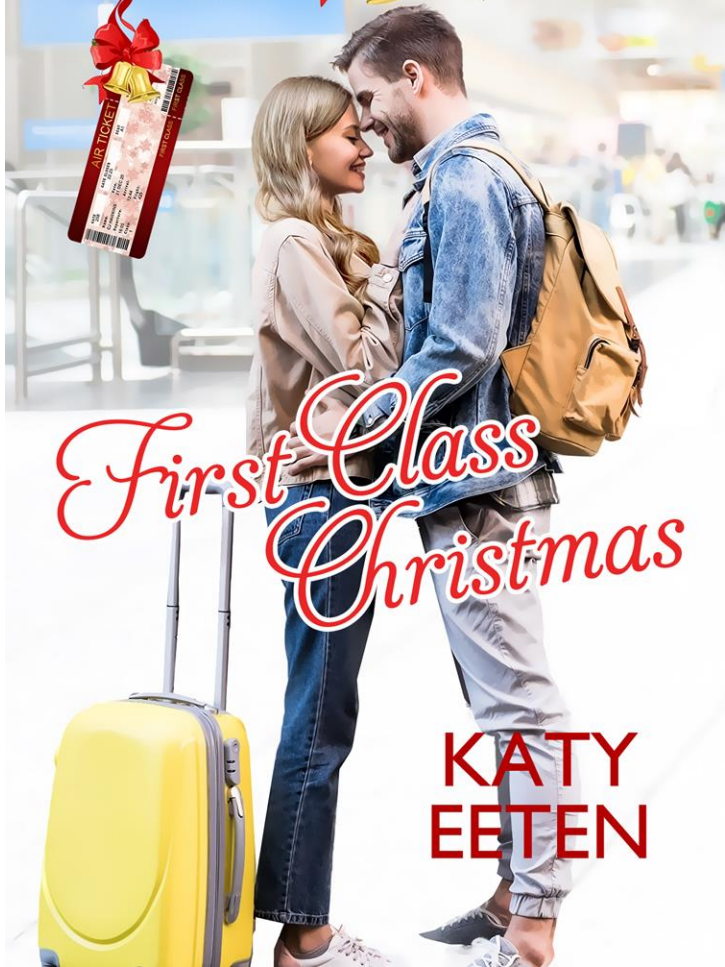


LOVE IS IN THE AIR THIS CHRISTMAS



*First Class
Christmas*

**KATY
EETEN**



First Class Christmas

Katy Eeten

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First Class Christmas
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Dedication

For all the holiday travelers out there. May your journey be smooth and perhaps even life changing.

1

Kayla floated down the aisle, her hair in sophisticated curls and a stunning bouquet in hand. With the sun setting over the Pacific directly behind the minister and a cool breeze flowing through the air, they couldn't have asked for a better day. But a muffled voice made the image abruptly disappear, and Mandy was jolted from her snooze in one fell swoop.

"Good morning, passengers. In just a few minutes, we'll be boarding Flight 315 with nonstop service to Denver. Please have your boarding pass ready and check your boarding zone to help us with an on-time departure for our 8:45 flight this morning."

Mandy opened her eyes and gazed at her noisy surroundings. As objects came into focus, everything appeared slanted. Was she resting her head on something? Or someone?

Sitting up straight, she peered to her right. A man in his late twenties with a tan complexion and a gorgeous head of dark brown hair looked down at her with a sideways grin. *Tell me I did not just fall asleep on this chiseled human.* Her eyes narrowed as a small spot on his sleeve caught her attention. It was right where her face had been. Was that...? No, it couldn't be. Had she just drooled on a perfect stranger? A perfect, *handsome* stranger?

Her face burned. What should she do? How could

she make this right? She cleared her throat. "Sorry about that." What else could she say? *Thanks for letting a total stranger sleep on your manly bicep? Please forgive the drool?* She swiped a hand over her face and shook her head in embarrassment.

"No worries." The man gave her a polite smile and returned his attention to the screen of his phone.

Oh, how she wished the ground would swallow her whole—or that she could leave the gate area and never see this guy again. But the airport was packed, everyone eagerly awaiting their boarding call. With any luck, he would be in the first round of passengers to board and out of her hair for good.

What she needed was a distraction, especially since she was in boarding zone five. Retrieving her phone, she pulled up photos from her friend's wedding. Kayla was the only reason she would dare travel this close to Christmas. The wedding had been in San Diego, and although it wasn't a cheap trip, she had been the maid of honor. She served her role with pride, and everything had turned out great. The only downer was that her ex-boyfriend, Kevin, was supposed to have been by her side through the entire trip. Instead, he'd decided three weeks ago that they should see other people. As if that wasn't bad enough, she'd already purchased his plane ticket for the event, and he had used it as his own personal vacation.

He'd bought his own hotel room, of course, but Mandy couldn't stop him from getting on the plane. She'd been able to get the airlines to change their seat assignments on each of the flights out to San Diego—no way would she sit next to her ex for hours if she could help it. But so far, she was unsuccessful to do the same on the flights back home.

The wedding had been wonderful, watching Kayla in love, starting a life with her new husband. Except now, Mandy was left with an empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. Christmas was three days away, she was suddenly single, her best friend was on her honeymoon, and because of the wedding expenses, she didn't even have enough money to visit her parents in Wyoming this year. Not that she was heartbroken about that fact.

"Now boarding zone five." The nasally voice saved Mandy from her self-pity. At some point during her daydreaming, her handsome neighbor had disappeared into the masses, and she took her place at the end of the line. They were all getting on the plane. There was no sense in scrambling to be ahead of anyone else—especially knowing all that awaited her was a seat next to her ex.

While waiting in line, Mandy took out her phone and opened the camera. Using selfie mode, she took stock of her appearance. Traveling always brought the frizz out of her blonde curls, and today was no exception. Putting her phone away, she snatched the elastic band from her wrist and threw her hair back into a messy ponytail. It was better than the alternative.

As the gate attendant was about to scan her boarding pass, the woman did a double take. "Oh, Miss Brockman?"

Mandy blinked. "Yes?"

"We had a last-minute cancelation, so there's one empty seat on the plane if you'd like to take it. I know you were asking earlier if you could have a new assignment."

Relief flooded her soul. "Yes! I'll take it."

The airline employee went to her computer and

entered a few keystrokes before printing a new boarding pass and scanning it. "Here you go—24B."

Mandy smiled as she grabbed the slip of paper. "Thank you so much."

The plane was full by the time she boarded, and most people were already seated with their luggage stowed. She walked down the aisle, averting her gaze when she got to row 16 where Kevin was sitting. She didn't even want to see his face.

As she approached Row 24, a different kind of dread pooled in her gut. *No. Not him.* Sitting in seat 24A was the man she had drooled on not thirty minutes earlier. Biting her lip, she reminded herself that sitting next to him was still better than forced proximity to her ex. Wasn't it?

Mandy gave him a cordial smile as she ducked into her seat and stuffed her carry-on underneath the seat in front of her. Her goal was to avoid eye contact and endure the entire flight in silence. But when the man next to her opened his mouth to speak, she knew her plans would be difficult to carry out.

"I'm CJ." He extended his hand for a formal handshake.

Mandy tilted her head, giving him a sideways glance. The way she was feeling right now, any kind of contact with the male species was the last thing on her mind. But her parents had raised her to be polite, so she took his hand and awkwardly obliged. "Mandy." *Phew.* That was over. She reached for her ear buds and changed her phone to airplane mode before searching for some music to play.

The flight crew began their usual safety announcements as the plane headed toward the runway.

“Getting away, or flying back home?” CJ asked.

Despite not being in a talkative mood, there was an inviting quality to this guy’s voice. “Flying back home. To Minneapolis.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Really? Same here. Are you on the 1:15 out of Denver?”

Mandy tried not to let her shoulders sag at the uncanny coincidence. “Yep.”

At the end of the flight crew’s spiel, a second voice came over the speakers. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m pleased to announce that flying with us today is Olympic champion Chase Hawkins. Chase has won both a gold and silver medal in pole vaulting. Welcome aboard, Chase!”

Mandy snickered at the announcement. Pole vaulting? Who cared about pole vaulting? And really, who cared about flying in the same plane as an Olympian?

CJ cleared his throat. “What’s so funny? The announcement?”

She nodded, rolling her eyes. “It’s just kind of an obscure sport, don’t you think? I mean, does it really warrant a special announcement? Does this guy think he’s better than us or something, just because he’s won a couple medals in some random sport?”

CJ chuckled, which only fueled Mandy’s rant. She was on a roll. “I bet he’s sitting up in first class, too good for economy like the rest of us. Heaven forbid he get stuck with a middle seat.” She was tempted to search for him online to see what a pole vaulting champion looked like, but she wasn’t about to pay for the plane’s Wi-Fi.

CJ stared at her with an amused expression, crinkles forming around the corners of his eyes.

“OK, now I have to ask *you* what’s so funny?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

It was probably best to mind her own business, but she couldn’t help herself. “No. You’re laughing at me, and I want to know why.”

The man licked his lips. “It just seems...maybe you have a bit of a chip on your shoulder. Did you have a bad experience with a pole vaulter in the past? I mean, what did this Chase guy ever do to you?”

Wow. The nerve of this guy! Mandy glared at him. Sure, he was right—she definitely had a chip on her shoulder. One that told her men were pigs, not to be trusted. Kevin was a football player, and he’d used that platform to cheat on her. Three weeks before her best friend’s wedding, no less. But she certainly wasn’t giving this CJ person the satisfaction of admitting he was right.

“He didn’t do anything,” she finally admitted. “But I’ve had enough experiences with womanizing athletes to know they’re all the same. And to use his Olympic status to get a better seat and draw attention to himself on a flight? It’s...tacky.” Why was she spilling her guts to this stranger? And why was she letting him get under her skin? It wasn’t her finest hour.

CJ rubbed his stubbly chin, as if genuinely intrigued by this conversation. “How do you know this guy’s trying to draw attention to himself? Maybe the airlines happened to notice who he was and made that announcement all on their own.”

Mandy turned her head to give him a stern look. “Doubtful. But whatever. Let’s just forget I said anything.” She finally selected some tunes on her phone and sat back to enjoy the music as the plane

took off. Her ear buds would give CJ the hint.

A few minutes later, her conscience got the best of her. She sighed, regretting her harsh comments. This guy didn't deserve to bear the brunt of her misplaced anger. Kevin was his own person. His poor decisions didn't mean she should be mean to perfect strangers.

Taking out one ear bud, she turned to CJ, who had powered up his laptop now that they were cleared for electronic devices. "Hey, I'm sorry about before." He'd better appreciate her apology; this didn't come easy for her. "I'm not in a great place right now, but I didn't mean to lash out at you."

The corner of his lips turned up and a dimple formed on his cheek. She couldn't deny that the man was easy on the eyes. "I didn't take it personally. Sorry to hear you're in a rough spot."

Mandy flashed him a grin before putting the earpiece back in her ear. "Thanks."

They flew without speaking for the next half hour. She'd made nice, and now her hopes of a silent flight were coming to fruition. The beverage cart was heading their way, so she removed her ear buds and waited to place her drink order.

A minute later, the flight attendant handed them each a cocktail napkin and some peanuts. Before Mandy could request a ginger ale, the woman spoke. "Hi, Mr. Hawkins, is there anything I can get for you?"

Mandy furrowed her brow. How did the flight attendant know his name? And why did it sound so familiar? *Wait...Hawkins.* Wasn't that the last name of the pole vaulter from the captain's announcement? Chase Hawkins. Was that what the C in CJ stood for? The blood drained from her face. *No. It can't be.* Her mouth flew open and then shut again at the realization

that she was sitting next to the very man she'd insulted for the first five minutes of the flight. She managed to get her drink order out, and then turned to face her neighbor, her cheeks on fire. "Are you..." her voice trailed off, and she swallowed hard. "You're the Olympian, aren't you?"

CJ's smile turned into a beam as he waggled his eyebrows. "I cannot tell a lie."

Closing her eyes, she tried to absorb what was happening. Perhaps he couldn't tell a lie, but he'd played a little fast and loose with the truth earlier when he'd talked about the pole vaulter in the third person. Still, she could hardly blame him based on her rude comments. How many times could she make a fool of herself in front of this man? From falling asleep on him, drooling on his shirt, lashing out for no reason, and learning that she'd insulted him without even knowing who he was, she was humiliated. *Keep it up, Mandy. You're rocking it.*

When she opened her eyes, the flight attendant was handing them drinks.

They reached for their cups.

Mandy turned to face CJ, contrite. "I...I'm so sorry," she finally spit out. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night, and it's been a rough few weeks for me. What I said before, it wasn't personal. Or true. I think it's awesome that you were in the Olympics."

CJ grinned. "Even for some random sport no one knows?"

Her shoulders slumped. He was mocking her. She couldn't let it get to her, though. After all, he clearly wasn't taking it personally if he was laughing about it. But it still put her on the defensive. "Yes, and of course people know about pole vaulting. That was just me

being bitter about my ex." Not that CJ deserved the gory details behind her frame of mind, but this handsome man had her flustered, saying things without thinking.

A chuckle came from her seatmate. "Mandy, stop. It's really OK. I was just giving you a hard time."

She tried to smile. "Thanks. I don't know why I said that about first class though. As if you're snooty just because you've won a medal. Oh. My. Word. I called you a *womanizer*, and I don't even know you." She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, "Lord, forgive me." Once upon a time, she was spiritual enough to pray on a regular basis. She didn't keep in touch with God much anymore, but if ever there was a time to reach out to a higher power, it was now. *Please keep me from saying any more stupid things.*

"So your ex, huh?" CJ shifted in his seat. "Is he the reason you think all men are players?"

Ducking her head, her cheeks heated again at the reminder of how she'd insulted this kind man before she'd even known him. That was *not* who she was. Kevin's actions had really done a number on her. She took a sip of her drink to delay her vulnerable response. "I guess so, yeah. And he's on this flight, so I'm a bit on edge."

He raised his eyebrows. "I take it things didn't end well?"

Mandy took a deep breath. Why was she going into this ugly story with some stranger sitting next to her on the plane? She *could* tell him it was none of his business. But somehow, the idea of unleashing on someone who seemed genuinely interested and who she'd never see again anyway sounded strangely inviting. And safe. What did she have to lose? "We

broke up three weeks ago. He said he just didn't see it with us for the long haul, and that he wanted to see other people. I found the timing to be a bit convenient, as I'd already paid for his ticket to my best friend's wedding in San Diego. Our breakup didn't stop him from using the opportunity for a free trip to California."

CJ's eyes widened. "Did he pay you back, at least?"

Mandy shook her head. "I thought of asking him to, but I didn't want to come off as bitter. Besides, the trip was technically a birthday present a couple months back, so I didn't want it to look as though I was taking back my gift. And he was on his own for room and board, so it wasn't, like, an all-expense paid trip or anything."

CJ took a sip of his soda, and then placed it on his tray. "Well, I'm sorry he tainted your trip."

She let out a humorless laugh. "That's not the worst part." She rolled her neck in a dramatic fashion until she was facing him. Did she really want to go down this path? Her mouth opened before she could weigh the consequences. "During the wedding reception, a so-called friend had a little too much to drink and confessed to me that Kevin had started *seeing other people* long before we broke up." She used air quotes for effect.

CJ's mouth formed into a small circle. "He cheated on you?"

Mandy nodded and returned her gaze to her ginger ale, inspecting the fizzy beverage as if it were the most fascinating thing on the planet. "So, there I was all by my lonesome, watching my best friend marry the love of her life and finding out that the guy I

was dating for the past year had been cheating on me. It was...not a great feeling. I've had a bit of a pit in my stomach the past couple days." That was an understatement. She had never felt so empty before in her life.

Out of nowhere, a gentle hand touched her arm. She jerked her head to discover its source and found a sympathetic face staring back at her. CJ removed his hand after her reaction, but his concern remained. "I'm so sorry. If it's any consolation, I can relate." He shook his head and looked down. "I mean, I've not been cheated on, and I've never cheated." He lifted his head back up to face her. "But my sister just went through a similar breakup. She was distraught when she found out. It was so hard seeing her like that, but after a while, her ex-boyfriend's actions finally lost their sting and she was able to move on."

Mandy squeezed her lips together, not sure how to respond.

Thankfully, CJ changed the subject. "So, what do you do for a living?"

That was one question she didn't mind answering. Other areas of her life weren't anything to brag about, but at least she loved her job. "I manage a special needs theater in the Eden Oaks district. We help adults with different abilities live out their dreams on the stage or behind the scenes."

CJ's eyes popped. "Seriously? That's awesome! How have I never heard of this place? I'm definitely coming to a show sometime. Wait, it's open to the public, right?"

Mandy nodded shyly, stunned by his enthusiastic response. "Yes, anyone can come. We just finished our Christmas show last week, but we typically have

multiple groups rehearsing at once, so it won't be too long before another show starts. And we rent out the facility to businesses and parties during our slow times—when there are no shows or rehearsals or classes going on. Gotta pay the bills and all.”

CJ nodded, amazement still covering his face. “What a great idea.”

His interest in her job was endearing, if not a bit overwhelming, although she couldn't pinpoint why. She turned her face toward the aisle to take a private breath and her heart immediately sank. “Oh, no,” she murmured. Her gaze dropped to her lap as she nervously bounced her legs.

“What is it?” CJ asked.

She cleared her throat and swallowed hard. “My ex. Heading this way.”

2

Mandy couldn't hide her insecurity upon seeing her ex. What she wouldn't do for Kevin to see her laughing or in love. To know that his actions hadn't affected her the way they clearly had. Just then, CJ reached over and intertwined his fingers with hers. What was he doing? Mandy glanced at their hands and then up at his face. He gazed down at her with a heartwarming smile. After stealing a quick glance over her head toward the aisle, he returned his gaze to her face. His brown eyes were gorgeous, and she was tingling from the gentle touch of his hand on hers. Her warm cheeks grew even hotter.

A few seconds later, he squeezed her hand and then let go. "He's gone. But he glared at me as he walked by. That's good, right?"

Mandy let out a pent-up breath. CJ had read her mind, realized she wanted her ex to see that she'd moved on. It was childish and immature, but at the same time, an oddly moving gesture. Kevin's hint of jealousy did give her a bit of satisfaction, but it didn't remove the emptiness from her gut. Still, she was grateful for CJ's attempt. "In a weird way, yeah."

He nodded, but he was able to read between the lines. "Don't let it get to you. It *will* get better. You'll find someone you don't feel the need to impress.

Someone who wants you for you.”

Her forced grin turned into a more sincere one. “How’d you get so good at consoling strangers?”

CJ shrugged. “My sister just went through the same thing. And I can tell you that once you realize you actually dodged a bullet with someone like that—someone who’s OK with cheating—you move on and it gets better. God has someone out there who’s a much better fit for you.”

Mandy blinked a few times. Did she believe that? Did God really care about who she ended up with? Was there someone out there for her? She wasn’t sure, but right now, she was thankful for her seat assignment. CJ wasn’t half bad after all.

Just then, he glanced toward the back of the plane. “He’s coming back. Should we sell it?” He kept his voice low.

She giggled at the way he asked, as if it was some sort of covert operation. “If you’re up for it.”

CJ winked and patted his right shoulder. Mandy took the cue and leaned her head on him. He linked their hands again and leaned his head on top of hers just as Kevin approached. Mandy watched out of the corner of her eye and saw him cast a backwards glance after passing by. It would seem he still cared to some degree, but that was too bad. He’d had his chance, and he’d blown it.

After her ex was back in his seat several rows up, she knew she could lift her head off CJ’s shoulder. And given her penchant for drooling on this man, it was probably the wise choice. But something about leaning on him felt so comforting that she didn’t want to move. The fact that CJ hadn’t let go of her hand told her maybe he felt the same way.

~*~

CJ watched as Mandy slept on his shoulder—for the second time that day. The first time had been comical, watching some stranger nod off and land on him in the middle of a crowded airport. But this time, her head on his shoulder felt almost nice.

They had gotten off on the wrong foot when she'd ranted on about Chase Hawkins. But he'd found her spunkiness refreshing and admired her ability to own up to her mistakes, to apologize for her wrongs. Not everyone would have done that. And when she talked about her job at the theater, enthusiasm dripped from her words. He appreciated a woman who was passionate about what she did.

The skidding of the plane's wheels on the ground jolted her awake. She lifted her head as she yawned, and then turned toward him and scrunched up her face. "Wow, that's really becoming a habit, huh?"

He grinned. "You must need the rest."

"Thanks for not minding."

He missed the warmth of her head on his shoulder but reminded himself that this was probably the last time they'd see each other. There was no sense entertaining anything more than this one casual encounter with this woman—attractive, kind, and intriguing though she was.

When the plane came to a stop at the gate, a chaotic rush of passengers grabbed their belongings and exited the plane one by one. CJ extended his arm for a handshake. "Well, if I don't see you on the next