

LITTLE VICTORIES

A short story by Jay Eales
Illustrated by Adam Smith



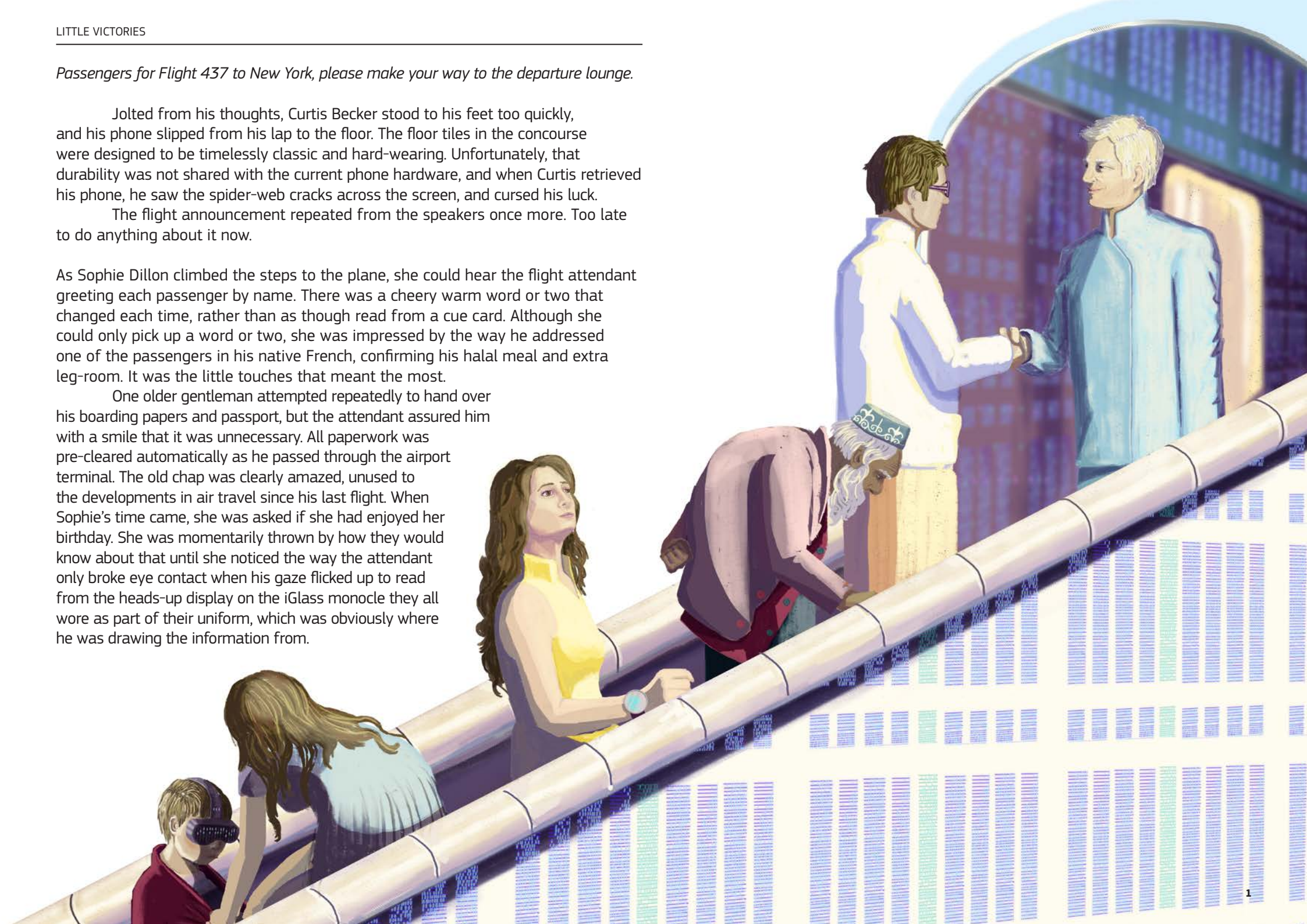
Passengers for Flight 437 to New York, please make your way to the departure lounge.

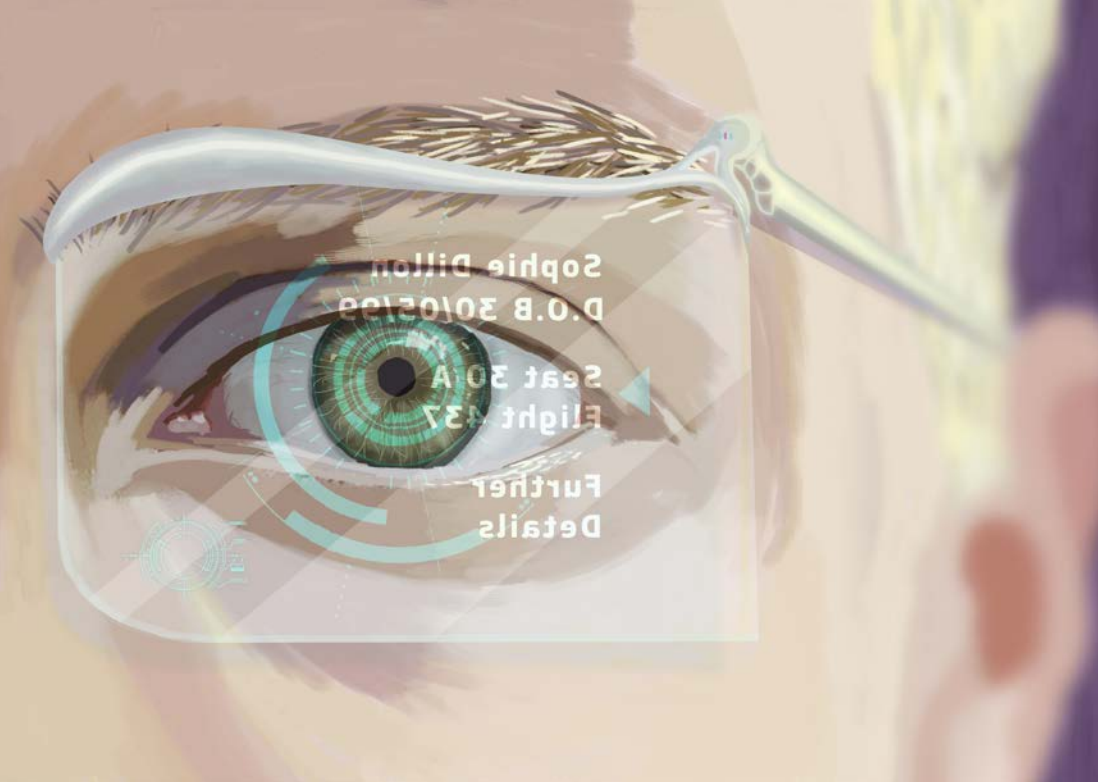
Jolted from his thoughts, Curtis Becker stood to his feet too quickly, and his phone slipped from his lap to the floor. The floor tiles in the concourse were designed to be timelessly classic and hard-wearing. Unfortunately, that durability was not shared with the current phone hardware, and when Curtis retrieved his phone, he saw the spider-web cracks across the screen, and cursed his luck.

The flight announcement repeated from the speakers once more. Too late to do anything about it now.

As Sophie Dillon climbed the steps to the plane, she could hear the flight attendant greeting each passenger by name. There was a cheery warm word or two that changed each time, rather than as though read from a cue card. Although she could only pick up a word or two, she was impressed by the way he addressed one of the passengers in his native French, confirming his halal meal and extra leg-room. It was the little touches that meant the most.

One older gentleman attempted repeatedly to hand over his boarding papers and passport, but the attendant assured him with a smile that it was unnecessary. All paperwork was pre-cleared automatically as he passed through the airport terminal. The old chap was clearly amazed, unused to the developments in air travel since his last flight. When Sophie's time came, she was asked if she had enjoyed her birthday. She was momentarily thrown by how they would know about that until she noticed the way the attendant only broke eye contact when his gaze flicked up to read from the heads-up display on the iGlass monacle they all wore as part of their uniform, which was obviously where he was drawing the information from.





“Lovely, thanks,” she said eventually, as the attendant directed her towards her seat, and turned his attention to the next in line. Sophie looked back past the attendant at the curtained section beyond which lay the first class passengers. As a standard passenger, Sophie surveyed her own section. Roomier than some budget flights she could remember, and in the seat pocket in front of her, along with the safety instructions and in-flight magazine that would remain unread by most, there was a tablet device preloaded with a range of games and movies. They even threw in a 3D headset for that fully immersive gaming experience. Not as advanced as the iGlasses the flight crew had, but still great. Her apartment at home wasn’t as well equipped. If Standard Class had all this, she idly speculated, what wonders were reserved for those up in First? Hot and cold running foot massages?

In Business Class – for despite Sophie’s daydreaming, the plane did not actually have a First Class section – it was not quite the paradise she imagined. The seats were fewer and further apart, and a finer menu was served course by course, rather than doled out in a complete package. There were more attendants per passenger, and a better range of entertainments, but the crowning jewel, which to the stressed executive riding the redeye was worth its weight in gold, was the lie-flat seating.

Curtis was looking forward to making use of the fully reclining seat later, but first he had more pressing issues. With the other business class travellers, he had been seated before the rest of the flight, and had told them the saga of his damaged phone. Without missing a beat, they had reassured him that they could arrange for a local outlet of his phone service provider to courier a replacement handset to JFK for collection as soon as he disembarked. As a stop-gap measure, he would be able to customise the standard plane tablet to access any of his data he might need access to during the flight. While the smashed phone screen made his own handset pretty much useless, all he needed to do to get up and running again was to put it against the tablet and pop in his password and fingerprint ID to nudge everything onto the device even quicker than retrieving it from the cloud would have been.

As his contacts and settings loaded up, right down to his choice of desktop wallpaper, Curtis relaxed. Now he could get back to the job at hand. He put a proprietary hand on his satchel and glanced across at a couple of his fellow passengers. The woman was in her early fifties, though did not look it, possibly due to her Scandinavian ancestry. Dressed well but inexpensively, she was clearly the senior partner to her colleague, a good foot shorter, and easily twice her waist across. Where she was pale and European, he was dark and Indian. He was pushing sixty hard, but where his colleague’s demeanour was serious, his eyes shone.

Domino Burgess was famous enough to have a household name, but as an author, for the most part, not a name you could put a face to. That suited her, as she was able to walk the streets untroubled by her success. For the most part. Occasionally she would run into a reader who recognised her from her out of date dust jacket portrait, or someone familiar with her charity work. Outside of her contractual obligations, she did not court the world’s media, but sometimes she had to play the game. This was one of those times.

Against her better judgement, Domino had allowed her long-suffering editor Milan Gohil to persuade her to attend a speaking engagement in New York. Ostensibly to promote her latest work in progress, Milan had intimated that it would also be a good platform to soapbox about her landmine charity in front of the great and good. The deal struck, Milan was canny enough to book the tickets there and then. He decided to accompany Domino not as a corporate jolly, but because he wanted to make sure she actually boarded the flight. Once bitten... Milan’s Gujarat-born father taught him the value of caution. Why trust in a belt when you could also wear braces?

In the crew section, the status panel pinged, and an answering alert vibrated on the airline logo pin affixed to each flight attendant’s jacket. Simultaneously, wherever they were in the plane and whatever their current duties, they all glanced up at

the iGlass alert, to determine whether it was something they needed to deal with. The attendant nearest the station panel was able to respond. It was a simple enough situation, already taken care of by the ground staff, and just requiring confirmation by the air crew. One of the loader trucks carrying luggage to another plane had inadvertently been stacked with a suitcase bound for this flight, and as it moved further away from its associated owner, the RFID tag triggered an alert. Ground crew just required confirmation from the plane that their passenger was indeed aboard, and that done, diverted the loader to reunite luggage with its owner, none the wiser for its detour. The airline was justifiably proud of its boast to have never lost an item of luggage since the introduction of the system, and they weren't going to lose it today.



Sophie fired up her tablet and hooked into the cloud. There was an immediate flag from the airline network, which she allowed, pulling down menu screens containing an assortment of games and movies. As it drew information from her accounts, the selection shuffled to bring up the titles she'd most be interested in. But right now, Sophie wasn't interested in gaming or watching a show. She paged through the options to bring up her communities, and barely able to contain herself, she placed the headset on her head as though it were a crown. As it activated, software drivers automatically installed themselves on her tablet. The whole thing was ready for use within seconds.

Gazing around the plane, Sophie was disappointed by the number of greyed out seats – the passengers who either didn't do online, or had their privacy settings so high they were practically invisible. Of the rest, there was a temperature gauge of cool blue to red hot. The more open the network, the more accurate the match.

There were a few hotspots around her, in a sea of blue, but before she could investigate further...

PING! An avatar popped up on her screen – her university friend Trevor Knight, who she was meeting up with in New York, grinned out at her in miniature.

How's the flight? Any delays? T

Sophie tapped back: All good so far. She dragged open a new window with their shared holiday itinerary on it. Since she'd last looked, the airline software had plugged into it and was updating it in realtime, with funky animations of Sophie's plane and the train that Trevor was currently aboard, and a countdown of around seven hours to when they were due to meet up.

How's the US so far? Sophie asked.

Outrageous! Shame you couldn't get out sooner. Trevor said, before adding *Bringing the British weather with you, though! You have to see this* and he switched to video mode. After a rocky blur as he turned the phone to face the window, Sophie could see the dark skies of upstate New York – Albany, according to the



map – with its topography of skyscrapers. As she watched, there was an enormous flash, and lightning lit up the sky. *Great, eh?*

Whoah! Sophie typed, *Hope that's gone by the time I land!* Trevor and Sophie raced each other to bring up the weather forecast first. Ten points to Trevor, but they were both grateful that it appeared the storm front would have passed over NYC by the time Sophie's plane was due to arrive.

As Sophie looked at the itinerary, her screen flickered and the numbers changed, and the timeline moved on by ten minutes. She had little time to ponder when a message box popped up from the airline confirming a slight modification to the route to skirt the edge of a weather front, to minimise any turbulence along the way. There was a ripple effect on Sophie's schedule, as the delay impacted on her pre-booked taxi at the airport, all cancelled and rebooked automatically.

At the cab company's end, drivers were shuffled in the deck and re-routed to the next available fare. All of this was done between the airline and taxi company systems with very little input needed from the administrators. Over the course of the average flight, bookings were in a constant state of flux, taking into account any number of variables from traffic jams to the unexpected need for a rest stop. The taxi drivers learned to plan no further than the next fare, since the exact nature of the next passenger was like Schrödinger's Cat, in a state of quantum uncertainty until the last moment.

“Ms Burgess? It is Domino Burgess, isn’t it?” Curtis moved across the aisle hesitantly towards Domino, leaning in front of Milan’s defensive wall. He held a package behind his back, while he made his introductions. “I’m so sorry to disturb you, but I’m just so amazed to see you on my plane – well, not *my* plane...”

Domino did well to prevent her eyes from rolling, and to maintain a half-smile. This did not happen often, but often enough that she could predict his next move. Ah yes, here was the book. Fortune’s Fool, naturally. Her 1983 multi-award winner, never out of print since then. Interestingly, the blue dustcover. The first edition, then. Domino’s hand rose instinctively to ward the book away. The making of her career, but since that ill-advised movie adaptation – she did *not* approve – it had become as much a curse as a blessing.

“...wouldn’t normally dream of asking...” Curtis said, lying. “...never get another opportunity...” he added.

Milan interposed himself between his client and the fan, as he had done many times during their association. “Ms Burgess is always grateful for the support of her readers, but *regrettably*, she is unable to provide autographs.” In truth, Domino had not signed an autograph in the 21st Century.

Curtis continued, as though he had not heard Milan’s words, “...fate, I think, that I should be re-reading Fortune’s Fool, right now... and on this plane, you know?”

“I’m sorry, but the answer is no.” Domino said, as Milan adjusted his



position to move further between them. The book remained outstretched, and Curtis wore his most hopeful expression. One he'd practiced in the mirror to be the right mixture of pleading and non-threatening. He could see that Domino was wavering. Weighing up whether it would be less trouble to just sign the damn autograph and be rid of him before a queue formed, or to stand her ground.

"Jonathon Pym. Jon-a-*thon*, with an 'o'. It would mean the world to me."

"That's not going to happen, Mister Pym." Milan spoke more loudly this time, and his eyes no longer shone.

"Please..." Curtis began, looking directly into Domino's eyes. Almost.

Almost...

"Can I help?" The raised voices had by now attracted the attention of flight attendants, two of whom hurried over to defuse the situation.

"No problem," Curtis said a little too sharply. He was reluctant to reclaim his book, despite the growing awkwardness of the situation.

The attendant's eyes flicked up to retrieve data, "Mister Becker? May I please ask you to return to your seat?"

"All I'm trying to do is..."

"Becker?" Milan said, "You said your name was Pym."

"We're done here." Domino said quietly.

At last, Curtis snatched back the book, no longer able to contain his frustration.

"Your seat, sir." The attendant indicated the empty seat across the aisle. "If I have to, I will remove you from this section, sir."

Curtis considered his position. He knew that the plane was already at capacity. There were no spare seats to move him to. But they could upgrade someone from Standard. Would they do that? And how would he fulfil his contract then? He had a lot riding on this job, and wasn't used to being unable to get what he wanted. He sat.



Have you checked out the menu yet? Sophie typed. She pushed the hotel restaurant link across the internet to Trevor's device. *They just had a delivery of swordfish and BANG! It's on the menu.*

We're living in the future, Soph! Trevor said, *Oh wow! Just checked the desserts. Salted Caramel Bread and Butter Pudding... #droooool*

Count me in! Save an extra place, though. Found someone on the flight you should meet. Hannah, jump in when you're ready.

PING! <Hannah Delgado has joined the conversation>

On Trevor's screen, Hannah's avatar popped up for him to click. *Hi Hannah!*

Hi Trevor! Sophie tells me you're into electronica.

Just a bit. Hey! Is that a Blancmange t-shirt you're wearing?



That's how I knew you'd get on. Trevor wore the same shirt until it fell apart. Sophie said.

Think that's good, take a look at this Hannah typed, before pushing an image from her photo album at Trevor.

You met Thomas Dolby! #wearenotworthy

I thought you two could geek about Korgs and Fairlights while I get on with the important sightseeing stuff. :)

Milan and Domino conducted their conversation in hushed tones. They were not comfortable with Curtis remaining so close to them, although he had remained in his seat since he had been dismissed earlier. From time to time, he glanced over at them, the cogs going round in his head as he attempted to find a way to get the autograph that Jonathon Pym – the *real* Jonathon Pym – was paying him for.

Milan was normally the calming influence, but now, Domino was returning the compliment. Milan was more agitated than she had seen before. He was sweating despite the ambient temperature, and his sentences were confused and hesitant. At times, what he was saying made no sense. He'd had a couple of Talisker whiskies, but he was acting as though he were four sheets to the wind.

"Are you okay?" Domino asked, as Milan hesitantly got to his feet.

"Mm going toilet." Milan lurched off in the direction of the rear of the plane,

rather than the Business Class rest room. As he stumbled off, Curtis looked across, as though he might take advantage of the situation, but one burning glare from Domino changed his mind, and he returned to contemplating his navel.

“The other way!” Domino called to her editor, but he waved away her guidance and plunged through the curtain into the next section.

The station panel pinged an alert to all flight attendants as it recognised heightened levels of distress from Milan’s monitor, but he was not where they expected to find him.

Sophie had left the new fast friends Trevor and Hannah to gabble at each other, while she took out her battered but faithful eReader to catch up on some of the mountain of novels she’d let build up while she was knee-deep in her coursework. A Bachelor in Medicine and Surgery didn’t allow for much reading for pleasure. Another reason why Sophie was so looking forward to this holiday. Work hard, play hard, they said.

She looked up from her screen as the Indian guy made a break for it from the front section. He bounced off the seats to the left and right before taking a tumble right by her. Her initial thought was that he had started playing hard a bit early, but then she saw that his face had dropped on the right, and saw it for the stroke it was. She slid from her seat and got down beside him, calling for assistance “Someone grab an attendant! This man’s having a stroke.”

By now, attendants were coming from all directions. Sophie explained that she was a third year medical student, and asked if the plane was equipped with tPA, or tissue plasminogen activator, and when no answer was immediately forthcoming, she asked for soluble aspirin and a glass of water, which was quickly supplied.

Sophie did her best to soothe Milan as the attendant helped him to swallow the water. Unsure as to what else to do, she read to him from the book she had been reading. He was distressed, unable to get his words out, and unsure of what was happening to him, but Sophie’s voice seemed to help. Domino had been informed by this time, and had come out to do what she could, but the aisle was pretty much blocked with air crew, so all she could do was identify her ailing editor and be on hand for any other questions.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Milan. It’s taken me fourteen years to get you trained. You mustn’t make me start again.”

Milan had enough about him to manage a half-smile at that.

Sophie’s itinerary pinged repeatedly with updates as Flight 437 was forced to detour to the nearest airport in Atlantic City, but she was too preoccupied to read it until later. There would be other swordfish dishes on other days. While the flight attendant had nominally taken charge of Milan’s medical wellbeing, she could see that Milan was drawing strength from Sophie’s presence, so she was allowed to remain by his side.

They had moved him carefully into the business section, and made good use of the lie-flat seating.

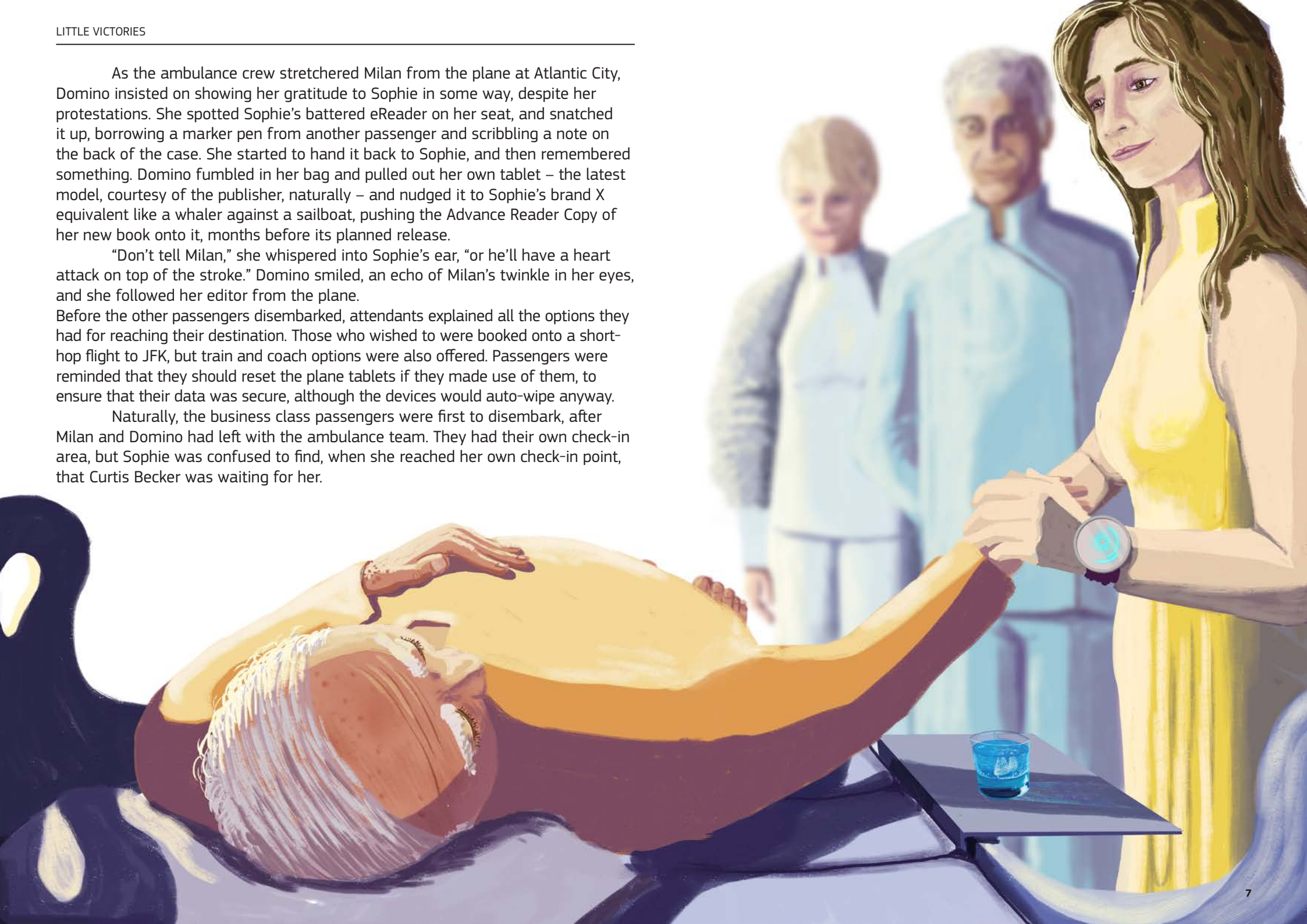


As the ambulance crew stretchered Milan from the plane at Atlantic City, Domino insisted on showing her gratitude to Sophie in some way, despite her protestations. She spotted Sophie's battered eReader on her seat, and snatched it up, borrowing a marker pen from another passenger and scribbling a note on the back of the case. She started to hand it back to Sophie, and then remembered something. Domino fumbled in her bag and pulled out her own tablet – the latest model, courtesy of the publisher, naturally – and nudged it to Sophie's brand X equivalent like a whaler against a sailboat, pushing the Advance Reader Copy of her new book onto it, months before its planned release.

"Don't tell Milan," she whispered into Sophie's ear, "or he'll have a heart attack on top of the stroke." Domino smiled, an echo of Milan's twinkle in her eyes, and she followed her editor from the plane.

Before the other passengers disembarked, attendants explained all the options they had for reaching their destination. Those who wished to were booked onto a short-hop flight to JFK, but train and coach options were also offered. Passengers were reminded that they should reset the plane tablets if they made use of them, to ensure that their data was secure, although the devices would auto-wipe anyway.

Naturally, the business class passengers were first to disembark, after Milan and Domino had left with the ambulance team. They had their own check-in area, but Sophie was confused to find, when she reached her own check-in point, that Curtis Becker was waiting for her.



“How much?” he asked, trying every trick in his extensive book of plays to persuade Sophie to part with her newly autographed eReader. He offered ten times what she’d paid for it, without batting an eyelash. It wasn’t what his client had requested, but he was sure that he could salvage something from the contract for the only new autograph anyone was likely to get from Domino Burgess.

Sophie played along, if only to see just how high the price would go, but eventually she tired of the game and cut him loose. Curtis shuffled away, defeated. At least his replacement phone was waiting for him at JFK as promised. Small mercies.

Intrigued by her surprisingly valuable knock-off eReader, as Sophie sat in the concourse waiting for her connecting flight, she pulled the treasure from her bag, realising she hadn’t read what Domino had written on it. She flipped it over, and read:

*For Sophie,
We are all Fortune’s Fools.
With love,
Domino Burgess.*

THE END

