



FLIRTING
WITH
MURDER

A NOVEL

AMANDA SELLET



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



||| saw my first dead body when I was nine years old.

||| Dead-ish. Somewhat lifeless. *Lightly* deceased. He was doing his best, but it's hard to fake being a corpse. The breathing is a dead giveaway.

No pun intended.

That day's victim was Mr. Gutierrez, one of my grandmother's neighbors.

"What do you notice, Virginia?" Grandma Lainey asked me as we surveyed the scene.

My heart pounded with the pure adrenaline of performance anxiety. "The desk drawers are open. Somebody was looking for something."

"Excellent. What else?"

"His hands."

"What about them?"

After a few more blinks, I puzzled out what had caught my eye. "The pen is in his right hand, but it looks weird. How he's holding it. And he has ink blotches on his other hand."

Lessons in penmanship were fresh in my mind that summer, thanks to a third-grade teacher who still believed in the power of cursive.

“Good girl. You’re a natural!” She stroked the back of my head. “Murder is in your blood. You get that from me.”

I should clarify that my grandmother is not a serial killer. First off, she would never stoop so low. Serial killers are a total cop-out. Who did it? The person who does all the murders. Surprise! Not a lot to sink your teeth into, storywise. A satisfying mystery needs twists and turns, complicated backstory, psychological insights.

The other thing to note is that death is what Grandma Lainey and her friends do for a living. Or rather *did*, before they hit retirement age. It was a whole production, with lights and sets and sound effects, musical interludes, and a buffet dinner. They’ve kept it going as a hobby, which means most of the bodies scattered around their Florida condo are only pretending to be less than alive.

Did you catch the subtle emphasis on “most”? If so, you’re quicker on the uptake than some people I could mention. (*Cough*, Felix, *cough*.)

But I’m getting ahead of myself. As my grandmother always says, you can’t just plunge a trick knife into someone’s side and hope the blood bag spurts on cue. It would be like dropping a chandelier on stage before the curtain opens. You have to set the scene first.

Here’s a little foreshadowing: This summer, there will be a lot of death at Grandma Lainey’s condo.

One I already know about.

Others will be more theatrical, with costumes and props.

And finally—emphasis on *final*, as in resting place—there’s

a murder brewing behind the scenes, like a tropical storm gathering force, systems of pressure building . . . or however that works. I'm not a meteorologist.

What I do know are crime scenes, *usually* of the make-believe variety.

But at some point very soon, yours truly will stumble upon her first real corpse—the kind that stays dead.



CHAPTER ONE

THE BODY AT BAGGAGE CLAIM

The woman sitting next to me on the plane has been sending hopeful little smiles in my direction since we reached cruising altitude. I can tell she wants to chat, but this is a three-hour flight and I'm in the window seat. What if she tries to recruit me for her cult—or show me pictures of her grandkids?

When the drink cart arrives, she seizes the opening. “Traveling alone?”

I nod an affirmative. “Visiting family. They’re meeting me at the airport.” I tack on the last bit in case she’s about to invite me on a one-way trip to her compound in the woods. That would be a smart play: getting a harmless-looking older woman in peach capris to do your dirty work. Fortunately I know better than to underestimate the over-sixty-five set.

“Disney?” she guesses.

“Funeral.” If I thought that answer would take the wind out of her sails, the joke’s on me.

“Oh, honey.” She squeezes my forearm. “I’m so sorry. Who was it?”

The last bit slides out in a whisper, with a slight lean across the armrest so I don’t have to broadcast my business to a plane full of strangers. Some people might argue the appropriateness of the question, but I get it. You hear about a death, and the first thing you want to know is who, followed quickly by how and why—at least in my experience.

“A family friend.” I’m not sure that does justice to Claude. He was an honorary grandparent, a style icon, and one of the most generous people I’ve ever met. Without him, my grandmother and her friends wouldn’t live in the coolest condo in Florida.

It must feel different without Claude on the top floor. I wonder who will live in the penthouse suite now? Maybe they’ll hold auditions for a new tenant while I’m there. I picture the application: *Do you have stage training? Please list any special talents (dance experience a bonus!).*

“He used to work with my grandmother. At a theater,” I add, since my nosy neighbor is clearly waiting for me to elaborate.

“Oooh,” she says, suitably impressed. “How exciting!”

“Yes,” I agree. She has no idea. Murder Most Fowl was a combo mystery dinner theater and fried-chicken buffet. (Slogan: It’s a Clucking Good Time.) Every night another murder to solve, with a side of chicken strips. What more could you want?

“Was he an actor?”

I can tell she’s hoping for a celebrity cameo. It’s a stretch, but I give her what I can. “He did a commercial once. You might have seen it. ‘What’s the secret to great hair?’” I pause in case she wants to fill in the rest.

“Claude knows!” she supplies, right on cue, even doing the signature wink.

“That’s him.” *Was him*, I silently correct myself. Apparently in the world of TV commercials there’s a rule where they have to pay extra to use your name, and Claude’s ad for a discreet line of men’s styling products aired enough times to fund his purchase of a derelict hotel, which became the communal living situation of his dreams, aka Castle Claude.

“It’s nice of you to go to the funeral,” my companion says, rattling her plastic cup of ginger ale. “I’m sure your grandmother appreciates it.”

My shrug is at least half squirm, like I’m just that modest. The truth is that I missed the actual funeral because of finals, but I’ll be there in time for the celebration of life. And I’m not making this trip out of the goodness of my heart. Putting some miles between me and my home life isn’t exactly a sacrifice. Plus, apparently Claude left me something in his will.

My brain ping-pongs between sadness and something harder to identify. Anticipation, maybe? It has less to do with whatever *thing* I inherited than the intrigue of it all. I’ve never been in someone’s will before. I think Claude probably planned it this way, because he was big on not letting his passing turn into a “downer.”

Which is on brand, considering death has always been a source of entertainment at Castle Claude.

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The first thing I do when the plane lands is turn on my phone. A bon voyage!! from my best friend, Sam, pops up, with a string of celebratory emojis. It feels tepid, like what she’s really saying is *Have fun on your cute little trip to a place you’ve seen a hundred times while I explore the wider world of EUROPE with my*

award-winning youth choir, but it's possible that's my insecurity talking.

I send my mother a quick text letting her know I arrived in one piece, then Like her reply (Make good choices!) before de-touring to the nearest bathroom. The baggage claim at this airport is so slow I always picture a team of sloths unloading the suitcases one by one, so I probably won't have time to change once I get to Castle Claude. Any sprucing up that's going to happen will need to be done in this public restroom—hence my multifaceted wardrobe strategy.

The hoodie is easy to peel off and stuff in my backpack. The sweatpants require a certain amount of hopping to get over my shoes, but I manage to shimmy out of those without crashing into the wall of the stall. Just like that, I'm wearing a purple baby doll dress with a rounded white collar and dangling black bow. It used to belong to Grandma Lainey, and while I don't usually go for clothes this conspicuous, I feel like Claude would appreciate the retro stylings. Plus he specifically requested lots of color, which would have ruled out the gray dress my mom thinks I'm going to wear (even if I wanted to look like a depressed church secretary).

After smoothing my hair, I dig out the red lipstick my grandmother gave me last time I was here. We spent an entire afternoon at the mall, comparing shades until we found the perfect color.

"Every woman needs a power red in her arsenal," Grandma Lainey informed me, though I've never seen my mother wear any shade darker than strawberry gum.

My red is appropriate for the occasion, I decide, leaning closer to the mirror to make sure I stay inside the lines. The goal is sophisticated, not scary clown.

When I make it to baggage claim, the carousel is silent and unmoving. I almost expect to see cobwebs stretched across it. There's an empty seat near the rental car counter. I sink down only to spring up again when my underwear touches the cracked vinyl. The second attempt goes better because I remember to hold on to my hemline.

"Pine cone?"

It takes a second to register that the question is directed at me. Slowly I turn my head, taking in the dark-haired stranger two seats over. He's violating at least seven social rules by not pretending he didn't notice my jack-in-the-box routine. I'm debating whether to act like I didn't hear him when an announcement crackles over the loudspeaker, informing us that the baggage carousel is experiencing mechanical issues.

The stranger casually moves into the spot next to mine, like that's a normal response. Hey, we're trapped here, so let's band together in case there's a zombie apocalypse.

Odd. And yet I wouldn't have pegged him as a weirdo on looks alone. Naturally I gave him a once-over as soon as he opened his mouth, in case I need to describe him for a police report later. Clothing: Pale yellow button-down with the sleeves rolled up and the kind of green pants that are less hideous than khakis. Hair: dark brown. Eyes: same, or possibly black. Age: late teens, at a guess. Height: hard to tell while he's sitting down, though his legs are sticking out pretty far. He's not sweating or twitching or muttering under his breath, but what guy my age talks to random people in an airport?

I should take out my phone and not engage, but once again curiosity gets the better of me. "Why a pine cone?"

"The Sound of Music."

"The musical," I clarify. "With the nuns?"

He lifts a shoulder as if to say, *Of course. What else would I be chatting with strangers about in this airport?* “The scene where the kids prank her that first night at dinner. That’s a deep cut, though. Let me guess, you’re more of a ‘Lonely Goatherd’ girl?”

It’s so far off base I don’t bother to correct him. Obviously my favorite scene is when Captain von Trapp dances with Maria in the garden, because I’m not dead inside. Unlike his sense of logic.

“How would a pine cone have wound up at baggage claim?” I do a slow pan around the plant-free interior to drive home the point. Not to mention the fact that we’re in Florida, where pine trees are a lot less common than lush tropical foliage.

“Preschool teacher on her way to craft time. Park ranger flying back from Yosemite. Big botany convention.” He shrugs like that’s the tip of the iceberg, guesswise. “I could go on.”

“I mean, sure. Anybody can spitball.”

“Oh really? Enlighten me then. What would you assume, if someone acted like their chair was a bouncy castle?”

“Ketchup packet,” I reply, ignoring his attempt to throw me off my game.

“Interesting.” He turns in his seat so he can study my face like a crossword puzzle. “Let’s hear it.”

I count off the supporting evidence on my fingers. “One, fast food is everywhere. Two, people get snacky when they fly. And three, humans are sloppy and don’t throw their trash away.”

“Means, opportunity, motive. I like it.” Between the smile and the slow nod, it sounds like he’s really saying, *I like you.*

I catch myself fidgeting with my dress and force my hands

to go still. "I would have noticed a pine cone," I say, like we're still arguing. "I'm observant."

He holds out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Observant. I'm Felix."

I don't want to be an accessory to the crime of making dad jokes, so I shake my head instead of his hand.

"Am I keeping you from something?" he asks when I check my phone.

"I have a thing to go to. After I get my luggage."

"Is that why you're dressed like that?"

I side-eye him.

"I meant dressed up. Except your shoes."

"What's wrong with my shoes?" This is my nice pair of Converse. They could be less dirty, but at least they don't have holes at the toe.

"Nothing! They're different, is all. From the dress."

"Do you always give fashion advice to strangers?"

"It wasn't a criticism. I just noticed the anomaly."

On the basis of his blush, I decide to believe him. He also looks a little fancy by Florida airport standards, but it's not like I'm going to comment on *his* appearance.

"Do you want to grab a drink?"

"Uh, I don't have an ID." Or at least not a fake one. And I can't imagine the two of us not getting carded.

He points at the vending machine behind us. "I was thinking water. Or Coke. The soda. Not drugs."

"Sure," I say, like I'm totally relaxed and not kicking myself on the inside.

There's an awkward moment where he might be offering to pay for the orange juice I selected but I'm not 100 percent

sure, so I bust out a wrinkled dollar bill like it's a Badge of Feminism. And then I can't decide if it would be more progressive or less to buy his drink, so I awkwardly shuffle to the side and watch him feed quarters into the machine.

We find new seats because even the most eager beavers have given up on saving a prime spot in front of the defunct luggage carousel.

"Cheers," he says, twisting off the cap of his water bottle. There's an expectant pause.

"What?"

"I didn't catch your name."

I take a sip of orange juice to stall. "You can call me . . . Katie."

"Because that's . . . your name?" he asks, mimicking my hesitation.

It's not a complete fabrication, because Katherine is my middle name. I thought about going by Katie at school for a while, around the time the boys in my grade figured out what "virgin" meant and started pronouncing my name like it was a communicable disease. *VIRGIN-eee-uh!* But then Grandma Lainey told me that one day I'd be glad to have a powerful first name, instead of sounding like a stripper, and now I'm more or less okay with it.

It's still fun to pretend I'm someone else for a minute, especially since it's not like I'm ever going to see Felix again.

"Are you here for work or pleasure, Katie?"

"Are those the only two options?" If so, I'm not sure how to answer.

"I guess it could be both."

"How do you figure?"

“Theme park performer. Spreading joy to young and old.”
He adds sparkle fingers, in case I need the visual aid.

“I thought you were going to say sex worker.”

Felix chokes, and water shoots out of his mouth. He looks mortified, but I’m flattered I made him do a spit take.

“I’m not really Disney princess material,” I add, while he wipes off the armrest.

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it. Beats working the deep fryer at Mickey D’s.”

“Is that what the cool kids call it?”

“Mickey D’s. BK Lounge. The Bell.” His poker face is excellent. Even Grandma Lainey would approve.

“Nobody calls it ‘The Bell.’”

He grins at my look of disgust. “Maybe you need to get out more, Katie. Where are you from?”

“I’m not sure I should tell you.”

“Why, is it the challenge question for your online banking? Let me guess. Peoria? Charlotte? Gary, Indiana?”

“No, no, and no.” So much for this lipstick giving off cosmopolitan vibes. “Where are *you* from?”

“Atlanta.” His grin is unexpectedly cute. “See? Sharing is caring.”

“I’ll remember that when I steal your identity.”

“Nice. I’m here visiting my grandfather, by the way. Not that you asked.”

My nod is distracted. Is he flirting or killing time? I wish I had the nerve to come right out and ask, but there’s only so much confidence I can fake.

The luggage carousel emits a metallic screech before jerking into motion. *Crap*. I don’t want Felix to know I still use the

cosmic kittens suitcase Grandma Lainey bought me when I was seven. I stand, shouldering my backpack. “Well. Thanks for—” I break off, remembering he didn’t buy my drink.

“Spitting on you?”

“I was going to say, ‘being rude about my clothes.’”

“Any time.”

“Unlikely.” Before he can respond, I slip behind a couple pushing a loaded cart. It would have been a slick move if this airport had more than one baggage carousel. Thirty seconds later, Felix nods at me from the other side of the conveyor belt.

New plan: I’ll ignore my suitcase until he leaves. There it goes now, trundling past me in all its hot pink glory. I deliberately look away, staring at the succession of black and silver bags. When I check to see whether Felix has his luggage, he’s gone.

“Good,” I say under my breath, ignoring the twinge of disappointment. I can grab my suitcase and go find my ride. They’re probably all waiting for me to arrive.

When I turn around, space cats in hand, Felix is standing right there. His eyes widen when he gets a load of my hot pink bag.

“That is—wow.” He shakes his head, clearly at a loss for words.

“Go ahead.” I sigh. “Get it all out.”

“Meow or later?”

“You’re just jealous.” I glance longingly at his navy duffel bag.

He raises a hand like he’s taking an oath. “Guilty.”

“Okay, well, I better go.” I start for the door marked **GROUND TRANSPORTATION**.

“Are you headed downtown?” he asks, catching up to me in a few long strides.

“Maybe.”

“We could ride together.”

I stop walking.

“What?” He swipes at his face, like there’s a blob of something on his cheek. “Why are you squinting at me?”

“I’m doing a gut check.”

“I get that. You have to ask yourself, ‘Do I or do I not like musicals?’ Because I will sing along to the radio. It’s my toxic trait.” He pauses like he’s running that answer past a polygraph. “One of them, anyway.”

“I’m more concerned with stranger danger. Abduction, murder, whatnot.”

He fake whistles. “That’s a very dark attitude. I’d expect more optimism from someone who believes cats can go to space.”

“It’s also possible *I* could stab *you*.” My index finger stops just shy of poking him in the chest. He looks down at my hand and then at my face, like he’s delighted by the attention.

“I’d like to note that although I am male-identifying and a stranger, I’m also in high school.”

“What’s your point?”

“Seems young to kick off a killing spree.”

“Everybody has to start somewhere.”

Felix sighs, like I’ve got him there. “Tricky to get an internship.”

“They never come to career day.” I’m trying not to smile, but I know the twitching of my lips betrays me. I’m not used to this kind of back-and-forth. My sort-of ex liked to keep things pragmatic. His idea of a romantic text was, Do the extra credit on the quiz in gov. You get points even if it’s wrong.

Swoon!

Felix reaches into his jacket and pulls out a notebook and

ballpoint, scrawling something on a blank page. After adding a few more slashes of ink near the bottom, he tears out the paper and offers it to me. "This is my number. I'll be around for a while if you want to hang out. In a totally non-creepy way," he adds when I hesitate. "Brightly lit public place. No duct tape."

I raise my eyebrows.

"Pretend I didn't mention the duct tape."

"Classic blunder."

"It's surprisingly hard not to monologue about your evil plans. It slips out."

I pluck the paper out of his hand. "No promises."

He nods, watching me slide on my sunglasses.

"Okay, then. I'm going." I don't move.

"I'll let you get a head start."

"Good." I'm not sure what else to say, so I jerk my chin at him then head for the exit.

"Hey, Katie," Felix calls as the doors slide open in front of me. I glance back at him. "Claw me, maybe?" He paws at the air like he's starring in a no-budget production of *CATS*, minus the leotard.

I shake my head, but I'm grinning as I step outside.

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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