

Playing It Close
(London Legends #2)

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Chapter One

Warm seawater sliding over naked skin. *That's* how Tess wanted to end her second night in Venezuela.

She stood on the moonlit shore and gripped the hem of her T-shirt, battling her misgivings as she scanned the beach. No one. She was completely alone. If she pulled the shirt over her head, no one would see that she'd ditched her bikini top in her room and only wore a pair of frilly pink bikini bottoms. No one would see if she slipped those off too.

Her hand relaxed its grip on the soft cotton before fisting it again and inching it up. *Do it. But there could be cameras.* She scanned the shore from left to right, then turned to face the beachside hotel and did it again. The moonlight shone brightly—too brightly. The journalists who'd hounded her for eight months wouldn't even need to use their flash if they wanted a decent picture of the Scourge of the City cavorting naked and alone in the Caribbean. How much would the London tabloids pay for a photo like that?

Enough that she might be tempted to send them one herself.

Idiot. You're at a remote eco-lodge halfway around the world. No one here cares or even knows who you are.

Still...

Resolved, Tess let go of the shirt hem and took determined strides toward the water lapping at the shore. She had five more nights here. Plenty of time for the moonlight to die down. She could wait for a cloudy night—if northern Venezuela experienced such things. Tonight she would simply enjoy swimming lazily through the calm water with her T-shirt protecting her dignity.

Although it was past midnight, the sand was still warm from the strong rays it had soaked up throughout the day. The water cooled Tess's sun-kissed skin as it swirled around her knees, her hips, her waist. She brought her hands over her head and dove in, kicking her feet and pulling her arms back in an underwater breaststroke for as long as she could hold her breath.

Freedom. Under here, no one could touch her. Under here, her life was her own.

After ten minutes of paddling around, she swam for the shore and stepped onto the soft sand. A breeze swept over the sea, chilling her skin, and Tess realized she'd forgotten a towel. If she'd stripped her shirt off before getting into the water, she would have had a dry shirt to put on. Now she was half-naked in a translucent white T-shirt. Fabulous.

She shoved her feet into her sandals, crossed her arms over her chest and rushed through the hotel's beach entrance. *Please let everyone be in bed.*

No such luck. As she entered the lobby, the receptionist was handing a man his room key. *Bugger.* She'd have to walk right past them to get to the stairs. Fortunately the lift was right here. She ducked her head and pressed the up arrow, muttering, "Come on, come on."

"We hope you enjoy your stay, Señor Jones," the receptionist said.

"Cheers, Maria."

Come on come on come on! The lift whirred, dinged and opened. *Yes!* Tess hurried into it and hit the button for the third floor a thousand times, like a hyperactive child on a sugar rush—the kind of child she used to be.

A deep voice called out across the lobby. "Hold the lift!"

Oh, hell no. She pressed the door-close button and let out a sigh as it worked its magic—

A foot jammed itself between the closing doors, followed swiftly by a deep-throated "Fucking hell!" when the doors didn't bounce open automatically but clamped together instead.

No! Tess swallowed her cry of defeat as a pair of very big, very masculine hands braced themselves on the edge of one of the doors and pushed. Hard. Like, Superman hard. Within seconds, the man created enough space to squeeze himself and his travelers' backpack through the gap. When he leaped away from the doors as if they might bite him again, Tess had to press herself against the wall to avoid being flattened.

"Are you crazy?" she yelled as the lift's doors bounced closed behind him. Her voice reverberated around the small space, making the thin walls vibrate behind her back. "You could've been killed!"

A niggle of familiarity passed through her at her first glance at him, but then she noticed he was glaring at her hand. She followed his gaze to find she was still pressing the door-close button. Drawing back her arm, she crossed it with the other one over her chest. "Oops. Wrong button."

"Mentalist," he muttered. He pressed the button for the fourth floor and turned his back to her, dropping the weathered blue backpack from his shoulders. The lift shook from its weight.

Holy mother... his shoulders took up nearly half the airspace in the lift. Tess breathed a silent sigh of relief as the lift jerked and started its ascent. Only a few seconds from now, the doors would reopen and this awkward moment would be behind her—literally, since she was getting off on the floor below his and would have to walk away with her wet T-shirt plastered to her skinny arse. He was so much bigger than her. Why the hell had she yelled at him when he first got into the lift?

Impulse-control: never one of her strong points.

Fortunately, he didn't say anything more. She'd caught his accent. British, like her, he'd probably grown up well versed in how to ignore awkward situations.

The lift chugged, its erratic ascent making her imagine it was a bucket being hoisted upward by monkeys working a rope pulley hand-over-hand. She kept her attention on the buttons, counting them as they lit up, as if they were items on a to-do list that she had to get through before she could escape. First floor—done. Second floor—done. Nearly there—

The lift jerked to a hard halt, making her gasp and brace her hand against the faux wooden wall.

"What the hell?" her companion muttered.

The second- and third-floor buttons were both lit, but the doors didn't open. The man banged his fist on them, as though they were a vending machine that had kept hold of his Snickers bar. "Open up."

"Don't think it can hear you," she said.

Mistake. Her sarky comment brought his attention back to her. She could feel it, even though she kept her gaze firmly trained on the opposite wall, not eager to see whether he was ready to throttle or jump her. For several long seconds, she shivered under his silent scrutiny. The water hadn't been as warm as she'd expected. Fine when you were in it, but stepping into the slight breeze had left her covered in goose pimples...and a couple of pointy parts she was desperately trying to cover with her arms, as if he might not have noticed that she'd left her bikini top in her room.

Damn it. One thing she'd learned from working in a male-dominated office was that she had to stand up for herself. She lifted her head to glare up at him, and the niggle of familiarity exploded into awareness.

No way. No *way*.

Liam Callaghan? Liam Callaghan, rugby's all-time leading points scorer? Captain of

London Legends and, more recently, of the England squad? Liam bloody Callaghan? Her father would shit a brick when she told him.

She'd leave out the wet T-shirt part, of course.

He was staring at her too. Or, at least, at her hair. She just barely managed to keep from touching it self-consciously. She'd had a lot of funny looks the past couple of days—not surprising since her hair was currently bubblegum pink. After a second in which he seemed fixated on the horror covering the top of her head, Liam Callaghan turned away as if she wasn't worth acknowledging—a posture she'd got used to during her years working in an industry dripping with testosterone—and banged on the door again, this time shouting for anyone who might be able to hear them. “Hello? We're stuck in here!”

She tried pushing the third-floor button again. And again. Her finger became more frantic as the doors stayed solidly closed.

“Will you stop that?” he snapped. “That'll make it worse. We're probably stuck in here because you jammed the buttons in the first place.”

“Wait, are you accusing me of breaking the lift? Me? When you were the one who forced the doors open?”

His eyes went wide in patent disbelief. “Are you having a laugh? I wouldn't have had to if you'd held the lift like any decent human being would do.”

She stuffed down her annoyance. He obviously had a point, though she would quibble with that *decent human being* bit if she weren't half-naked and locked in a lift with a man who made his living knocking seventeen-stone men to the ground. “Look, let's not waste our time arguing about this. How do we get out of here?”

The question was more to herself than him, and she'd already started scanning the doors, walls and ceiling for any indication of what to do in an emergency. No escape hatch in the ceiling, the way there always was in films. Not that she'd know what to do if he did boost her up there. Maybe convince the monkeys to get back to work? No telephone or emergency call button. No security camera.

“Shit. We're fucked.”

“Maybe there's a call button,” he said, clearly a few mental steps behind her as he peered closer at the panel.

“There isn't. There's nothing. We're well and truly stuck.”

He scanned the ceiling and the corners, then ran his hands down the seam of the closed doors. She waited silently for him to catch up with her. “There's nothing. We're stuck.”

Echo much? Saying the words aloud would be a bad idea. Another situation she'd learned how to deal with from working with sexist pigs for seven years. Don't antagonize, and try not to respond. They harassed you because they wanted to see you lose your shit. If you didn't, they'd realize it wasn't much fun and stop doing it.

He beat the doors, and the whole lift shook from the pounding. Without thinking, she grabbed his arm to stop him, immediately tugging her hand back when she felt the power in his biceps. She would need three hands to wrap around them. “Please don't do that. I'd rather be stuck between floors than plummet down to the ground floor.”

“The receptionist said she was going home after she checked me in. Maybe she hasn't left yet. Hello! Maria!” He pounded and yelled some more before giving up with a curse. “Fan-bloody-tastic.”

They stood in awkward silence for a few tension-filled moments. Her shivers grew more pronounced. The cool dip had felt invigorating after sweltering all day, but now her body

registered not only the slight drop in temperature but also the fact that she might be trapped for hours in this lift with a strange man. A frustrated man. A man she didn't know, and she was quite exposed. More than a chill was making her teeth chatter.

"Are you cold?"

"Mmm-hmm." She rubbed her hands up and down her arms as best she could without exposing her breasts. Her shoulders hunched over, both to hide from him and because the more she thought about it the colder she got.

"Are you kidding? It's sweltering in here."

She gave him a look of pure disbelief. "You might not have noticed, but I'm wearing a little less than you."

One corner of his mouth kicked up. He clearly had noticed, and she braced herself for the smarmy comment that would inevitably follow.

Nothing.

He crouched down and unclipped the cover of his ancient blue backpack, then tugged on the drawstring tab that closed the top of the bag. After rummaging for a few seconds, he pulled out a handful of green cotton. "Dry T-shirt?"

Oh, God, yes please. She took it from him with a grateful smile, and he dug into his bag again. "I've got some trousers in here, too, but I think you'd fit your whole body into one of my trouser legs, so they might not be that useful."

He yanked out a pair of shorts and held them up, eyeing her. "Don't fancy the chances of these staying up, either." He dropped them, went back to the bag, held up a pair of gray cotton boxer briefs, his gaze never straying south of her face even though he was squatting level with her girl parts. "How about a pair of my pants? I promise they're clean."

"Thanks for the offer, but I've only just met you. I don't think it would be appropriate to wear your underpants."

"You're right. Much more appropriate for you to stand there wearing nothing but my T-shirt."

With a resigned sigh, she took the briefs from him and said, "Thank you."

"No, thank *you*." He closed his bag, stood and turned his back to her. "Let me know when you're done."

The tiny lift didn't leave much room for maneuver, but she hurriedly stripped off her sodden shirt and dropped it to the floor with a *plop*. She whipped his shirt over her head. The hem fell halfway to her knees, covering her as she wriggled out of her damp bikini bottoms and tugged his pants on. The elasticated waist wasn't small enough to stay where it should, but fortunately it settled around her hips and seemed like it would stay put. She was drowning in clothes now, and he'd kept his back respectfully turned. A dangerous man wouldn't have done that, or even given her his clothes in the first place—right? Her shoulders relaxed. She rolled them around to ease the tension she'd carried from hunching over. "I'm finished."

He faced her again, quickly assessing her outfit. Sticking out a hand, he said, "I'm Liam...uh, Jones."

She kept her brows from rising at his lie, but just barely. "Hello, Liam Jones. I'm Tess. Tess...Crawley."

What the hell. If he was going to make up a name, she might as well, too, so she chose one from her favorite TV period drama. God knew her name had been splashed all over the papers for the better part of a year. She'd come here to escape the legal minefield she'd thrown herself into headfirst, but it had never occurred to her to make up a new identity, which seemed

like an oversight now she thought about it. Hadn't she done everything possible to leave her old life behind and become someone new? She'd gone through two hair colors drastically different than her normal boring brown. She'd spent the past two days exploring the jungle treetops instead of the urban jungle she'd been trapped in her whole life. Yet she hadn't considered traveling incognito. Huh. Tess Crawley. What a novelty.

Liam made a sound of pent-up frustration and stretched his arms above his head, his fingertips scraping the low ceiling. He was quite a bit taller than her, probably nearly six feet to her five foot three. Certainly not one of the biggest players, height-wise. In fact, on TV he was dwarfed by some of his teammates. Then again, he towered over others. Funny thing about rugby, how the men who played it had wildly different body types—from twenty-stone goliaths with no necks to garden gnomes who could dart across the pitch...to gods like Liam Callaghan.

But no, he wasn't Liam Callaghan, and she had to remember that. Everyone deserved privacy, especially when they were on holiday—a lesson she'd recently learned the hard way.

He glanced at his watch. "Maria told me the reception desk opens at six. That's less than five hours from now. You don't suppose someone might arrive early and discover the lift's broken?"

"Could do. I'd bet kitchen staff get here fairly early. The breakfast they prepare is amazing. Must take hours of prep."

A growl rumbled and they both glanced at his stomach.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"Yeah. I ate on the plane, but that was hours ago."

"No snacks in your Mary Poppins bag?"

His face lit up and he practically ripped the poor backpack apart. He dumped several rolled-up items of clothing onto the floor before pulling out a plastic container with a triumphant "Ah-ha!"

She grimaced when he popped it open. "What is that?"

"A little something my housekeeper made me for the journey. Can't believe I nearly forgot about them."

"You have a housekeeper?"

A flicker of awareness crossed his face. He seemed to realize he'd given a piece of himself away and evaded the question. "Homemade energy bars. They look a little worse for the journey, but they're great. Lots of oats, sultanas, wheat germ, honey...want one?"

She shook her head. "You lost me at wheat germ."

"Suit yourself." He sat on the floor and rested against the wall. Too tall to stretch his legs out, he kept them bent and spread wide with his backpack in between, invading her space even more. She peeked into the container again. What might've once been bars had been knocked around so much that they now resembled pale, chunky dirt. He scooped up a handful and squished it into a patty before dropping it into his mouth. His eyes closed as he chewed, and the back of his head thumped against the wall. Light gray shadows clung to the skin below his eyes. His wavy blond hair—always famously tousled—stood practically on end. He looked exhausted...and far too big for this lift.

He grabbed another fistful of the crumbled oat concoction and shoved it into his mouth, sighing in satisfaction. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until the smell of honey hit her. Swimming always made her ravenous. Once he'd swallowed, he glanced up at her with sleepy eyes. "Why don't you sit down? We might be here a while. I'm not used to having to look up to talk to women, and I'm getting a crick in my neck."

She slid down the wall, sat with her knees to her chest to help her warm up, and pulled the bottom of his T-shirt over her naked legs. Her tummy rumbled, but before she could steal another peek at his snack he flung his arm out to silently offer it to her.

“Thanks.” She tried to be delicate. Her mother had drilled ladylike table manners into her, which made it difficult to find a way to pick up crumbled, sticky oats without feeling like a slob.

Liam shook his head in clear amusement and reached into the plastic container with his whole hand. “Let me help. Open wide.”

She opened her mouth.

“Wider than that, Pinkie.”

Just to mock him, she opened as wide as she could and tilted her head back, shocked when he dropped a shower of the mix into her mouth. Pieces bounced off her chin—hopefully whatever the hell wheat germ was—and rolled onto the canopy she’d made of his T-shirt between her chest and knees. She closed her mouth and chewed, the sweet taste of honey coating her tongue and making her groan.

“Good, huh?”

She nodded, too lost in nirvana to answer with real words. She’d been hungrier than she thought, and the delicious mix hit her sweet spot. Simple but luscious. Satisfying but leaving her hungry for more. More. She needed more. Her head lolled to the side, her mouth opening and receiving another helping. She savored as she chewed, swallowed and let out a throaty sigh, only realizing how embarrassingly sexual the sound was when she opened her eyes and found Liam staring at her with an expression she couldn’t decipher. She self-consciously licked her lips for crumbs, and his fern-green eyes homed in on her mouth with an intensity she’d never been on the receiving end of before. It was the way a starving man would look at a steak, or how she would view a bottle of cabernet at the end of a horrendous work week. Desire and need swirling around each other, rubbing up against each other in a seductive dance. Her temperature spiked as he dragged his gaze away from her mouth and met her eyes with a look bordering between fascination and confusion.

He scooped up another handful of his snack and slowly munched on it. “So, uh...tell me about breakfast.”

Okay, maybe she’d misinterpreted that look, reading into it what she wanted to see. Or maybe he had a food fetish. She tried to clear the lusty thoughts clouding her mind. “It’s a big spread. Lots of tropical fruit, pineapples, mango and even chunks of fresh coconut. But you can also get the local equivalent of a fry-up—beans, scrambled eggs with onions and tomatoes...ooh, and this thing called *cachapa*, which is like a thick pancake made out of corn with melted cheese in it. It’s so delicious.”

Their stomachs growled in tandem, and he offered her the container of crumbs again. No longer caring if she made a mess, she squished some together and popped the lump into her mouth. “Swimming always makes me hungry and sleepy.”

“That why you went in this late at night? Couldn’t sleep?”

“No, not that.” But how could she explain that she’d made herself a list of ten things to accomplish on this trip, things she’d never done before and had decided her life wouldn’t be complete without giving them a go. Skinny-dipping was number one on the list—still unticked.

His voice dropped, his lips curling in a gently teasing smile. “Let me guess. You were sweltering hot and couldn’t take it anymore, so you went down to the beach—fully intending to do the decent thing and just dip your toes in the water. Maybe splash around up to your ankles.

But then something came over you. Some wicked yearning to be a bit naughty. So you stripped down to your bikini and jumped in...only when you came up for air, you realized your top had magically disappeared.”

She bit back a shiver, forcing her brows to rise in mock censure. “That’s some imagination you’ve got there.”

“Not really. It happens in a lot of the movies I watch.”

“Oh, right. You watch *those* kinds of movies.”

He shrugged. “I won’t lie. They’ve been known to catch my attention when I’m staying at a hotel.”

“Stay at a lot of hotels?”

He ignored her. “But that’s not what happened, is it? Otherwise your shirt would’ve been damp but not completely soaked.”

“You’re putting way too much thought into this. Don’t strain yourself.”

“Hmm...I’m guessing you waited till the middle of the night because you thought everyone would be asleep. You decided to go for a midnight dip in the lagoon. Clearly you’ve never seen *Jaws*, or you would’ve realized what a stupid idea that is. But you wanted to go in, all the way in, and you wanted to feel the water all over you.”

Her skin flushed, and suddenly the chill left her body, replaced by a heat that percolated just below her surface. How could he know? Was she that easy to read?

Apparently so, because he watched her closely as he continued. “That’s definitely it. You wanted to feel that warm water all over your naked body. Or maybe you just intended to go in topless this first time, work up the courage to skinny-dip another time. Break yourself in slowly. So you left your top upstairs because you knew you’d chicken out if you brought it with you.”

The way he described the scene was so close to what actually happened that she felt as if he’d been watching her. He obviously hadn’t been. The backpack and tired eyes said he’d just checked in. But his keen attention to detail made her breath catch in her throat.

“Only, your shirt’s wet, so I’m thinking you chickened out anyway. Convinced yourself that swimming in the dark water at midnight was adventurous enough for tonight, that you’ll do the dirty tomorrow night...or maybe the night after. What happened?”

She swallowed, his intense gaze holding her transfixed. “Too much moonlight. Some of the rooms overlook the lagoon. I didn’t want anyone to see me. Not when I’m booked in for another five nights.”

“So you’ll do it on your last night here?”

“Maybe.” That was the idea, anyway. She had to. She never let to-do-list items go unticked.

“You know what you need?”

Yeah, she could think of about a thousand things, and in that moment she was convinced he could provide most of them.

“You need a cove. Somewhere with a bit of privacy, hidden from public view.”

Sounded reasonable. Why hadn’t she thought of that?

“But that’s not really safe, is it? What happens if you get a cramp? Or there’s an undertow? Who’ll watch out for shark fins popping up in the water behind you? Swimming lesson number one—never swim alone.”

She closed her eyes, leaned her head against the wall and let his seductive voice wash over her.

“You need a swim buddy, Pinkie. It’s a good thing I’m here. I make an excellent partner in crime.”