

CHAPTER 1

(Mindy)

THE SKY ABOVE LONDON, rich with darkness, was where the planes which flew into and out of Heathrow Airport roared more furiously. The noises which lived in the airport were the low growls of the jet engines, the grinding of the landing gears on the tarmac and the whooshing sounds of planes rolling down the runways.

Christmas Eve was upon London, and the airport buzzed with activity as people arrived and departed. The air was cursed with a chilling intensity. Thin and dry. Victims were the ground crew who shivered tirelessly to generate warmth as they dealt with crucial activities needed to keep the momentum of the airport going. Efficiently and without error.

The control tower, eminent like the Eiffel tower, was where the routine landings and take-offs were being navigated. Focused, the air traffic controllers issued instructions in hushed tones, their eyes darting across multiple screens.

Caleb is going to kill me! Mindy thought as she walked into the tower, the clicking sound of her kitten heels earning her quick glances from the assembled air traffic controllers.

Her outfit was a combination of red and white: a red skirt which hugged her hips, a red blazer which partly concealed her white blouse and a white-dotted red scarf which was stylishly draped around her neck. She also wore red lipstick which made her appear more enticing.

Her face, however, was the picture of anxiety—one of the men in the tower stared deep into her eyes with a lasering effect.

I hope Caleb doesn't overreact. Good Heavens! But I'm two hours late, she cried as she walked towards the young man with brown eyes which carried fire in them.

"Caleb..." she faltered. "I'm so sorry I am late, mate. My car broke down on—"

"Oh, please Mindy!" Caleb's voice was burdened with anger. "Save it for someone else. You might need it in the future."

Furtive glances from the other controllers burnt Mindy's skin.

Why is he trying to embarrass me in front of people? And these people are looking at me like I've killed someone, she grumbled to herself.

"The night shift began two hours ago, and all my shift mates have gone home to rest except for me," Caleb continued, his voice a symphony of disturbed emotions. "How is your alibi trying to make up for my extra hours?"

"Look..." Mindy breathed, her voice equally low. "I'm sorry, okay? It wasn't intentional...besides, you're my friend. Not that I am trying to take advantage of that—I really appreciate you for working extra hours on my behalf."

Caleb's eyes held Mindy's for a few seconds before he said, "I am sorry if I overreacted, but please be early next time." Mindy's innocent face had extinguished his rage.

With a calm composure, Caleb stood up and heaved a sigh. "You can now sit down."

Without further incident, Caleb explained to Mindy how he was progressing with his communication with one of the planes scheduled to land at the airport in about an hour.

"Take care, fam," Caleb said before he started for the lift.

Taking a deep breath, Mindy brushed her brunette hair to the left side of her shoulder and adjusted the air traffic headsets, her mind still processing Caleb's words. After a few moments, she was finally ready to dive into her work as an air traffic controller.

British Airways Flight 399 was one of the planes scheduled to land at Heathrow airport that night. The plane was finally on its last leg of the journey after seven consecutive hours of flying through the air—it was from New York.

About forty-five minutes had now passed, and Mindy had just finished communicating with a pilot from Flight 399 when she received another call on the radio communication system. "Air traffic control, how can I help you?" she asked.

"This is Captain Adrien speaking. I am piloting Malaysia Airlines Flight 372 to Florida, and we need help with takeoff clearance on runway 26," the captain explained.

Sighing heavily, Mindy told the pilot to give her a moment so she could check the system to see if the runway was clear for takeoff. After checking the system and confirming with the other controllers, she explained to the pilots to go ahead with the takeoff since there were no other planes on the runway.

A few minutes after that, she went back to Flight 399, which was just a few miles away from the airport.

“Flight 399, clear to land on runway eight,” she spoke up the moment she got in contact with the pilot.

“Affirmative,” the pilot replied over the line.

Mindy’s face tightened with confusion at the incomplete response. In most cases, the pilots would say the name of the runway they were told to land on in order to avoid misinterpretation. However, she pushed the uneasy feeling away and continued monitoring their flight path.

When the time to contact the captain again came, she did so without fail. To her horror, instead of an answer, she earned herself a deadly silence from the other side.

“Flight 399, report your status.” She paused for a few seconds and waited for a response, and when she didn’t get any, she reiterated, “Flight 399, report your status, Flight 399 do you copy? Flight 399 do you read?”

What could have possibly gone wrong? she wondered to herself, uncertainty cascading down her spine. Thinking it might be a technical problem with her air traffic headset, she took another one and connected it to the radio communication system, taking a deep breath before saying, “Flight 399, report your status.”

Anxiety whitened her face when the silence grew deadlier. *I honestly can’t understand what is going on*—she pinched the bridge of her nose as she thought harder. *Maybe there is a technical problem on their end.*

However, when she took a closer look at the radar system on the computer, she figured that there was more to it than just a technical problem. The plane had veered off-course, almost one hundred and eighty degrees from the airport.

This doesn't look good! Fear and confusion gripped her spine.

Worse, the plane's altitude was plummeting dangerously, and before she knew it, the plane vanished from the computer system.

Ice travelled throughout her body, freezing her momentarily. "No! No! This *can't* be," she cried when reality struck her hard.

"THIS CAN'T BE TRUE!" This time around, her voice was sharp enough to attract her co-workers' attention.

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