh, crap. I instantly regretted my sock and boot toss as I was forced to kick my flip-flops off. Think happy thoughts. Clean thoughts. Sanitary thoughts. My toes curled as my bare feet touched the cold airport floor. In less than twelve hours, I could buff my feet in Kauai sand and let the Pacific wash away the East Coast grime. Happy thoughts, happy thoughts . . .

“Is that yours?”

“Yep, that’s one of my two allowed personal items.” Personally, though, I wouldn’t be caught dead in it.

“Ain’t no bin big enough for that, girl.” TSA and I both watched as the garment bag went down the conveyor belt, followed by my bag and my cell phone, chirping happily. It was probably Danica texting, loopy on the time change. I wasn’t going to need an alarm clock in Hawaii, not when I had a best friend who was an extreme morning person under normal circumstances. I couldn’t imagine Dani on Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time. I was going to have to slip an Ambien into her mai tai.

Although as heavy as chain mail, the dress made it through the X-ray and metal detector with flying colors. Me, on the other hand . . .

“Anything in your pockets, miss? Belt on?” I shook my head. “Jewelry?”

Allen’s class ring.

I hadn’t removed the chunky platinum band with its peridot stone since the weekend of our ten-year high school reunion, except to replace the string knotted on the back keeping it snug.

“But it’s so small.” And LaGuardia Airport was so, so big.

My heart vibrated in my chest like Allen's sticks on the snare drum when he sound-checked to an empty room.

Mr. TSA wasn't backing down. And there was a pileup of travelers in their stocking feet, holding up their trousers and grumbling, behind me. "All right, all right." I plunked the ring into the little gray dog dish, held my breath, and crossed over to the other side.

East Concourse, Gate C15

Nothing a grande latte and a lemon poppy seed muffin wouldn't fix. Ring? Check. Dress? Check. Phone? Useless, but I had time to power up before boarding. Boarding pass: nowhere to be found.

Are you kidding me?

I could practically hear my mother's voice as I retraced my steps, back through Starbucks and over to the newsstand. "I swear, Laney, you'd lose your tuchus if it wasn't stamped on the back of you!" No boarding pass tucked between the trashy novels I had contemplated buying for a beach read. I checked the perfume counter where I had impulse-purchased Aquolina Pink Sugar because no one was around to judge me . . . no sign of it. Nor was it in the restroom, first stall on the right.

I was a ticketed passenger without a ticket.

"Not a problem, we can certainly print a new one up for you, Ms. Hudson." The attendant at the gate clacked manically at her keyboard. "I may even have an upgrade for you. That way you'll be closer to your gown if there's room for it in the first-class closet."

"It's my—" I paused. If I had to be the dress bearer while my mother globe-trotted around with her sugar daddy fiancé, shouldn't I at least milk it for all it was worth? I had lost a boot heel and a boarding pass, but gaining a first-class seat would more than make up for it. "It's my first time on a plane," I finished, flashing pearly whites to go along with my little white lie. "That would be terrific, thank you."

"Oh, then you definitely deserve a bumping up, Miss Bride-to-Be!" she enthused. "I won't know until boarding time, so I'll call you to the desk then, okay?"

"Sounds good."

I made a beeline into the waiting area, in search of my favorite comfy seat and a power source. Between touring on the road with Allen's band and escorting him down to that medical trial in Philadelphia, I was actually a frequent traveler through this particular waiting lounge.

The airline had pairs of great square chairs near the windows, in padded black leather with electrical outlets built right into the armrests. Unfortunately, the only free one was next to a guy in a matchy-match gray suit, draining half the tristate's electric grid. Not only was he hogging both armrest outlets, with his fancy phone and his tablet charging, he was also typing one-handed on a laptop balanced on his knee, its power cord like a tightrope that I had to maneuver past just to get close to the empty seat. At close range, his cologne was a force field I had to skirt around. A hands-free device winked from behind a lock of his thick jet-black hair like a glowing blue locust. This guy was wired to the gills and completely self-absorbed within his sensory-overload bubble.

I made a production of carefully draping the garment bag across the chair before plopping myself down on the floor near the one wall outlet he wasn't zapping power from. New text messages from Danica lit up the minute I plugged in.

Where are you!?!?! TEXT ME.

Sorry, needed to find a plug. Evil supervillain is harnessing all airport energy at his superbase to fuel his death ray.

Tech-Boy had stopped typing. I stole a glance. Maybe that was no ordinary Bluetooth device in his ear: could it read my thoughts? Or my texts?

English, please?

Dude totally hogging the outlets at my gate. And now he is staring at me.

Oh. :-) Is he cute?

I flicked my eyes up nonchalantly. He now had his cell phone in his hand and was frowning at the screen as he loosened his tie.

A little like Keanu.

Pre-Matrix or post-Matrix?

Pre-Matrix. But with more technology. And more hair.

LOL. Take a pic!

Are you THAT bored in Hawaii already? What time is it there, anyway?

Laney! Come on. Pic or I don't believe you.

The stuff I do to amuse you, Dani.

I nonchalantly angled my phone and pretended to admire my toes, freshly shellacked in a blue the color of sea glass, and stealthily captured him still in frowning mode. Three button pushes later, his picture was in Hawaii, in my best friend's waiting hand. Gotta love technology.

Pretty hot. I like the scruff.

I snuck another peek. I liked it, too. It was a nice contrast to his high cheekbones.

Maybe I should go buy him an electric razor so he can have one more thing to plug in.

Ha! Maybe he'll be sitting next to you.

Just what I don't need. Thanks.

Come on. Live a little. Think WWDD.

What Would Dani Do? You'd probably be joining the Mile-High Club with some sexy pilot.

LOVE a man in uniform! LOL. But no, not exactly . . . I would keep my eyes open, tho. And you should, too. You're one bad sweater away from becoming a crazy cat lady, you know.

I frowned, glancing down at the long, gray, belted cardigan I had picked for my traveling ensemble. After a day of criminal-butt-whooping badassery, I could totally picture Wonder Woman or Supergirl kicking back

to relax in such a thing. It was comfy and hip when paired with my black leggings and high black leather boots . . . although my boots were no more. True, I had picked the sweater's neutral color with the thought in mind that it wouldn't show cat hair as much as black would.

One cat does not a crazy cat lady make, Dan.

Wait, I thought you had three cats.

No, Sister Frances Tappan Zee Got Milk just has a really long name.

LOL. Whatever. You're about to board a jet for a grand adventure, Laney. At least take off Allen's stupid ring.

I bit the raised stone on the ring guiltily. Even from the middle of the Pacific Ocean, my best friend knew me all too well. The peridot was warm against my lips, but the metal was cold. It was a subject I really didn't feel like talking—or texting—about. I deleted her last comment and changed topics.

They want to upgrade me AND the dress to first class. Isn't that a scream?

Cool. Will it get you here any faster? Cuz your mom is already driving me crazy! Tell me again why she didn't just have her wedding on Long Island. There's a perfectly good beach, like, a mile from your house.

You know my mom . . . she was worried people would get stuck in traffic on the L.I.E.

I sent the last text and smiled, picturing Danica laughing at the absurdity of Hawaii being an easier commute than the Long Island Expressway.

A half hour till boarding time. Reaching into my bag, I pulled out my sketchpad, a fresh Faber-Castell 2B, and my earbuds. Music was essential when I worked, especially with Tech-Boy keeping up his staccato one-hand typing trick just inches away from my eardrums. Using my legging-clad knees as my easel, I began to flesh out an elaborate throne. Coils of wire and tubing emanated from every crack and crevice; if I had my colors handy, I would ink them in neon yellow or toxic green, perfect for the supervillain siphoning all the world's energy for his death ray.

I bit my lip into a smile as I sketched, my lines becoming looser and freer with every stroke of the pencil. Tech-Boy was sprawled spineless in his airport lounge chair now, barking short responses at someone on the other end of his Bluetooth. Funny how one tiny piece of technology was the fine line between socially acceptable and looking like a crazy person ranting into thin air.

In my drawing, he was rod straight in the chair, long fingers gripping the armrests in evil victory. A large T was emblazoned across his muscled chest in classic superhero style. I added Bluetooth devices to both ears—why not?—and, for added effect, a metal band around his head like a crown, connecting with bolts to all the tubes. May as well wire his brainpan. With simple wavy lines and a few bursts, I achieved a glow effect in a halo around him.

I was totally lost in my process now, not even aware that I was staring as I studied his facial features. Those cheekbones could cut glass, they were so sharp. His dark eyes were almond shaped, but I could see the curling fan of perfect, lush lashes. I had eyelashes like that, too, but mine came out of a mascara tube. His brow was thick and straight. He was actually a dream to draw. I smudged in his five o'clock shadow with the tip of my pinky, softening his strong jawline.

Allowing myself one last look to make sure I had captured the length and wave of his hair, I was met with a stony, irritated stare. I quickly dropped my eyes and slammed my sketchbook shut. Since leaving my job at

Marvel, drawing was a guilty luxury, an escape.

Since losing Allen, I had a hard time being on board with the whole justice-prevailing-over-evil thing. Turns out, the good guys don't always win.

Noah

CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

From: Manhattan Paperie

Subject: Bidwell-Ridgewood wedding PROOF

Date: March 5, 2013 8:00 AM EST

To: Noah Ridgewood , Sloane Bidwell

Dear Sloane and Noah,

Thank you for letting Manhattan Paperie help commemorate your special day!

Attached please find your revised invitation proof. Your approval is required to complete the order, so please let us know at your earliest convenience if it meets your satisfaction.

It is a pleasure to be of service to you at this joyful and important time in your lives.

Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Bidwell

request the honor of your presence

at the marriage of their daughter

Sloane Rose

to

Mr. Noah L. Ridgewood

Saturday, the eighth of June

two thousand and thirteen

at half after five in the evening

Grace Church

New York, New York

Dinner and dancing

immediately following

The Altman Building

135 West Eighteenth Street, Manhattan

From: Kewana Jones

Subject: Fwd: Fwd: Wedding flowers

Date: March 5, 2013 8:28 AM EST

To: Noah Ridgewood

Is she STILL not speaking to you?

P.S. Don't shoot the messenger . . .

K

Begin forwarded message:

From: Sloane Bidwell

Subject: Fwd: Wedding flowers

Date: March 5, 2013 8:25 AM EST

To: Kewana Jones

Tell him if we change date, lily of the valley go out of season. Imported from Holland \$9/stem. Revised estimate attached. Remy's shooting schedule is tight and he leaves for Paris on June 20th. Also, band now booked up for the entire month of July. HIS CHOICE.

From: Noah Ridgewood

Subject: Sorry . . .

Date: March 5, 2013 8:31 AM EST

To: Kewana Jones

Kiwi,

I bet you didn't think handling the boss's daughter's rebel fiancé would be in your job description when Bidwell-Butler hired you to be my secretary, did you? Sorry you are caught in the middle of this . . . I will deal with her.

Thanks,N.

From: Kewana Jones

Subject: Re: Sorry . . .

Date: March 5, 2013 8:32 AM EST

To: Noah Ridgewood

Noah,

Don't apologize. You know I would follow you to the ends of the earth. If only you could pay me half as well as B-B does.

Kiwi

From: Noah Ridgewood

Subject: Re: Re: Sorry . . .

Date: March 5, 2013 8:33 AM EST

To: Kewana Jones

LOL someday. Meanwhile, you would NOT have wanted to follow me into 7am mtg. w/ Bidwell today. Was basically handed my balls in a sling. Told to go "get it out of my system" in Vegas, then come back and make things right. As if it were that simple . . .

From: Kewana Jones

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Sorry . . .

Date: March 4, 2013 8:35 AM EST

To: Noah Ridgewood

Mama always told me to keep my eggs out of the same basket. You should never have put all your balls in that one basket, if you know what I mean.

Safe travels, boss. What happens in Vegas . . . ain't none of my business!

•••

My father had always told me to choose my battles wisely, but with a fiancée on the wedding warpath, no topic was safe these days. Sloane had accused me of not caring enough about the details, but then she had thrown a fit when I suggested dove gray ink for our invitations might be a nice alternative to the traditional black. She sulked for days after I chose my groomsmen (they're more IQ than GQ), but couldn't understand why I might have a slight problem with her inviting not one, not two, but a whopping three of her ex-boyfriends to the wedding. She turned that tug-of-war into an exchange as complex as the Dix-Hill Cartel: my five buds for her three exes. I would hardly put them in the same category, since I had never slept with any of my groomsmen.

I hit speed-dial and announced my name and account. "I'd like to order two dozen long-stemmed roses, please. Um, cool water lavender and white. She likes a fuller petal in white, is that the Vendela? Perfect. Yes, to the usual address. No, no card needed. Thanks."

Chi non ha denaro in borsa, abbia miele in bocca, my mother liked to remind me. He who has no money in his purse, should have honey in his mouth. But when it came to girls like Sloane, bribing with sweetness didn't really impress. You'll catch less hell with the push of a button to Sloane's favorite West Side florist, over more flies with honey, any day of the week.

Last month we were fighting over honeymooning in Belize or Sardinia (as if either were a losing

proposition) and this month: the date. She changed it while I was out of town on a business trip last week. And by changed it, I mean she changed it with the church, the caterer, and the venue before even consulting me. I got a “BTW,” courtesy of a Post-it waiting on my pillow when I got home. Since when does the groom rank a “by the way” level of importance on the ball-and-chain food chain?

Sounds petty, but out of the three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, she had to pick the one day that I’d rather have wiped from the calendar altogether.

I frowned as I scanned over the proof from the printer once more, my eyes going out of focus as they stared at the details I had not agreed to. “Can we not make any other changes until I’m back from Vegas?” I had specifically asked her. “And what about all the Save the Date e-mails that went out earlier?” Sloane had dismissed my concerns with a blanket “Oh, nothing’s set in stone” comment, but seeing it there in the printer’s proof felt pretty damn concrete.

My thumb worked its way into the tight Windsor knot of my tie while I waited for her voice mail. “Sloane. I saw the bill you forwarded to Kiwi. So import the flowers from Holland if you have to, that’s fine. I’m all right with choosing another band if it comes to that. And I’m sorry, but there are other photographers in the world besides Remy Georges. Just . . . please. Don’t sign off on that invitation proof until we’ve had time to figure this out, okay? Just . . . just call me back.” I slumped back in the chair and let out a gusty sigh, remembering the power struggle over the Post-it Note.

As usual, she had had the last word: “I get that the day sucks for you. It’s a lemon. So why not turn that day into lemonade?”

Because that’s not how my brain works.

And I thought she’d know that about me by now.

I’m not a game changer. Slow and steady wins the race. Not that I’m winning at much lately. Especially not the game of Marital Monopoly. In that game, Sloane’s father is the top hat piece. Mr. Moneybags. He’s also my boss in real life. And he’s controlling the bank; he rolls the dice first. Sloane, she’s like the iron token. She gives off the impression of being sweetly domestic, but when no one’s looking, she whacks me upside the head and leaves a scalding burn mark. Me? I’ve been the Scottie dog. Trotting along behind them, loyal to a fault. Trying to keep the peace. Trying to please everyone.

But lately, it’s all been Do Not Pass Go. Do Not Collect Your Prize. Sloane and I had been fighting like crazy. Plus, there was not even the bonus of amazing makeup sex, because even when we agreed to disagree, there was still the no-sex-till-the-wedding-night ban she had unilaterally imposed on us. Even if she finally agreed to bump the date out of June and back into July, I had the feeling that would be my last Get Out of Jail Free card.

“Thank you, young man.” I felt a soft hand fall on my shoulder. The elderly woman from the row of seats across from me was getting ready to board with the help of her grandson. She looked at me expectantly.

“Oh, no problem. They really need to add more outlets around here.” I wiggled the prongs of her adapter loose and handed back her Kindle, which had needed charging. “Happy to help, ma’am.”

“Such a gentleman.” She gave my shoulder an extra pat. “Your mother raised you well. Safe travels, dear.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

With a sigh, I clicked my laptop shut and glanced around. Half the passengers had boarded already and I hadn’t even noticed. Amazing how one stupid e-mail could bring the weight of the world down on my

shoulders. Then again, Sloane Bidwell expected the very same world to revolve around her, twenty-four/seven, so why was I surprised in the least? I released myself from my necktie's stranglehold and shoved it into the side pocket of my computer bag. If only I could loosen the grip she had on me as easily. Or her father's, for that matter. I roughly pushed a hand through my hair, upsetting the careful grooming I had gone through to make my best impression at that morning's meeting.

Trying to ungroom, Noah?

How fitting.

"Get it out of your system, Ridgewood." My boss's words echoed in my ears as I walked down the chilly gangway to the aircraft.

I've never been a game changer.

God, I really hoped Vegas was good for something.

Boarding and Departure

"Safe and sound," the flight attendant assured me as she clicked the first-class closet closed with the dress inside. "I love your hair! Are you going to wear it like that for the wedding?"

I pushed a hand through my unapologetically pin-straight tresses that wouldn't hold a wave no matter how hard I tried. The grass is always greener on the other side of the septic tank, Dani would remind me, with her Keri Russell curls that she considered a curse. Unlike its texture, my hair had a hard time making up its mind what color it wanted to be. A caramel-fudge combo in the winter that became streaky red-gold in the summer sun. "Nature's highlights," my mother would allow. "You can't duplicate that in any salon." I think it was a compliment.

"Maybe in an updo?" the other flight attendant offered. "You have enough for a French twist." Sometime over the last year, it had reached past shoulder-blade length. A last-minute decision, along with a night at home alone, a bottle of red wine, and nothing good on television, had left me with the thick fringe of bangs that I was still getting used to. I had been conservative with the cutting shears, afraid to go too short, and was now constantly blinking them out of my eyes.

"Maybe."

I hadn't even decided what dress to wear for my mom's beachside ceremony, let alone thought about my hair. All I knew was I wouldn't be in the seafoam green strapless silk chiffon Danica and the other bridesmaids were wearing. My mother made no bones about letting everyone know my best friend would look better in the hue than her flesh and blood and only child. Whatever. Apparently, my primary function for the big day was getting her dress from point A to point B, and then the pressure was off.

Not that I think she had planned on giving me such an important role in the first place. But a delay with alterations at the dress shop, along with a last-minute opportunity to combine a business trip with a prehoneymoon in Paris, had created a first-world problem for her. And the only viable solution had been to ask the problem child: me.

"Laney can't be counted on," I had overheard her telling someone on the phone at work. "I just don't know . . ." Oh, well. Desperate times called for desperate measures, apparently.

Not that I ever had a hope of measuring up in her eyes.

First class was, for lack of a better word, classy. I marveled at the size of the seats and my personal in-flight entertainment setup. Too bad I had a layover in Chicago; it would have been nice to jet all the way from New York to Hawaii in such luxury.

That grande latte had worked its way down to my bladder. “Is it okay to use the bathroom now?” I asked the attendant, who was bringing an elderly lady her first gin and tonic of the day.

“Honey!” She laughed. “Other than lounging in the cockpit, feel free to move about the cabin.”

I scooted toward the nose of the plane, bypassing the next group of passengers boarding, and into the first-class lavatory, which was identical to those in the back, except for the fancy lotion. Well, that answered one of those burning life questions. Rich people had to pee in Lilliputian-sized lavs just like the cattle in coach class.

The plane was rapidly filling. By the time I made it back to my cushy seat, it was covered with ruffled Wall Street Journal pages, headphones, and a banana.

“Um, excuse me? That’s my seat.”

“But that . . . that’s impossible,” Tech-Boy stuttered. God, he was even better looking in close quarters. His tie was now gone. “My phone app said this seat was empty five minutes ago; that’s why I switched to this row.” He held up his smartphone.

“Well, clearly,” I said, cocking the banana at him, “your app doesn’t know its ass from its elbow.” It was kind of a stupid thing to say, since a piece of software had neither an ass nor an elbow. But I think he got my point.

Grumbling, he snatched his precious paper up before my bottom landed on it, then popped up from his own spot like a jack-in-the-box. Scanning the cabin for another place to sit, no doubt. Too bad his app couldn’t tell him the airline had given me the last available first-class seat.

I rolled my eyes as his finger jabbed at the attendant button. “Jack and Coke, please. Double Jack.”

“That’ll go good with your banana,” I muttered. Which was worse, the fact that he couldn’t stand to sit next to me or that he was going to need large quantities of alcohol to get through the trauma? WWDD? I thought. Dani would probably have the guy curled around her little finger by now, with his phone number in her back pocket to prove it.

“Anything for you?” The flight attendant touched my shoulder like a best girlfriend would.

“Just an orange juice, please.” Resisting the urge to add, What normal people drink at nine thirty in the morning. I pulled the black and navy blue Windwest Airways sleep mask over my eyes and tried to ignore my seatmate as he powered down every gizmo he had brought on board.

Relaxation.

Starts.

Now.

“Can I have my fruit back?”

I slid the sleep mask up and stared him down. “I don’t know. Can you?” It was unnecessary, but I couldn’t resist. Yes, even comic book artists can be members of the grammar police force. Top of my class at School

of Visual Arts.

“Just hand over the banana and no one gets hurt,” he said in his best tough-guy voice. I reluctantly surrendered a smile and he resumed custody of his fruit.

How many hours till Chicago?

• • •

“Seat backs and tray tables in their locked, upright position, please.” Our flight attendant, Anita, was preparing the aircraft for departure. She was also looking to dish and gab. “So where’s the wedding?”

“Hawaii. Waipouli Beach.”

“Oh, gorgeous!” she gasped, before reverting back to work mode. “Everything with an on/off switch needs to be powered down, sir.”

This guy was like the Energizer Bunny, still going and going and going with that phone. I heard him mutter something about IPOs as Anita moved on.

“Are you going to go through withdrawal if that thing is off for two hours?” I asked him.

“Work to live, live to work. The market just opened.”

There was a growing roar from the jet engines as they began to spool up for takeoff. He gripped the oversized armrests, just like in my cartoon version of him in my sketchpad. But no evil supervillain grin, just a grim set of his lips. His stubble gave him a rough-and-tumble, “I just woke up and rolled over here” look, but the rest of his demeanor screamed uptight and anxious.

“What do you do?” Yes, the oldest prompt in the book. But it seemed to distract him momentarily.

“Software design,” he replied, jutting his chin. “Apps, specifically.” I thought of my “don’t know ass from elbow” comment and gave a weak grin and guilty snort. “And what, are you curing cancer?” he finished defensively.

Oh, he did not just say that.

The cabin lights dimmed, and the plane began to tear down the runway.

“Graphic artist,” I managed through gritted teeth. It sounded better than out-of-work comic illustrator. Maybe someday I would cure the world with laughter. Or at least invent some sort of kryptonite to render pompous guys powerless and unable to say stupid, hurtful things.

Give him a break, Laney Jane. He can’t read your mind.

I went for my overhead light just as he moved to punch his, our fingers grazing and almost tangling as the eight-hundred-thousand-pound silver tube suddenly became weightless, lifting us into the air.

“I’m Noah,” he said quietly. “And I really hate flying.”

“Laney. Think they’ll serve us good snacks on this bird?”

Noah

BEHIND THE EIGHT BALL

I know it's statistically safer to fly than drive. My chances of dying on this flight are something like one in fourteen million. Still, statistics say the first three minutes and the last eight minutes in flight are the most likely times when things could go wrong. And I'm stuck next to another victim of the bridal apocalypse. Great. What are the chances of that? She took up half the first-class cargo space with her dress, and she's got the stewardesses fussing over her every move. Where's my drink? They're supposed to be flight attendants, not bridal attendants.

Amber, Brittany, Camille, Darinda, Emma, Fawn, and Gabi. I wondered how they would react were Sloane to tell them they weren't going to be her bridesmaids after all. Haley, Iris, and Jessie would probably be cool with it. I'm pretty sure Sloane only chose them because they fit the dresses and the alphabetical order.

There was a time when I thought we were in love and able to shut out the rest of the world. When and why did she have to open the floodgates? Ten bridesmaids! Two girls for every guy was picture perfect in Sloane's mind. I'm pretty sure she has everyone accounted for on that damn checklist of hers . . . except for me.

Wheels going up. Damn, they sound like they are falling off. What percentage of accidents are due to landing gear failure? Jeez, Noah, think of some happier statistics. Like how many freakin' lily of the valley stems your insane fiancée plans on importing from Holland to total \$3,150. Nine into three thousand, carry the . . .

God, the girl in 3B smells really good. Like, warm sugar cookie good. Way better than lily of the valley ever could. I got a whiff when she pushed by me in the waiting lounge and almost took me out with her humongous bridal bag. They should charge her an extra seat for that thing . . .

Oh, great. She's reaching into her carry-on. How much do you want to bet she's going to pull out the most recent wedding porn from the newsstand? The Knot, Brides, Martha Stewart Weddings . . . I had a forest's worth cluttering my coffee table at home, property of Sloane. Fuel for the wedding juggernaut.

The shared armrest between us vibrated against my elbow. Was she having a seizure? I flicked a glance over. No bridal magazines to be seen; instead, she had something clasped between her hands and she was shaking, turning, and cursing it in rapid succession.

She caught me looking. "What? You've never seen a Magic 8 Ball?"

"I've never seen anyone violate one like that."

She blew a dismissive pfft from her bottom lip, which ruffled her choppy bangs and gave me a good look at her wide, green eyes. She rolled them in response to my comment and offered up the fortune-telling toy. "You try."

"No, thanks."

"Come on. Not one shake? You know you want to," she taunted.

What were we in, second grade? I refused to bow to her bullying tactics, turning my gaze to the window instead. I wished I could see the wing of the plane from first class. Seeing the wing always made me feel a little better about—

What the hell?

She had literally reached over, unlocked my tray table to horizontal position, and set the Magic 8 Ball in

front of me. “You look like you could use a good shake,” she added.

What I could really use is another double Jack and Coke. “All right, all right,” I muttered, giving it a halfhearted tumble.

Will this plane land safely? I silently queried, then flipped it and watched the die inside slowly float to the top. Without a doubt, hovered in the display. Well, that was a good sign. I gave it another shake, thinking about my morning meeting and Bidwell’s threat. Not that I would trust a ten-dollar toy to decide my fate, but . . . Will I “get it out of my system” in Vegas?

Get rid of my cold feet?

Get on with things?

Go with the flow?

Give in?

“The pyramid’s stuck.” She was leaning over my shoulder, snooping on my fortune.

“It’s not a pyramid,” I informed her. “It’s an icosahedron. It has twenty sides.”

“Well, shit.” Her tone was mockingly amazed, laced with scorn. “You’d think it would give me at least one answer I want, then.”

“Well,” I mused, giving it another slow shake, “if you understand probability theory, you’d have to turn it about seventy times on average to see all its answers at least once.” Great, Noah. Way to put an idea in her head. She’ll be shaking that thing all the way to Chicago.

“Did you just calculate that in your head?” She sounded both impressed and slightly creeped out.

I ignored her, looking down at the ball. The raised letters displaced the liquid to show Reply hazy, try again, in the window. I shook it again. Cannot predict now, it insisted. Of course you can’t predict, I told it. You’re a cheap, plastic plaything. I’d be crazy to trust you as an oracle of prediction on the matter of my pending marital status.

Maybe I had asked it too many questions at once.

To marry or not to marry: that question had grown larger and more open-ended than just a simple “yes” or “no” answer could satisfy.

I wordlessly handed back the toy to my seatmate, allowing my own mind to spin over that.

In Flight

“It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s . . . Laney Jane!”

“Allen Burnside, you give that back!”

It was hard to think of Allen and not picture him at eighteen, the lanky skater kid with the swoop of blond hair. The class clown who loved to talk with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth, squinting like a grunge version of James Dean. Who wrote poetry and played drums and totally won my heart in seventh grade when he lost the election for class president. “That’s the way the cookie bounces,” he’d said. “Wanna go get high after school?”

Was Allen my soul mate?

Might as well ask the Magic 8 Ball.

I squeezed my eyes shut and waited a beat to peek at the answer. You may rely on it.

Thanks. But really, can I?

We may have been voted Cutest Class Couple, but Allen and I hadn't exactly had the most reliable track record, especially after that fateful day on the beach. Over the next decade, we had taken our own sweet time, and turns, hurting each other.

Not that I was keeping track or anything.

I absently rubbed the 8 Ball like it was a genie's lamp and tried to conjure up that early spring day, verbatim, from our senior year.

"Give it, give it!" I'd hopped up from my blanket on the sand and given chase, practically climbing Allen's six-foot-one frame like a ladder to get back the letter he had swiped. He held it infuriatingly an inch from his face and out of my reach, studying it.

"Laney, this is an acceptance letter to Otis!"

"I know, butthead. It came today." I gestured toward my blanket. After pulling several fat white envelopes from the mailbox, I'd walked down to the beach to open them in solitude. The last thing I'd wanted was my mother hovering and commenting.

"That's perfect!" he crowed, pulling me into one of his signature Allen Burnside bear hugs, over the shoulders and stranglehold tight. Somewhere downwind, a radio was blasting Blink-182's "Dammit," its poppy riff ebbing and flowing out of earshot above the dull roar of the waves. "Laney and Allen, taking on L.A.! It's like they named the city after us." He rocked us until our feet faced the ocean. "Pretty soon we'll be standing, just like this, in front of the warm, blue Pacific . . . instead of the dirty, gray Atlantic. I am so proud of you, girl."

I gently butted my head against his sternum. "Thanks." The wind had picked up. He pulled the hood of my zippered hoodie up over my breeze-tangled hair and we raced back to secure the blanket, and my other letters, from blowing down Quogue Village Beach.

I remembered how we collapsed to the sand, kissing like teens are wont to kiss: with a deliberate passion, with a luxury of all the time in the world. In junior high school we had kissed for practice; by sixteen we had learned how to deliciously build up each other's libidos and how to set them free.

Looking back, I realized I was kissing him out of consolation that day. We were on the cusp of graduation, and he was heading to California with his band come fall. I had been accepted to L.A.'s Otis College of Art and Design. But my number one choice—well, my mother's—had always been the School of Visual Arts right in Manhattan, and they wanted me, too.

"I want you so bad, Laney Jane."

I remembered the conflicted feeling as I twisted his ring off my finger, Blink-182 in the background, insisting that this was growing up. I could still hear my voice, barely a whisper above the chilly ocean breeze but loud enough for it to sink in. And there was no taking it back.

“Allen, we need to talk . . .”

• • •

Will this trip be a grand adventure or would I have been better off staying home?

Better not tell you now, bubbled to the Magic 8 Ball’s surface.

Why the hell not? Stupid 8 Ball. I guess it was kind of a loaded question anyway. I tucked the toy, and my thought, away for the time being.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve reached our cruising altitude, and the captain has just informed us that it is safe to use approved portable electronics at this time . . .”

Great. Tech-Boy went to work peeling his laptop out of its case, practically knocking his Jack into my juice. I pulled a vintage issue of the Hernandez brothers’ Love and Rockets from the side pocket of my bag and leaned on the armrest closest to the aisle, and as far away as I could get from his cologne—and his insane typing. He reminded me of one of those dipping drinking birds made of glass. His index finger would slowly come down and hover on a key before popping back, then dipping down quick and pecking out multiple characters across the lighted keyboard. Then back up and slow, like the bird with the liquid in its butt bulb. There was no rhyme or reason to his assault on the keys, no steady rhythm.

After dating a drummer for so long, I craved rhythm.

“Frittata with ham, sir.” Anita reached past me to place a tray in front of my seatmate. He barely glanced at the food, which was served on ceramic rather than plastic. The egg smelled heavenly, and the sides of asparagus and fruit were plump and bright, like close-up photos from a foodie magazine.

“Hold on, hon. I’ve got nothing listed for you.” She frowned. “Let me go check on that.”

She sashayed up the aisle.

“Hmm, my app might not know an ass from an elbow, but it knows how to keep my stomach from rumbling,” Noah said, tucking into his frittata. “Ordered ahead,” he added, mouth full of egg. “On my app.”

Anita was back. “I’m so sorry, we don’t have any additional hot breakfasts, but I can give you yogurt with granola and fruit.”

“Not a problem. I love fruit and granola. And yogurt! It doesn’t make your pee smell funny, like asparagus does.”

Noah pushed his spring veggies off to the side of his plate and continued index-fingering his way through the alphabet on his oh-so-important document. I smiled, dipped my spoon into my parfait, and went back to my Love and Rockets storyline. It was one with Maggie and Hopey, who were just about my favorite characters from any graphic novel ever.

“Hey, want to know why urine smells funny after eating asparagus?” The guy in the opposite row leaned conspiratorially across the aisle.

“Yes, do tell.”

“Sulfurous amino acids.”

“Fascinating!”

“Are you really having this conversation?” Noah inserted. I dismissed him with a wave of my spoon.

“And here’s the kicker: everybody has pungent pee after digesting asparagus, but less than half the population owns up to it. Want to know why?”

“Of course,” I prompted.

“Because not everyone has the special gene that allows them to smell it!” This guy was very pleased with himself.

“I did not know that. Thanks.” I tipped my spoon politely at him and went back to scraping the sides of my dish. Noah finished his meal, including his asparagus, in silence. I wondered if he possessed the smell gene for asparagus pee or not. Something told me I’d better not ask.

“Business proposal?” I inquired instead. He had all sorts of windows with Excel worksheets open.

“Nope. Bachelor party.” Noah sounded thrilled . . . not. “A week-long extravaganza in Vegas. I’ve known the best man my whole life. Tim is what you’d call . . . a bit gung ho.”

I glanced at the screen again, with its grids and flowcharts and color coding. It made my eyes practically cross just trying to find a spot to focus on. “Wow, looks like a wild time. Are you going to have strippers there, giving PowerPoint presentations?”

He smirked. “Ha, you’re funny.” He highlighted a bullet point, made a notation, and clicked save. “Really. You should do comedy.”

“Comedy is exactly what my mom always hoped I would pursue.” I waited a beat. “Said no child of a critical, overbearing, advice-dealing Jewish mother, ever.”

Now he really laughed; it was a full-on belly laugh. The kind of laugh you’d just love to bottle up and save, to let loose on a rainy day.

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