

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Hannah Elizabeth Pugh for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in General Science presented on May 29, 2009. Title: The Gate.

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Eric Hill

This project is a short novelette told from the points of view of several different characters. The story is set in an airport and follows these characters as they wait for their flight to arrive. Each of the characters is observing the others, much like people do everyday without realizing it. Their personalities and histories are built throughout the story through their thought processes and the memories they have that are triggered by the observations they make, thus removing the reader from the airport setting occasionally to scenes that take place throughout the characters' lives. This story is intended to allow any reader to relate with one or more of the characters. Some themes that are presented throughout the story are that of observation and the process of relationships.

Key Words: Fiction, Gate, Airport, Waiting

Corresponding Email Address: [pughha@onid.orst.edu](mailto:pughha@onid.orst.edu)

©Copyright by Hannah Elizabeth Pugh  
May 29, 2009  
All Rights Reserved

The Gate

by

Hannah Elizabeth Pugh

A PROJECT

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in General Science (Honors Scholar)

Presented May 29, 2009  
Commencement June 2010

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in General Science project of Hannah Elizabeth Pugh  
presented on May 29, 2009.

APPROVED:

---

Mentor, representing University Honors College

---

Committee Member, representing Speech Communication

---

Committee Member, representing Public Health

---

Dean, University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

---

Hannah Elizabeth Pugh, Author

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Eric Hill for guiding and motivating me as I wrote this story. Not only did I come away from every meeting with valuable feedback, but also a smile from exceedingly interesting conversations. I would also like to thank my committee, for all of the time they have contributed to this project and for their willingness to be a part of its completion. I am also very thankful to all of my family and friends. To those of you who read my thesis throughout the writing process and gave me valuable feedback and to those of you who encouraged me along the way and expressed your desires to read it upon completion. Thank you. And finally, I would like to thank Jesus Christ. Without Him, I would be nothing. Anything accomplished through me is because He has blessed me and enabled me.

**Table of Contents**

	<u>Page</u>
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	13
Chapter 4.....	19
Chapter 5.....	27
Chapter 6.....	34
Chapter 7.....	42
Chapter 8.....	49

# The Gate

## Chapter 1

“...and thank you for flying with us today.” Riley could feel the muscles in his feet start to loosen. Landings were always the worst; knowing that the plane was about to hit the ground and decelerate hundreds of miles an hour in less than a minute never really gave him a good feeling. He couldn’t figure out if he disliked the popping in his ears more or the slow crawl of anticipation from right below his navel all the way up to the muscles in his jaw several seconds before the landing gear touched down.

*Ding.* The “fasten seatbelt” sign was finally off. Riley discounted the chorus of clicking as he quickly jostled his belt from his waist and stood among the group of people he had just spent several hours with. *Why did I stand up? I always stand up!* He looked around frustrated with his uncanny knack to follow group mentality. He glanced sideways and noticed that the older gentleman who had been quietly drooling as he slept was now much closer than during the flight. Instead of simply being in the seat across the aisle, sometimes separated by the pressurized air and others by a passing attendant, he was now uncomfortably close to his armpit. Perfect height, really. Sighing, Riley eased back into his seat and waited for his turn to slowly begin the shuffle toward the front of the plane.

Seven minutes later, or what felt to Riley like a half hour later, he stepped into the airport terminal buzzing with people. He quickly glanced around for the nearest monitors displaying arrivals and departures while he dug into his pocket to find his next boarding

pass. The blinking panel of four screens sat about twenty strides to his right and he glanced down to the wrinkled paper in his hand as he headed to join the family that had sat behind him throughout his first flight. He thought it strange to finally be able to put a face to the whining adolescent boy that hadn't quite had his voice deepen yet. The entire flight this boy had been arguing with his much younger brother, who was now sleeping in his mother's arms. Occasionally Riley had thought about turning around and asking the parents to keep their kids under control, but never got frustrated enough to take action. Seeing the family now, he was glad he hadn't turned to them during the flight. The mother looked haggard holding the younger one, with her hair up in a lop-sided ponytail and the father looked as if he were going to explode with the slightest antagonism from the older son. Now he almost empathized with the boy that looked at him as he was being tugged away as the family turned to wander towards their next gate. Riley hoped it was a different gate than his own. He looked to the screen and scanned for his flight number.

"D-33," he muttered under his breath. He turned from the monitors and saw the signs indicating that his gate was in the opposite direction of the family. He sighed as he started the trek to his new home for the next four hours and thirty-six minutes. "D-33."



"Vera, how long do we have until the plane leaves? I need to use the restroom."

She lifted her eyes from her well-worn southern romance novel and let them rest on her husband's soft brown eyes. "We still have about four and a half hours, Gilbert. I told you that extra coffee this morning would be too much for you." She let her mauve lips curve slightly to form a flirty grin and the old man knew she was right. He returned



the smile. Reading his mind, she quickly added, “The men’s room is right over there.” She pointed to an opening with the well-recognized figure of a man on the wall across from their gate. His gaze followed her small finger with the pink acrylic nail and he nodded to her when he saw the door.

Her hand began to lower and Gilbert gently grabbed it with his. Her fingers were clammy and her sun-spotted skin was loose in his grip, but he gently rubbed her palm with his rough, aged fingers. He shifted his gaze from her deep green eyes crowned with crow’s feet down to the hand he now held. A small L-shaped scar caught his attention and he let his mind take him back to that night.

They had taken the kids out to cut down a Christmas tree for the first time. Usually Gilbert would go out and find one by himself, but this year, Shawn and Neil had insisted that they go out as a family. Vera thought it was a great idea, even with the baby, Debbie. So, they bundled up and went out to the woods and started the search for “the perfect tree.” The boys took off ahead with the dog, either Buster or Copper; he couldn’t remember which one they had at that point. After a couple hours of searching and a short snowball fight between the boys and Dad, they had finally found their tree. When they drug it back to the house, somehow the tree startled the neighbor’s cat, which then thought it best to attack Buster. Or was it Copper? It didn’t matter; Vera had to pull the cat away from the whimpering pup with one hand while she held the baby in the other.

“Don’t get lost, okay?”

Her voice pulled him back to the airport and he remembered his need for relief. “I won’t,” he said with a wink as he let her hand wander back to find its twin. He stood from his frayed leather seat and walked to the restroom.

She watched as he disappeared into the tiled room and then looked down at her hands in her lap. She wasn’t joking about Gilbert not getting lost once he was done in the restroom. To make sure he found her, she knew she would have to watch for him to emerge again. “Thank goodness the bathroom is nearby,” she muttered to herself as she gently dog-eared a page in her book and let it shut.



Miriam shifted in her seat. The numbers on her cell phone screen stared up at her. *10:41. Not even close to lunch yet. Sigh.* She tried focusing on her music, but it just wasn’t distracting her from the thoughts ricocheting around the recesses of her mind. *Adult life is just too complicated and scary. Why can’t I just go back to like, second grade?* She clicked off her music and placed the music player back in her bright yellow purse. It was her favorite. Her mom had gotten it for her for her birthday. It was a big, leather bag that she was able to put everything she needed in. And the canary yellow reminded her of happiness. Maybe she loved it so much simply because it reflected her personality: loud, outgoing, and disorganized. Or maybe because the cute boy at the coffee shop told her he liked it the first day she used it. After riffling around the bag a bit to find something else to distract her, she came up empty-handed and slouched back in her seat.

*Only 10:43? Seriously? Ugh.* She put the phone in her pocket and let her eyes drift shut as she tried to keep her thoughts off of the stresses that accompanied

graduation. *Two months until real life. Should be plenty of time to figure things out. Right?* She knew that was unrealistic but she definitely didn't want to think about it while she was sitting here in the airport. In between thoughts of going home and finding a job, she would occasionally open her eyes slightly to make sure her surroundings hadn't changed much. More specifically, she was checking to make sure she was safe and no strange men were making her uncomfortable. She really didn't even think about it as she did it. It was more of a habit that she developed from going to college. You can never be too careful if you're a young woman, especially if you're alone. At this particular gate there weren't too many people yet. The flight wasn't going to be leaving for several more hours. But she did notice an older gentleman who seemed somewhat troubling. His clothing was wrinkled and he looked as if he hadn't slept for a while. There was graying stubble on his face and his receding hair looked matted and unwashed. Occasionally when she would look up, it almost seemed like he was gazing at her, but when she would shift, he wouldn't seem to notice. Most of the time, his gaze was on the ground about twenty feet in front of him.

Gradually, she began to forget to check her surroundings and her thoughts became more blurred. Her grip on the purse in her lap slowly loosened as did the muscles in her neck allowing her head to be fully supported by the back of her seat, which only came up to her shoulder blades when she was sitting fully upright. She was vaguely aware of how awkward she must have appeared to the other people at the gate in her extremely slouched position, but she didn't care about it as much as she would have if, say, she had caffeine earlier in the day. Her breathing started to slow and come in short, barely audible breaths as she drifted off in slumber.



They told him this sort of thing never happens. *Then why is it happening to me?*

Dale blinked a couple of times to clear his vision. He had been sitting in this airport for how many days now? Three? Yes, it must have been three days because he spent the previous two nights here. This was the final leg of his flight home and he was nearly tempted to just start walking. The most frustrating part of the situation was that he felt like he couldn't leave. Stuck in a prison of muted walls and a never-ending carpet of the same repeated, colorful pattern of shapes. But at least there were big windows. Not that there was much of a view, but it was interesting to watch the airplanes come and go. He only wished he could be on one of them.

Every time he thought he might have time to step out of his prison, one of the staff would tell him of a flight that was leaving soon that he could be on. And every time, this flight would be taking off just soon enough that he wouldn't have time to leave and come back through security again. And every time, for some reason or another, he wouldn't be allowed on the flight. Usually because they were full and everyone actually showed up. Despite how unusual it was for this to occur, it just kept happening, and the airport staff simply apologized and tried to hide their puzzlement over the above average attendance of their customers. Over the past couple days he had accumulated a significant number of air miles, but all he really wanted was to get home to his wife.

## Chapter 2

Some movement at the edge of the seating caught his attention and Dale looked up. Whenever a new flight would come in, he would try to guess where they had come from based on several characteristics, like clothing, whether the people looked tan, how relieved they looked to finally be off of their plane, etc. This was one of the many “games” he had developed over the past few days to keep him from going completely insane. This particular flight was fairly easy to identify. The “UCLA” sweatshirts worn by a young couple and an older fan behind them were somewhat of a dead giveaway. He preferred a bit more of a challenge.

Slightly disappointed, he sat back in his chair and let his hand come up to his chin. He groaned when he felt his unshaven face. Jackie would always tell him before he left on a trip to put the “essentials” in his carryon. He could almost hear her telling him now. He imagined her with her fiery red hair resting lightly on her shoulders and her sharp eyes flashing as she wagged her finger at him to scold him for not listening to her. Then she would take a deep breath, look into his eyes, and shake her head right before she gave him one of those hugs that would always make him lose his train of thought. He wished he actually could hear her, but he also forgot his phone charger. The occasional brief call from a phone booth was all he had. And he was running low on change.

As he was shifting to retrieve the change from his pocket to see how much he had, something red caught his eye. Though, it wasn't so much the color that caused him to look up as it was the sudden stop that it made. The young man wearing the red t-shirt with blue jeans had stopped to look at the gate sign. *Is that...? No, it can't be...* Dale

watched as the twenty-something compared the number on the sign to the one on his boarding pass. Satisfied that he was at the correct gate, he glanced around to find a suitable seat. The one he chose was perpendicular to his own, nearer to the windows but not facing them.

Dale watched as the kid, he really was just a kid, sat down and pulled on the gray, zippered hoodie that he had earlier held in his hand. As the kid settled into his seat, Dale studied him. Studied his posture, his build, but what got to him the most was his hair. It was one of those popular shaggy cuts. And instead of brushing his hair off of his forehead with his hand, he would shake his head to one side. The left side. After realizing that he had been watching him for some time, Dale quickly shifted his gaze back to the ground in front of himself. But he just couldn't stop thinking about how the kid shook his head.



Vera quietly let her fingers roll one of the toggles on her purse while she continued to eye the bathroom. She sighed and thought that maybe she really should have asked the young man that had sat nearby her to go check on Gilbert. He seemed like a nice boy. He smiled at her as he sat down, which seemed unusual considering most kids his age were usually much too caught up in the world around them to smile at a stranger. He was also clean-shaven and his pants weren't falling off. But she knew he would have helped her because of his eyes. He had bright, helpful eyes.

Just as she was about to turn to the boy, Gilbert emerged from the bathroom and began scanning the area. Vera smiled with relief as she raised her hand up to wave him over. When he spotted her, he let his lips form the crooked grin that still made her catch

her breath. It was that silly, stupid grin that made her notice him the first time she met him back when she was seventeen. He was twenty and had just moved to her hometown to work for the local newspaper. His very first assignment was to interview her father and write a story about one of his recent police escapades. He had come down to the police station to interview him and one of her father's coworkers and she had come to deliver the lunch that her father forgot that day. She came into the station right as Gilbert had finished up the interviews and was thanking the men for their time. When he had turned to face her, he flashed her that grin and she had been lost in it ever since. They were married a little more than a year later and she didn't regret a minute of it. They of course had their fights here and there, but they knew that neither would survive without the other.

When Gilbert reached his seat he leaned over Vera and kissed her lightly on the forehead. She smiled up at him and asked, "Did you wash your hands?" as he grabbed hers in his.

Chuckling, he replied, "Yes, of course I did." She gave his hand a quick squeeze before letting it go and she sighed once more as she went back to reading her book. But it was hard for her to concentrate on the words as she let her real-life love story play through her mind.



Despite the fact that Riley was going to be sitting in this airport for a while and had no idea what he was going to do when he got home, he was glad that he had finally built up the courage to quit his job. The entire time he was in college his goal was to get a job where he could make a difference and avoid cubicles at all cost. And yet, that's

exactly where he ended up. In a cubicle, filling out paperwork, hardly even impacting the company's wallet with his paycheck let alone making a difference. He knew he hated it from the first hour he was there. "Just give it a chance," his mom told him, "You might like it if you try." *Yeah right.* Now he was out and ready to find something he could really love.

He glanced around the gate at the other people waiting and he wondered if they loved their jobs. One man to his left almost looked as if he didn't have a job, with his wrinkled clothes and bristly chin. *But he's flying somewhere, so how else would he have gotten the money for a ticket?* Riley couldn't imagine what kind of job he might have so he shifted his eyes to the older couple sitting just a few seats directly to his right. The man had just come out the restroom and walked with a confidence that Riley knew he must have been very good at his job. *Probably retired by now. Maybe they're vacationing.* Riley tried to imagine what the couple might have looked like twenty years ago. He guessed that the man had probably had a job that was really people-oriented. Like the manager of a restaurant. He imagined him dressed in a nice suit, walking around a small Italian restaurant, nodding his head at the men and giving a playful grin to the women. If his wife had a job, she definitely would have been a teacher. Probably everyone's favorite teacher. *How many lives have they affected?*

Riley was actually considering becoming a teacher. He really didn't know what he wanted except he knew that his reasons for wanting a job were different than most other people's. He wanted to change lives. Help people. Person by person change the world. He rolled his eyes. *How is that even possible?* He could try to pursue something that might have a little effect on the lives of others, but would he feel like he was



contributing to the “greater good?” Would it really make him feel good about his life and make him happy? He sighed and flipped his hair out of his eyes.

His parents definitely didn’t understand either. They just wanted him to live the American dream, with a bigger house than they had and more money than they had. *They just don’t get it. I want to do something bigger than that. But what?* He could only imagine what they would say when they found out that he quit his job.

“You what?! And what about your college loans? They’re not just going to pay themselves off, now are they? You know we didn’t send you to college just for you to come back here and make *zero* dollars an hour twiddling your thumbs in our house.” His dad was pretty good at making him feel miserable about his decisions.

“Now Riley, you know your father’s right. That job was a good job. It paid pretty well and there was room for you to move up in the company. Are you sure you can’t call them and get it back?”

“Mom, I can’t just call them and get my job back. Besides, I hated it. Don’t you want me to be happy?” Riley didn’t even have to imagine their answers to that question. Teaching or doing volunteer work was not their idea of “happiness.”

He let his eyes glide over a handful of other people waiting for their flights, but his eyes came to a sudden stop when they reached the young woman sitting perpendicular to him on his right. She was probably close to his age and was sleeping in what looked to

be the most uncomfortable position possible. An ache rose from his stomach and welled up in his chest and throat as his eyes were frozen on her sleeping figure. His chest began tightening more and he realized that he had been holding his breath and he quickly exhaled. All he wanted to do at that moment was to run over to her and tuck his sweatshirt under her head for a pillow. Or maybe even his arm. The thought of her leaning on his arm as she slept made his heart thump even harder in his chest, pushing the ache further into his throat.

He quickly tore his eyes from her and forced them to focus on his shoes. *Did anyone see me looking at her?* The thought instantly struck him as irrational. He didn't know any of these people and would probably never see any of them again. But despite knowing this, he continued to try to train his eyes on his shoes, not letting them wander anywhere close to his right side.

### Chapter 3

*Was that my name?* Miriam lightly rubbed her eyes being careful not to smear her makeup. She had been sleeping, but hearing her name pulled her back to the reality of her wait.

“Mary Ann Jackson, please come to the service desk, your party is waiting, Mary Ann Jackson.” The woman on the intercom sounded more irritated with having to repeat the call a second time. She also managed to enunciate her words much more clearly.

*Ugh. I woke up for that?* She shifted in her seat and stretched her arms in front of her. How long had she been asleep? It felt like a long time, at least to her neck, which she really wished would pop. She tried leaning her head to either side, but her neck wouldn’t crack. *Sigh.* She started to rummage through her bag to find a piece of gum when her phone buzzed. It was a text message from her mom.

“Hey hon, how’s the layover?” She had taught her mom how to text message before she started college and occasionally regretted it. Now wasn’t one of those times.

She quickly typed back, “Boring. But I’m excited to finish up spring break at home :)” Using smiley faces in her text messages were one of her favorite ways to end a text. *Much more exciting than a period.*

She waited for her mom’s response, half expecting to just get a smiley face in return. As she was waiting, she noticed the time beaming up at her. *11:19. I actually slept for quite awhile.* Any nap lasting more than twenty minutes in an airport was pretty good for her.

The phone buzzed again. “I’m excited for you to get home too :) Are there any cute boys at the airport?” Miriam rolled her eyes. She was pretty sure that if she didn’t find a boyfriend, her mom would do it for her. She wanted to be a grandma and wasn’t going to let Miriam forget it. With graduation around the corner, her mom expected a husband and family to be around the next one.

She quickly scanned the waiting area to give her mom an honest answer. The same people as when she had fallen asleep with a couple additions. Including a guy who looked to be about her age and definitely qualified as an answer to her mom’s text. She studied him briefly before remembering the text. *Way cute. Love the hair.* He looked somewhat tense and she wondered what was on his mind. Her phone buzzed again and she knew her mom thought she hadn’t received the text. It was a repeat of the last one she sent.

“Yeah, and I think he’s by himself :)” She knew that the next text she would receive would encourage her to go talk to him. She glanced up at the boy one more time and eagerly awaited the next spurt of the conversation.



Dale took a deep breath and swallowed hard. He hadn’t had this much time on his hands to just remember for a long time. Eight years, actually. So far, it was mostly good memories running through his mind. Just so long as the bad ones didn’t surface he would be fine. *Come on plane, I can’t be here much longer.* And he knew he couldn’t. He knew that the longer he waited, the harder it would be to push away the memory of The Trip. The Trip that changed his life. The Trip that made him shake so badly in the

middle of the night that his wife would have to wake him up. The Trip that bit into his soul and wouldn't let go.

He jolted from his seat as the memories started to scratch at his mind's eye. *Coffee. I just need coffee.* He rubbed his temple with his right hand as he snatched up his small carryon. The carryon seemed insignificant now. Like a waste of time. He didn't really need the things in it. All it contained was a book, a lightweight jacket, and some of the brochures he had been given at the business meetings he attended. He had the book finished by the end of the first day in the airport and he couldn't even remember how many times he had read each of the brochures. He wanted to just leave it at his seat, but he'd already gotten in trouble for doing that once before. The short female police officer's shrill voice rang through his mind, "You can't leave bags unattended in an airport. People these days are all spooked about terrorists as it is and we don't need you addin' to the problem."

He sighed as he started the familiar walk to the coffee shop. He tried to think about how funny it would be to leave his bag unattended again. Maybe the same officer would lecture him again about how "spooked" the other people in the airport were. Or maybe he would just throw his bag into a crowd and start running as hard as could in the opposite direction. He chuckled as he tried to imagine what kind of lecture he would get for doing that.



"Can you believe we're going to be grandparents again? I just didn't think Neil would ever have any kids. He and Allie never really seemed interested in having any

children but now all of the sudden they are? I still can't help but think that Olivia might have been an accident but I'm so excited to meet her..."

Gilbert smiled and listened quietly as Vera rambled on. He loved to just watch her whenever she talked about their kids or grandkids. Her eyes would sparkle so brightly that he almost thought they could light up an entire stadium. There weren't very many topics that could make her chatter so much, but when she talked about her kids and grandkids, her love for them simply flowed from her mouth. The first time it happened, about a week after Shawn was born, it caught him off guard. But he soon learned to savor her rambling. And after each child and grandchild her words seemed to contain more and more love, so much so that it seemed to burst forth straight from her heart.

*I'm so lucky.* The thought made his smile grow a bit wider and Vera noticed. She responded by slowing a bit, returning the smile, and placing her hand on his as she jumped back into her love rant. He gently began rubbing her nimble fingers with his thumb. *I just want everyday to be like this.*

Vera's voice slowed and her grip on his hand tightened. "Gilbert, do you think Olivia is going to be okay? I just wish Neil would have told us more..." her voice trailed off and she shifted her eyes away from his, afraid of what his answer might be.

"Hey," he grabbed her other hand and lightly pulled to get her gaze back, "I'm sure she's going to be fine. Remember when Shawn got sick a few weeks after he was born? He was fine; we were just being worried first-time parents. I would be more concerned if Neil wasn't worried at all. He's a parent now, that's his job."

In reality, Gilbert wasn't even convinced by his answer. Neil had always been the most independent of their kids. And now he wanted the entire family, including his

siblings and their families, to come up to “support” him and Allie? All he had told them on the phone was that Olivia was sick and he “needed” his family to be with him. The Neil that Gilbert knew would never call on his entire family to halt all of their plans to come support him. Both Gilbert and Vera knew that this couldn’t be good news.

“I’m just so worried, Gilbert. Every time I think about it, there are just so many scenarios that keep playing through my mind. What if she has some life-threatening illness? Or what if when we get there she’s already...” her voice trailed off again as she realized that she didn’t even want to verbalize the possibility.

“We can’t think like that. We don’t know what’s going on and we don’t know how serious it is. I know you’re worried, just like me, but we can’t solve anything by worrying. All we can do is wait and pray.” He still hadn’t convinced himself. She sat back in her seat and sighed and Gilbert knew that he still hadn’t convinced her either. He started rubbing her fingers again with that old, familiar motion.



After a few minutes of staring at his shoes, Riley had managed to occasionally sneak a few glances at the girl who sat to his right. He tried to be as discrete as possible by slowly scanning the entire area, usually starting with his left side and moving to his right, while letting his eyes hover on her as he lowered his head back to the view of his sneakers. He used this pattern several times, and even managed to change it a few times by starting at his right, going to the left, and then back to his right again. The tactic worked pretty well until she woke up. That was when he went straight back to the sneakers. *Why do I get so nervous around girls? And it’s not even like I’ll ever see her again after this flight!*

The view of his sneakers seemed to be mocking his inability to look at the girl so he sat back in his seat and he focused his sight on a smudge on the wall that was about two feet away from the top of one of the bathroom doorways. *Maybe I should just go talk to her.* The thought made his muscles tense and he inhaled deeply. *No way! What would I even say to her?* The scenarios of everything he might say to her started running rampant through his mind. He shut his eyes to try to clear his mind and think about something else, but the picture of the sleeping girl just kept resurfacing to the forefront of his memory.



## Chapter 4

*An Americano or I could try something new...* Dale always got an Americano because he knew that he liked it and it didn't taste like what he called "chick drinks." Jackie would always get a "16oz. half shot caramel macchiato made with skim please." A chick drink. She even convinced him to try a sip of it once and he felt like he was drinking warm froth.

"I'll have a tall white mocha, thank you." The roughly 30-year-old woman two people ahead of him in line just ordered a chick drink. He sighed as he shifted his eyes back to the menu board over the register. When it was finally his turn, he gave up and ordered his usual, a grande Americano.

"That'll be \$3.15." The kid working behind the counter looked quite smug as Dale reached for his wallet.

"Can I have the change in quarters? I need to make a call." Dale pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to the kid who didn't look too thrilled about having to part with seven of the quarters in his till and possibly have to break open a new roll.

A fake smile plastered his face as he handed the \$1.85 in coins to Dale, "Have a good day, Sir." Dale nodded in response and went to the other end of the counter to wait for his drink along with the handful of other customers who were waiting. The chick drink was just picked up by the woman who was in front of him, so he figured that he wouldn't have to wait too long.

The weight of the change in his pocket would usually frustrate him, but right now he welcomed it. It meant a break. Some relief from the world he was forced to be in. A

connection to the one he wanted to be in. He smiled as he thought about hearing Jackie's voice. Hearing her smile through the phone.

"Grande Americano?" The coffee barista set his drink down on the counter and went back to the espresso machine. The change in his pocket jingled as he grabbed his coffee and started walking back to the gate. His throat welcomed the bitter taste of the hot liquid as he took a giant swig and smiled.



Kristy blew the long wispy bangs out of her face as she readjusted her grip on the small, sticky hands in each of her own. "C'mon, we're almost to our gate." She tugged gently on the hands and looked behind her to see her husband, Terrance, following closely with a tight grip on the little pink jacket he held in one hand and the small duffel bag he held in the other. She felt the purse strap on her shoulder shift and tried to shrug it back into a secure place. Instead it was left dangling on her elbow, just another weight she had to juggle against gravity.

"Here's some seats." Terrance took the lead and helped usher the kids to a handful of empty seats that weren't too nearby any of the other passengers waiting for the plane. After helping Paige climb into a seat, he plopped into the seat next to hers and dropped the bag and jacket into the seat on his other side. Ethan sat down next to Paige and Kristy next to him. They had learned fairly quickly that it was always better to put the kids in the middle with a parent on either side. Once they had lost Paige at the zoo while Ethan was watching the monkeys and that rule became very clear in both of their minds. They would rather deal with the "he's touching me" complaints over the screaming silence of a missing child any day.

“I’m hungry. When’re we gonna eat?” Ethan was definitely a growing boy. Terrance looked down at his watch. 11:35. They had gotten through security a bit more smoothly than both of them had expected.

“We’re gonna sit and wait a little while before we eat, okay?” Kristy was always really patient with the kids. Ethan rolled his eyes and slouched back in his seat. A whole lot of attitude for a nine-year-old. Terrance took a deep breath and fought to restrain himself from grabbing the boy’s arm and giving him a stern warning. He was thankful he was sitting next to Paige, who was quietly, for now, playing with the doll she had been dragging through the airport. A bit more carelessly than her mother had been dragging the kids, but dragging nonetheless. Her face was still a little red from the screaming she had done when the doll was separated from her at security.

For now, no one was screaming and there was no fighting. Terrance sat back in his seat and sighed. He knew he didn’t have very much time to savor the moment. *It’s gonna be a long day.*



Riley groaned. He had hoped that the couple with the two kids would pass by his gate, but they planted themselves firmly in the same seating area. They had actually taken over the area that the man in the wrinkled clothes had earlier been sitting. It had the most open seats, mostly because no one had wanted to sit next to him, probably suspecting foul body odor or just wanting to avoid the overall suspicious character. So that placed Riley as one of the closest to the new family. So far, the children seemed to be relatively well behaved. Maybe this wouldn’t be a repeat of his first flight...

After deciding that this family seemed less obnoxious than the first one he encountered that day and that his chances of sitting near them on the plane were low, his mind wandered quickly back to the girl. The approach was the most important part.

“Hey, where are you headed?” Ugh, no way! Duh, she’s obviously going to the same place I am. “What’s your final destination?” NO. Bad idea. She’ll think I’m some sort of sci-fi nerd or something. Maybe I could ask about her family...but then I’m the creepy airport stalker. And who knows, maybe she doesn’t have family. She probably has a boyfriend or fiancé or something too. She was texting quite a bit earlier, it was probably him. Dang. I’m too late. My dream girl is taken. But I’ll never know if I don’t talk to her...

The thoughts rammed around in his mind and he could almost feel them thumping on the backs of his eyeballs. Especially when he snuck glances at her. She wasn’t texting anymore, but she definitely didn’t seem as interested in him as he was in her.

Maybe I can try a corny pick-up line on her. “Hey, could you hold onto this for me while I take a walk?” and offer her my hand. Oh yeah, and then what, walk around the *airport* with her? Super romantic—not! Besides, she’s better than dumb pick-up lines. Not one of those airheads with bubblegum for brains.

Some movement caught his eye. The man in the wrinkled clothes was back. Riley let the thoughts of approaching the girl subside briefly as he watched to see where

the man would sit. The man noticed the family in his old spot right away and he started scanning the place for a new one. Riley thought he saw his gaze get caught momentarily on his girl and then settle on a seat only a few away from hers. It was in the same row as his own and just past the older couple, but nearer to the girl sitting at a right angle in the next row. Riley felt his cheeks burn red as he clenched his jaw and took a deep breath. He quietly aimed his eyes back at his shoes, jaw still taut as the man settled into his new spot.



“Oh, Gilbert, look at those children! Do you remember when ours were that young?” Vera was beaming as she carefully watched the children settle into their seats and start playing with the toys they had brought along. The girl was playing with a small dolly that looked to have a stuffed body with a plastic head that was proportionally too large. The girl had just taken a little pink dress off of it and was currently struggling to redress the doll in a blue one. The slightly older boy had sat in his seat for just a minute or two before he seemed to get restless. A few tugs on his mother’s sleeve and he was happily playing with two Hot Wheels cars on the carpet, using the brightly colored shapes as makeshift roadways.

Vera looked up at Gilbert’s face and he was also watching the children play. “I miss those days. It didn’t matter what was going on, the kids were just so content with their little toys and games.” Vera could tell that Neil and his family were still in the back of his mind. The man was a solid rock until it came to his children and grandchildren. He was so strong whenever there was trouble, but when they were alone, she knew the

real Gilbert. They both gazed at the children as she settled her head into its familiar spot on his shoulder and remembered the day of Shawn's accident.

Gilbert had taken the boys out to help him chop some wood. Shawn was only twelve at the time and Neil was nine. She had started to get a little worried when it started to get dark outside, but that was when she got the call. Gilbert had called her from the hospital. His voice was firm and steady, but she could hear his fear as he briefly told her what had happened. Her chest tightened at what he said. Shawn had fallen through the ice and would probably be in the hospital for at least a few days. Gilbert and Neil were fine. He would tell her more when he got home.

The two hours and twenty-five minutes she waited for them to get home was the longest of her life. She would have gone to the hospital to be with them, but they had taken the only vehicle they owned and she had already put Debbie to bed and couldn't leave her alone. Instead she paced. Bit her fingernails. Prayed. Just when she began to consider attempting to sleep, the door opened and Gilbert walked in with sleeping Neil in his arms. No Shawn. She could feel the pressure in her chest grab hold of her even tighter.

After putting Neil to bed, Gilbert came into the living room and collapsed into a sobbing mess on the couch next to Vera. Seeing her husband cry punctured the pressure that had grabbed her and she began to cry. They simply held each other and cried like that for a long time. Their awareness of time dissipated and

she held him and knew she couldn't let go. Finally, they both seemed to lose the energy it took to cry and she asked him what had happened.

He slowly recounted the painful memories of the day. After showing the boys how to chop the wood properly, he let them play while he went to work finishing the job. After some time, he heard crying and ran over to where the boys were playing in the melting snow. Neil was on the ground, crying, and Gilbert knew that it was Shawn's doing. He yelled for Shawn, but he simply figured that he was hiding behind a nearby tree to avoid the impending spanking. He wiped the tears and started to head back to his axe.

He tried to describe the feeling he had gotten in his gut to Vera, but slow, quiet tears replaced his voice. She kissed one of the tears on his cheek and he seemed to gather the strength he needed to continue the story. He had ignored the feeling. Went back to chopping but couldn't help but stop every few swings to see if Shawn had returned from his hiding place.

The feeling kept getting stronger so he finally went back to where the boys had been playing and he started tracing their footprints. One set led away. The feeling slammed straight up from his stomach and hit his heart like a battering ram when he realized where they led. He yelled for Neil to wait in the truck as he ran as fast as he could to the frozen pond.

The pond wasn't very deep, but it was deep enough. And Gilbert knew it would be bad news to get stuck under the ice. As he approached the pond, yelling Shawn's name, he could see the break only about ten feet from the edge. His yelling became more frantic. He stopped at the edge and scanned for any signs of

his boy and saw a small form through the ice not too far from the hole. He raced into the waist high water, breaking the melting ice as he went. He punched through the ice near the form and lifted his son from the water. He began stripping the boy of his clothes as he rushed back to the truck. Luckily the hospital was only a seven-minute drive from the area he cut wood. He got there in less than three.

Shawn was released from the hospital two days later with a fractured rib and a cold. Doctor's orders had been to make him rest and drink plenty of hot liquids.

Vera sighed as she remembered just how broken her husband became when he was out of the view of others and in the privacy of home. He was a father scared for his son's life. Taking comfort in his wife. Now they were both unsure about Olivia's condition, but in the airport, he had to remain strong. Vera settled in closer to him. *But I know his heart.*



## Chapter 5

Her mood instantly changed when the children arrived at the gate. For some reason, kids could always elevate Miriam's mood, even if she was already soaring. And here at the airport, she needed something to lift her spirits. These kids seemed to be very well behaved, much the opposite of some of the kids she used to babysit. Logan and Mason. The "twin hellions," as her mom and several of their ex-babysitters used to call them. They were her favorites. She had been babysitting them throughout her high school years and occasionally when she was on break from college—until they were old enough to stay home by themselves. And every time she babysat they ran her ragged. She would come home and collapse in bed. But every time she babysat, they would give her the biggest hugs and tell her not to leave. A smile crept onto her face as she remembered one night when she brought the boys a present.

The boys loved their Legos. They were constantly building things and then, of course, destroying them. She was pretty sure they liked the second part more than the first. Which was why she was so excited to find a set of train Legos on sale. The boys would be absolutely *thrilled*. She was so excited to give it to them that she wanted to show up to babysit them an hour early. It was all she could do to keep from getting in her little beater car and driving over there. Seeing their faces was definitely worth the wait. The entire rest of the night they busied themselves with building trains and then crashing them, both on and off of the little tracks that came with the set. Occasionally she would even lift one of

the boys up into the air and he would drop the train into one of their many buildings, pretending to be a tornado. It took her at least an hour to clean up the Lego destruction after she put them to bed.

The little girl looked up from her dolly and made eye contact with her. The smile on Miriam's face grew and she winked and waved at the girl. She wanted to burst out laughing at the girl's response: mouth open, then a cute smile, wave back, and then timidly, but quickly turning her attention back to the doll. She watched for a minute or so as the girl delicately held the doll and played with its clothes. Occasionally the girl would look up to see if she was still watching. She would smile and the girl would quickly bury her face back in the dolly's dress. She wasn't too sure about the pediatric nursing job offer she was getting back from checking out, but with every kids' smile, her heart confirmed it. Being so far from home would be hard, but working a nursing job without the children would be even harder for her.

A rumble in her abdomen caught her attention. *12:02. Lunch time!* She put her phone back into her pocket and glanced around the gate. The older man with the wrinkled clothes had sat down nearby her earlier and she had been subconsciously keeping track of him the whole time. It would be very easy for her to sit further from the man and closer to the kids after getting her lunch. She smiled as she grabbed her purse and rose from her seat to find a decent airport eatery.



Dale sat in his new seat, slouched with one hand in his pocket, the other holding his now half-empty, lukewarm drink. He let the coins slip through his fingers and then he

would pick them up from the bottom of his linty pocket and do it again. Each time making a jingling sound. He didn't think it was too loud, but the young woman sitting near him must have since she glanced at him right before she got up to leave. He didn't care. Soon Jackie would be on her lunch break. The coins in his pocket would be gone and he could already hear the warmth of her voice, a salve to his homesick soul. 12:30 just couldn't come soon enough. He already had a plan. Jackie would get home for her hour break about five or six minutes after it started. He would walk over to the payphones at 12:37 just in case she hit traffic. A lump rose in his throat and his pulse quickened at the thought of the intimate bond he shared with the one woman who knew him inside and out. She could always comfort him. Ease his mind and heart.

A squeal brought his mind back to his wait. The little girl had overreacted just a bit when she dropped her dolly on the ground and her brother tried to run it over with one of his toy cars. Their mother scolded the boy and told him to be nice. Dale smiled as he watched the girl climb down from her seat to play with her brother, who was reluctant at first, but with a stern look from Mom, handed a car to his sister and they started to pretend to race. He sighed and sat back in his seat. He used to "race" with his son all the time.

For Brad's birthday he and Jackie had gotten him a plastic bike that was low to the ground and easy to ride for a kid who wasn't big enough to learn how to ride a "big kid's bike" yet. But he loved his bike. The way his eyes lit up when Dale guided him out to the driveway gleamed as brightly in his memory as they did that day. The picture of Brad with his rusty brown hair and huge smile as

he zipped back and forth on that bike was imprinted in his mind. Brad definitely had his smile. His mom's fiery spirit. And his hair was a weird combination of both of theirs; the brown from Dale, but the rusty tinge that became a lot brighter during the summer months came without a doubt from his mom. Beautiful kid. With the most amazing personality. He cared for everyone he met. And he made a competition out of just about everything. Even if he was on his brand new bike, racing his dad on foot. It was always a close race, but Dale made sure the kid would win. Every time. And every time their races would end in a wrestling match.

But then The Trip...

Dale pulled himself back from the memories and took a big mouthful of his cold coffee. He rubbed his eyes with his other hand and noticed the time. Only another 31 minutes before he would get up to call Jackie.



Kristy brushed her bangs out of her face again and rubbed her temples lightly. No headache yet, but she could tell that it was coming. Maybe minutes or maybe hours, but either way, it would come. With the way things were just piling up, she had been getting headaches much more frequently. And with the itinerary of the day, she guessed it would come sooner rather than later. The biggest sources of her headaches were the bickering of the kids, the problems that she and Terrance had been having, and her parents. And today was the day that all three would collide. There was also the added stress of

bringing her kids to an airport where their behavior would be a constant reminder of what the people around her must have thought about her parenting skills. In her mind, there was a direct correlation between the volume of the children and the inability of a woman to be a good and capable mother. The squeal earlier hadn't been a good sign of what she was to expect for the coming hours. Especially since the kids wouldn't be getting their naps today.

"Mommy, I'm hungry." Paige had come over to her and leaned on her lap, gazing up into her eyes as if she were dying from the hunger pangs.

"Me too. Can we eat yet? I'm so hungry I could eat a whole *elephant*!" Exaggeration was probably one of Ethan's favorite ways to express his needs. Including his "need" to be disruptive at school. He was constantly making trouble for his teacher and saying that he "had to" because if he didn't, nobody at school would ever like him or because the teacher was never nice to him. She didn't buy any of it, especially after her meetings with his teacher.

She looked down at her watch and decided that maybe eating something would help keep the headache at bay for a little longer. "Okay, what do you guys want?"

"Nothing too expensive, remember." Terrance was always concerned about their finances. It was good, but sometimes it became a bit overbearing. If he was so concerned about what she bought for the kids, maybe he should try to be at home a little more often than work. She let the comment slide.

"Happy meal!" The kids were virtually in unison with their response.

"Okay," she said with a smile. She shifted her eyes to her husband. "I'll be right back. Do you want anything?"

“You know what I like.” She did. He wasn’t one to change things up, unless it was of course increasing his hours at work. She grabbed her purse and stood to head towards the airport food court. “Hon, remember that we’re on a budget, K?” She nodded without looking back at him. He didn’t see that she had rolled her eyes as she strode away.



Riley let his eyes scan the hallway in the direction of the food court. She’d been gone for a while now. Almost a half hour. Other people were filtering back from getting their lunches and his girl wasn’t back yet. He sucked in a breath of air at the thought that she might not come back and he had completely missed his chance to talk to her. His chance to even make eye contact with her, with the possibility that she might flirt back. *Was she just at the wrong gate this whole time?* She didn’t look like the type to get that sort of thing messed up. And none of the other gates were overcrowded—it was a Tuesday.

His stomach rumbled. He had been waiting the whole time for the girl to come back, putting off getting his own lunch. And his stomach was letting him know that it wasn’t happy about getting second place to a girl. A girl he didn’t even know, nonetheless. He glanced around to see if anyone else had heard the rumbling and decided it would be better to settle the potential embarrassment it might cause if he talked to her before eating. The thought of talking and laughing with her and being suddenly interrupted by his monstrous stomach growling sent a shudder up his back and it tickled the nape of his neck. He rubbed it away with his hand as he stood and shook his hair out of his eyes. Lunch was a great idea.

He glanced at the family as he walked towards the food court. So far, not too loud. They weren't one of those families that everyone at an airport hates. The girl didn't hate them. Earlier he had seen her smile at the kids. And she had a *beautiful* smile. Sitting next to the kids, he had a great view of it. And then she started to almost play with the little girl from across the sitting area. The whole time he couldn't help but think that she would make a great mother someday. He wanted her to smile at him like she smiled at the little girl.

*Maybe I'll try to sit closer to her if she's there when I get back.* The thought made him stop midstride. He looked back at where he had just come. He wouldn't have as good of a view of her, but his chances for having a "random" conversation with her were a lot better if he was within talking distance. And she would probably be back at the gate before he was, so he could *easily* sit near her. A slight grin formed on his face as he started walking again. And it could potentially be really easy to start a conversation if the kids did something funny—or really if they did *anything*. All he would have to do is make sure she had enough time to get back to the gate before he did. His stomach growled again, but he didn't notice. The food court was in sight and he had a plan.

## Chapter 6

Jackie pulled her car into the driveway as close to the front door as she could. She gathered her purse and keys, quickly jumped from the car, and sprinted to the door, trying to avoid as many raindrops as she could. She always thought that maybe someday she would get used to the Washington rain, but after almost thirty years, it was still just something she dreaded. And the past week or so seemed to be even rainier and gloomier than usual. Especially with Dale gone for his week-long business conference and then getting stuck in the airport. She hated being without him, with the house to herself. *We really need a dog or something.*

She wiggled the key into the doorknob, pushed the heavy door open, and clambered inside. The rain hadn't gotten her too wet this time, even though it was pouring buckets. After she hung up her jacket and purse, she walked into the kitchen to make a quick lunch. *Maybe a sandwich? Nah. Oh, soup!* The thought immediately sat well in her stomach and she headed over to the pantry to get a can of soup. As she was pouring it into a pot that she had started heating on the stove, the phone rang. She quickly scraped the remaining bits of meat and noodles into the pot and jogged to answer the phone in the other room, picking it up in the middle of the fourth ring.

"Hello?" A smile spread across her face when she recognized her husband's voice. "Well, I love you too." Her smile widened. "When do you think you're going to get back?" She nodded her head to his answers even though she knew he wouldn't be able to see her and walked back to the stove to watch her meal. "So what happens if no one misses this flight? They just keep pushing you back? That doesn't seem very fair."



She began lightly stirring the soup and waited for an explanation. “Oh, okay, so if this flight actually fills up, then you’re basically guaranteed a spot on one of the flights this evening because they’re not even close to full. That’s good at least.” She could hear the exhaustion in his voice. “Well maybe when you get back we can start planning our second honeymoon with all the air miles you’re racking up.”

Her joke seemed to lighten him up a bit, but he still sounded more distressed than usual. “Babe, you don’t sound very good, are you alright?” Her eyebrows furrowed as she listened to him and she stopped stirring her soup that was close to boiling. Then it hit her. He didn’t say it, but she knew he had been thinking about Brad. With all the extra time he had in the airport and without anything to preoccupy his mind, it was unavoidable. “Hey Babe.” She paused briefly to make sure she had his attention. “Have you been thinking about Brad?” Her voice trembled slightly when she said his name. She immediately knew that she had hit the nail on the head. As she poured her soup into a bowl and began to eat, she listened intently to her husband.

Many of the memories he started recalling to her were good. Some even made her laugh and her voice carried a giggle as they reminisced. “Oh, of course I remember! That boy just wouldn’t let me cut his hair. I tried everything I could think of, but he wouldn’t let me. He *insisted* on letting it be long and shaggy, even though he had to always shake it out of his eyes.” At this point her soup had started to grow cold, but she had forgotten about it several memories ago. Her face suddenly fell and she sat up as she listened to Dale. “No, Dale. No. Stop letting yourself think things like that. Brad is gone.” Her voice was now draped with concern and the giggle was gone. “I don’t care if he looks like him and is the same age Brad would be; he’s not Brad. Even if he does

shake his head the same way. You can't go letting yourself even *hope* for something like that. You remember what happened last time, right?" She could never forget. He had almost walked off with someone else's child in tow, just a couple months after they had lost Brad. It was the final breaking point that led him to therapy. He was a wreck and the only thing keeping her from becoming one was that she had to take care of him. It had almost destroyed their marriage.

"How much change do you have left?" She waited for his answer. "Then I'll make this quick. Listen very carefully to me. Try not to think about Brad. Do something else. Walk around the airport, buy a book, I don't care. Do something to keep your mind busy. You're going to be home tonight and we can talk more about it then. I don't want you doing anything you would regret and I'm not there to stop you. Got it?" Her voice was comforting but firm at the same time. She did not want to start reliving that hell again. Her face softened. "Okay, I love and miss you too. Be good." She hung up the phone and looked at the remainder of her soup. She knew he wouldn't do anything, but it was hard to swallow knowing that he was struggling and she couldn't be there to help him.



***Eight years earlier...***

"It's time to go, Brad. Your alarm went off fifteen minutes ago. Get up." He felt someone shaking his shoulder and moaned hoping they'd leave. The shaking stopped and he thought his dad had given up. Then the light flipped on. He was really serious about this boat trip.

“Dad, it’s too early. I don’t even want to go.” He tried to pull the covers up over his head, but his dad grabbed them at the same time and pulled them from his groggy grip.

“Get up and get ready in five minutes or you’re going to be grounded.” He left the room and Brad rubbed his eyes. He was actually kind of excited about the fishing trip. He had gone fishing before but never on the ocean. But the part he wasn’t excited about was spending the whole day with his dad. He was always hounding him about something. Grades, his friends, pretty much anything he could find the smallest problem in. Their most recent argument was about Whitney. She had asked him to her junior prom and his dad thought it was a problem that she was two years older than him. He jammed his legs into his jeans and grabbed for a shirt. It was supposed to be a pretty nice day, but chilly on the water. Perfect weather for fishing. He smiled as he imagined himself reeling in a monster fish and his dad not getting anything.

Standing on the dock with the wind blowing through his hair, Brad was almost thankful that his dad arranged the trip. Hearing the water lapping against the old wood and smelling the salt in the air somehow seemed to ease the tension between them. His dad was talking with the captain and fishing guide about the trip and Brad had decided to wander onto the dock to feel the water beneath him and check out the boat. It was a medium-sized older boat. The green paint on the sides was chipping, but it was still a pretty nice boat. And it would have just enough room for the captain, the guide, Brad and his father, and two other men who looked to be about ten years older than his dad. If nothing was biting it would be a pretty boring day, but at least he was going to be on the open ocean.

The wood creaked and Brad turned to see his dad and the others coming towards him. “It’s time to board, Brad. Are you ready?” His dad’s eyes were gleaming with excitement and Brad decided to cut him a break.

“Ready? I’m always ready to catch bigger fish than you.” He flashed his dad a smug grin and watched his dad smirk and raise his eyebrow skeptically as an acceptance to the playful challenge. Even when they were arguing they could still connect through the thrill of competition. They boarded the boat and Brad watched carefully as the captain released the boat from the dock and went through his clearly familiar launch routine. It fascinated him to watch the captain’s thick leathery fingers quickly jog through the untying of intricate knots and the retying of even more complex ones.

Once they were several miles from shore, in what the guide called his “secret spot,” the guide gave them a quick speech on what he expected from the trip and some instructions for the area they were in. Brad was only half listening to the guide and half daydreaming about living a life on the sea. His mind wandered back and forth about different sea careers; everything from captains and fishermen to pirates and Vikings. If it involved being on or near the ocean, he was interested. When the speech was done, the guide began setting up poles for each of the passengers and Brad happened to glance at the sky. It was a beautiful blue with tufts of white clouds overhead and grayer clouds in the distance. The gray clouds caught his attention and he imagined what it might be like to be in the middle of the ocean, with dark gray clouds enveloping the expanse. A gust of wind blew through his hair and a chill went up his spine.

“Brad, come get your pole.” His dad called him and went back to his discussion with the guide. Brad took the pole that had been prepared for him and let the guide help

him bait his hook. He cast his line out and sat next to his dad, who was smiling from ear to ear. He let himself relax a bit and smiled back. As long as there was no lecture tied to this trip, it might actually turn out to be a pretty fun outing. The wind gusted through his hair and across his face and he took a deep breath of the brine air, readying himself for his dream fish.

After several hours on the sea, Brad felt like he could take on the world. The salt in the air invigorated him. Gave him a thirst for coastal living. This is where he wanted to end up and his dad thought it was a great idea. They shared their dreams and goals and Brad was amazed at all the things his dad had gone through. This was by far, one of the best trips that they had ever taken together. Everyone on the boat seemed to be having a great time and even the captain didn't notice the slow encroachment of the gray clouds that weren't so distant anymore or the increased frequency and intensity of the lapping waves on the boat's sides. The wind had picked up as well, but its howling was barely noticeable over the chatter of the men's voices and their guffaws of laughter. Despite not catching many fish, the group was having an excellent time.

The mist that they had been feeling on their faces slowly turned into small raindrops then started dropping more frequently. The captain began to take notice of the weather changes and a rumbling roar of thunder caught the rest of the group's attention. The raindrops grew larger. The captain quickly began barking orders while the guide gathered poles. The trip was quickly coming to an end, but Brad didn't mind the weather. It almost excited him. To be on the open ocean, unprotected against the raging of the storm. It felt like being in a movie. The captain began handing out lifejackets that had been stored earlier and Brad put his arms through one of the jackets. It was too big

for him and he didn't bother clipping the buckles. The waves were getting bigger but the captain seemed to know exactly what to do. Brad sat in one of the seats and watched the captain work furiously to leave the area before the weather got any worse. The other men were helping the guide with the poles and his dad was helping the captain with some ropes.

The rocking of the boat had started to increase dramatically and some of the bigger waves were tipping into the boat. He noticed that the captain seemed more frantic than he did just moments earlier and a knot suddenly swelled in his chest. One of the men helping the guide dropped one of the reels and swore. Brad bounced up from his seat and grabbed the reel. He turned to give it to the guide but slipped on the wet flooring of the boat into one of the men. The man almost lost his balance, but instead, thrust his hand back to the side of the boat, pushing Brad.

"Brad!" His dad yelled as he saw him topple from the boat. The splash could hardly be distinguished from the crashing of the waves. "Brad!" He ran to the side of the boat to search for his son and was followed by the captain who had grabbed the life preserver.

Brad could feel himself tumbling through the silent waters and he tried desperately to hold onto the lifejacket, but it was quickly torn from his grip. *Oh God!* He tried kicking to orient himself, but his shoes had soaked up the water and were dragging him in the opposite direction. He tried kicking them off, but only felt more disoriented and figured he might be better off if he tried to stay still and float.

"Brad!" Dale's yelling was frantic. The other men in the boat had to grab onto him to keep him from jumping overboard. After several long seconds with no sign of

Brad, they saw his lifejacket pop up, empty. This had turned Dale's yelling into blood curdling sobs that echoed into the openness and were quickly engulfed by the churning waters. "Braaaaaddd!"

He could feel himself, still tumbling, still not sure which direction the surface was in. Staying still had failed. Terror screamed through his mind. *Dad! Help me!* He knew his dad would save him. He always had in the past, why wouldn't he now? His lungs began burning and he knew he needed to breathe soon. He ripped his eyes open but could only see black through the stinging of the salt water. The muscles in his face were growing weak and he couldn't help but suck in a mouthful of the sea. It poured into his lungs. He felt like his head was about to explode. *Dad! Save me! Please Daddy!*

The men in the boat watched as Dale sat on the floor, weeping. The captain had radioed the Coast Guard, but all the men knew the boy was gone. The howling of the wind was empty and the waters were still crashing, but none of it could be heard over the guttural cries of the now sonless father. "Braaaaaddd! Braa-aaa-aadddd!" His heart wrenching sobs spread throughout the boat and across the waters and pierced the salty air.

## Chapter 7

“Hey, can we take a walk?” Vera looked into his eyes and he felt his heart beat quicken. “Not a very long one. We’ve just been sitting for a long time.”

A small smile crept onto her face. “That sounds like a great idea.” She began closing her book and placing it into her purse. Gilbert watched as her tender hands traced the straps of her purse and gently lifted it from its resting place. “Where do you want to go? Want to grab a snack?” They had brought some peanut buttered crackers for their light lunch, but she must have been able to tell that he was still hungry.

“Yeah, maybe we can pick up an apple or two at that little store we passed earlier.” Her smile widened and she nodded. Taking walks with this woman was one of the small pleasures that Gilbert clung to. Sometimes they would talk, other times, they would simply be together. With her hand in his, he could lose all concern for all the things that nipped at his mind. He helped her up from her seat and they began heading toward the store. She rested her head on his arm as she often did during their walks and the smell of her lavender shampoo wafted up to his nose and he sighed. During one of their very first walks together they had bordered a field of wildflowers and it was at that same field that he later proposed to her. The memory of that day was fresh in his mind.

He was sweating bullets as he waited for Vera that morning on her front porch. He had arrived a bit earlier than he had told her, so she wasn’t quite ready. He knew he would never be fully ready for what he prepared to do. He fingered the small ring in his pocket one last time before she emerged from the door. The



sight of her made him nearly lose his breath. She was wearing a light yellow sundress that hugged and waved around her knees with the opening of the door to the breezy day. She smiled at him and he grinned stupidly back. He couldn't stop smiling at her, and his grin only grew as she lightly pecked him on the cheek and bounded down the steps.

It was such a beautiful day, and Gilbert felt like he was the luckiest man on earth, to be sharing it with such a beautiful girl. The knot in his stomach grew as they approached the field. He swallowed a lump in his throat and knew that it was almost time. Time to become an even luckier man. His hand drifted down and rested on the small bump in his pocket.

As they neared the stump they liked to watch sunsets from, his breathing quickened and his heart thumped loudly in his ears. She broke his grip and ran ahead to the stump and he smiled. When he caught up with her, he gently grabbed her hands in his and gazed into her eyes. Her smile encouraged him, so he slowly lowered himself to the ground on his knee. "I love..."

The speech he had planned out was cut short as the beautiful girl threw herself into his arms, crying and yelling, "Yes! Yes, of course I'll marry you!" He held her in his arms, the excitement pounding through their chests. They both knew that this feeling would last forever.

Gilbert sighed as he remembered the day and gently squeezed Vera's hand as they neared the small store. She lifted her head from his arm, gazed into his eyes with a small smile, and gently squeezed back as she laid her head once again on his arm.



Watching as the children had their faces cleaned with a wet wipe by their overly eager mother put a smile on Miriam's face and warmth in her heart. The kids squirmed as the mom pressed the wipe against their little cheeks and chins, making sure to get every last grease spot from the french fries that came with their meals. Someday, Miriam hoped to be doing the exact same thing. Maybe a bit gentler, but with the same care.

If it weren't so expected of her, Miriam would have loved to simply not attend college and go straight into building a family and being a full-time, stay-at-home mom. But her family and teachers had always pushed her to get an education. Be able to support herself. And there was also the fact that she had never had a serious boyfriend. And now she was almost done with college and still wasn't even close to that first step of starting a family. Maybe taking the job offer she just checked out would have more benefits than just occupationally. Getting out of her comfort zone would force her to meet new people instead of relying on the people she's known for years.

But she had never lived more than an hour away from her mom. And even though her mom was encouraging her to accept the job offer that best met her needs, it still felt like she was deserting her if she moved to Nebraska. After the divorce, she felt like she was all she had. Who would she tell everything to? Yes, there was always the phone, but that just wasn't the same. Maybe she could bring her mom with her. She would never go for that. She already made it clear that leaving her job to "intrude" in Miriam's life was unacceptable, no matter how much she pleaded. This was a no-win situation. Miriam sighed and went back to watching the children try to wipe the antibacterial residue from their faces.



Terrance sighed and shifted in his seat once again. He cracked his knuckles and ran his hands over his face and through his hair. Kristy didn't like when he did that because she said it, "messed up his eyebrows." But he just couldn't help it as he sat, useless, in the airport. It was exactly opposite of what he wanted to be doing. Not only was he doing nothing, but he had to take work off in order to come. A double whammy. If he hadn't, today might have been the day his boss finally gave him the promotion he had been promised. Now how long would it take? It might have been worth it had they been getting some sort of inheritance from Kristy's grandmother, but they both knew that the woman was quite poor. Instead, they were heading to her funeral because Kristy's mom *expected* the whole family to be there. *Mothers-in-law*. Terrance sighed again, but this time much more audibly.

"Hey, I know you don't want to be here, but you could at least pretend you're having a good time. The kids haven't seen my parents for years and they're excited. Don't let your attitude ruin it for them." He glanced over at his wife and acknowledged her comment with a slight nod. She lowered her glare and the expression on her face softened again to the mothering glow she had long ago mastered. He loved this woman with all that he was, but sometimes, he just couldn't stand her. And it wasn't that he didn't like being with her, he loved being with her. It was almost as if she tried to keep him from being successful and productive. Couldn't she see that he needed to provide for their family? Yes, they need their father around, but they need food and clothing more, right? And besides, he was usually home on most evenings. Why couldn't she see that

he wanted her to have all she wanted? To give their family the world? He swallowed and sat back in his seat, trying to relax.



The pounding of his heart seemed to intensify with each step Riley took closer to the gate. This was the best chance he would get to talk to the girl. Unless, of course, he was seated next to her on the plane. But he knew that would never happen; he always got seated next to little kids or big, angry looking men who would constantly get up to use the bathroom.

He had given her plenty of time to get back to the gate while he ate. Not only did he try to eat painfully slow, but once he was done, he gave her extra time by walking around parts of the airport he hadn't been to. And being away from her had given him some time to think about what he would tell his parents about his job situation. His conclusion: just give it to them. He truly believed that honesty was the best policy, so why should he change his ways now? He could try to predict what they might say, but who knows, maybe they would surprise him. At least, that was what he was hoping for.

He turned a corner and could see the waiting area for his gate, but couldn't see who was sitting there. More people had showed up and he swallowed a lump in his throat as it crossed his mind that she might not be there. His eyes darted frantically for her and came to rest on her smiling face. And she was closer to the family, almost in his old spot. There were several seats open near her and the gate was just crowded enough that it wouldn't be too awkward if he chose a seat just one or two away from her own. He took a deep breath and began to walk more deliberately toward a seat to her right.

That would leave one empty between them, but it would be close enough for Riley to start a conversation with her.

When he sat down she looked at him briefly and gave him a small smile. Coyly, he grinned back and gave her a slight nod. He could feel the pounding of his heart in his ears as he wiped his damp palms on his jeans and shook the hair out of his eyes. He hadn't tripped and she even smiled at him! He would have tried talking to her then, but he knew he would probably start stammering and stumbling over his words.

As he was trying to calm himself down, he noticed the girl look up out of his peripheral vision. The man in the wrinkled clothes was coming back. And he looked sweatier than he had earlier. Older, almost. Riley watched him as he sat perpendicular to himself and the girl, a few seats away from the father of the family. He carried a small bag with him and what looked to be a new book, probably from one of the airport stores. Riley simply observed as the man sat with the book on his lap, arms propped on his knees with his face in his hands. He briefly forgot about the girl as he watched the man. All of the sudden, the man looked up straight into Riley's eyes. They held contact for several agonizing seconds. Riley broke the gaze and realized that he had been holding his breath. He let his eyes dart around the waiting area, avoiding the man, attempting to erase the awkward silence they had shared. He shook his hair from his eyes once more and began fiddling with the zipper of his hoodie.



Dale sat and looked down at his knees. The kid had looked him straight in the eyes. Then shook his head. He knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on the book he

had just bought. Instead he just sat. Replaying the kid shaking his head. Replaying Brad shaking his.

## Chapter 8

Just when she thought that she might escape the encroaching headache, a high-pitched squeal pushed it to the surface and Kristy clamped her eyes shut in a feeble attempt to relieve the pressure behind them. She looked down quickly at wide-eyed Ethan, holding his toy car, and crying Paige who sat clenching tiny, sore fingers against her own small frame. Kristy quickly stripped the situation down to the core. “Ethan! How many times have I told you to watch out for your sister’s fingers when you play Cars?” The boy looked down at the car he was holding as his mother picked up Paige and gingerly kissed each finger. The crying immediately subsided and she set the girl back down.

Ethan looked up at his red-faced sister. “Sorry.” A smile crossed Kristy’s face in spite of the headache and she looked over at Terrance. He looked up at her after watching the kids’ interaction and smiled.

“Hey, how about I tell you kids a story?” Both of the children forgot about the sorrows of hurt fingers and getting in trouble as they perked up and bounced over to sit with their dad, Paige in his lap and Ethan by his side.

Kristy sat back and quietly exhaled a deep breath. Maybe she’d have better luck warding off her headache while the kids sat entranced in her husband’s capable hands. How long had it been since he had last told them a story? She tried pushing her mind back, but the headache made it difficult to recall. The kids loved his stories. They had very active imaginations and when their daddy led the way, the kids could sit quietly for what seemed forever.

She heard Terrance's voice trailing off and she looked up at him just in time to watch as he startled the kids with a torrent of words. The sudden increase in volume even made her jump a little. He was an excellent storyteller and an even better father. When he wasn't working. Kristy simply watched in admiration as the man of her dreams resurfaced from the murky waters of his job and took a firm grasp on his responsibilities. This was the man she had married. Maybe someday he would realize her desire to simply be with him and watch him as he led the children on adventures, both real and imagined.



Miriam shifted her gaze away from the children who sat absorbed in the story their father was telling them. She could hear bits and pieces of the story but what caught her attention the most was the love that seemed to pour from his mouth straight into their hearts. She could only hope to one day find a man who allowed his love for his kids to cascade out of him into their children. She also couldn't imagine marrying anyone who didn't have a deep-seated love for kids and an overwhelming desire to become a parent.

She sighed and noticed the fidgeting of the cute boy who had sat next to her earlier. It seemed like he wanted to talk to her but so far, all he was doing was bouncing his foot. And occasionally shaking his hair out of his eyes. If he was going to talk to her, he needed to just do it. After waiting so long in this airport, she wasn't in the mood for any of the games that boys played. She waited a few more moments with her head slightly turned in his direction to see if he would say hello. Nothing. *Oh well.*

Miriam reached her arms out in front of her to stretch and she noticed the old couple returning. She let her eyes rest on them as they slowly walked over to a pair of



seats, each gently grasping the other's hand. A smile crept onto her face and she longed for a relationship like that. One where they could simply walk around an airport holding hands. Looking lovingly into each other's eyes after spending all those years together. She sat back in her seat and was quickly immersed in the fantasy of her imagination. A whirlwind of raising children together and slow dancing, playing games and getting lost in smiles.



"We start boarding soon, right?" Vera tugged on his sleeve as she asked and Gilbert could tell that her concern for Olivia had returned to the forefront of her mind. He looked down at his watch.

"Yeah, they should start calling people to board in about ten minutes or so." He rubbed her hand with his fingers. "Only a few more hours until we're at Neil's place, holding the newest love of our lives."

She smiled at the thought of holding the baby. Her heart melted every time she held a beautiful bundle of joy in her arms and she hoped with everything she was that the baby would be okay. Her newest grandbaby. "I haven't even seen her yet, but I know that I would do anything for her." Gilbert looked into her watering eyes and nodded. He knew she would. And he would too.



Riley sat up straight in his seat and twisted slightly to crack his back. A cover for his attempt to talk to the girl that quickly failed when his mouth simply couldn't open. As he twisted back to face forward he sighed. Turning had given him a really good view of her and she really wasn't extraordinary, but somehow her beauty stood out to him.

Lingered in his mind and clouded his ability to think clearly. It was almost haunting, but in such a way that he not only didn't mind, but he actually felt drawn to it. To her.

Why couldn't he talk to her? Even a simple "hello" stuck in his throat. He had gone over it a thousand times in his mind. And she had already smiled at him—she was obviously nice enough to acknowledge him and respond. Her smile really got to him. With a smile like that, how could she ever be mean to anyone let alone him? He felt like he could trust her. And laugh with her. Maybe even be the one to make her smile. The thought quickened the thumping in his chest.

His thoughts were interrupted by high-pitched laughter. The father had finished telling his kids a story and ended it by tickling them. The girl had noticed as well. This was his chance. Riley quickly swallowed and turned toward her. "They're pretty cute, huh?" He was almost surprised to hear the words come from his mouth.

She turned to him, smile already full across her face. "Yeah, I love kids." He didn't think it possible, but her smile managed to widen. "They're just so happy, you know?"

He smiled back at her. "Oh yeah, they don't have a care in the world." His mind scrambled to keep the conversation from dying out. He didn't really know many little kids to talk about. He quickly looked back at the kids, let out a small chuckle, and then returned his gaze to the girl.

"By the way, I'm Miriam." She held out her hand and Riley took it, thankful for the opportunity to change subjects. Her hand was soft in his and he quickly became aware of his damp palms.

“I’m Riley.” Before he had enough time to talk himself out of it, he asked the first question he thought of. “So Miriam, where are you headed to?” Her name felt warm as it flowed out of his lips, but he felt like punching himself for asking the question. *We’re waiting for the same flight! I’m such an idiot.*

“Oh, well actually I’m just heading home. I had an interview for a pediatric nursing job in Omaha.” Her answer surprised him. *Maybe it wasn’t a dumb question.*

“Nursing, really? That’s great. So do you...” His next question was cut short by the ding of the intercom.

“Good afternoon. Flight 513 to Seattle is now boarding rows one through twenty. Rows one through twenty are now boarding. Thank you.” Riley glanced over at the woman who had made the announcement and heard the intercom click off when she hung up the receiver she had spoken into.

With the distraction gone, he looked back to Miriam. “Well, that’s me. It was nice meeting you Riley.” He felt his heart sink to the bottom of his shoes as he watched her pick up her bright yellow purse.

“Yeah, it was really nice meeting you too. Maybe I’ll see you on the plane.” He knew he wouldn’t. He would walk past her, but he was in row thirty-five. At least fifteen rows behind her.

“Yeah, maybe.” She left him with a smile as she walked over to the line. He sighed and looked down at his shoes, shaking his head.



Cadence smiled as she began scanning passengers’ tickets as they boarded the plane. There were some days that she simply enjoyed her job more than others and today

was a good day. “Hello, have a good flight, Sir.” She nodded at the man whose ticket she had just scanned as he thanked her and moved past her. She always found it interesting to see how other people treated her. Usually not poorly, but sometimes simply as an inconvenience that had to be endured. A hoop to be jumped through. Occasionally, as a person who might also want to be somewhere else at the moment. But today she was fine with standing at her station, taking tickets, and smiling at the people who may or may not actually see her. “Oh, I love your bag!” A girl who looked to be the same age as her younger sister had presented her ticket and was carrying a bright yellow purse that looked like it could belong to her sister.

“Thanks! Birthday present.” She smiled and turned so Cadence could see the bag better as she handed the ticket back.

“Somebody has good taste. Enjoy your flight.” Cadence turned her attention back to the line of people. Her sister’s birthday was coming up soon, maybe she would get her a purse like the girl’s. She glanced down the shortening line of people and signaled to her co-worker to call the next set of rows. An older couple approached her and the husband handed her two tickets as he held his wife’s hand with his other. Cadence couldn’t help but let her heart melt at how cute they were. She wished them a good flight and smiled as the man led his wife to the plane. She let her thumb run down her finger to feel the cold metal of the ring she was wearing, thankful for her fiancé, wondering if they might be that old couple one day.

The intercom clicked on again and she could hear Marina’s voice calling up the next set of rows. The line quickly grew and Cadence continued to take tickets, smile, and exchange comments with the passengers. One family caught her eye. The two little kids

were adorable, especially the little girl who was snuggling into her daddy's neck. He had to shift her in his arms to hand Cadence the tickets, which made the girl tighten her grasp around his neck. As they walked past her, Cadence waved at the little girl and giggled to herself as the shy, little girl nestled down into the comfort of her dad's t-shirt.

The line of passengers was getting shorter. Cadence looked to Marina again to signal the final call. Marina was talking to a haggard man and looking things up on the system computer, but she nodded to Cadence as she reached for the intercom. She made the final boarding call and Cadence looked up to take the ticket of a young man. He smiled at her and shook the hair out of his eyes as she handed his ticket back to him. "Have a nice flight." He thanked her and stuffed the ticket into his jeans.

When she took the ticket of the last passenger, Cadence looked across the gate to see if there were any runners. She always felt bad when people missed their flight, especially if it was only by minutes. Satisfied that all had boarded, she walked back to Marina, who was finishing up talking with the same haggard man. "Oh, Cadence, we've got one last passenger."

Cadence looked to the man who was now smiling through the bags under his eyes. "Right this way, Sir." She took his ticket and watched him walk down the hallway leading to the plane. She shut the door and headed back to Marina at the computer, ready to start filling the next plane.