
Come Fly
WITH ME
A GLOBAL HAREM FANTASY
LENA WHITE & ANDREA MARTIN

Come Fly With Me

(Part 1)

A Global Harem Fantasy

By Andrea Martin and Lena White

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Cover by Allyson White

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~ Matthew ~

It can be a hard life, but it's one that I wouldn't trade for anything.
The boss tells me the destination, I fly the jet.
It's simple, uncomplicated, and straightforward.
Or it was - until the day I met her.

~ Jenna ~

I am trapped in my own life.
Stuck in the middle of nowhere, working a job I hate in a town I can't leave.
Is this how I'm supposed to spend the rest of my life?
Or is this mysterious, handsome stranger someone I can trust?

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Table of Contents

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

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1

~ Matthew ~

Two things that I love most in life. Number one: waking in the arms of a beautiful woman. Number two: bringing the jet up to altitude and soaring above the clouds.

And not necessarily in that order.

I allow a smile to tug my lips and glance at the various needles and dials displayed before me. Everything looks good so far. An easy enough journey, not even a hint of turbulence. Through the cockpit windows, I see nothing but the most vista known to man: perfect azure skies above, fluffy white clouds below. There are few things that can lift the human spirit like a view such as this one. I challenge anybody to look through the windows of this cockpit and not feel a sense of sheer, wondrous joy.

The nose of the Gulfstream G700 glides through the air with all the grace of an Olympic ice skater sailing through a routine. This, right here, is my reason for living. The hundreds of hours spent in various aircraft cockpits around the world; the years of study, practice, education, and theory; the numerous qualifications and accolades under my belt - not to mention all the time spent in endless flight simulators, honing my craft - have brought me here, to this point. Most pilots can only dream of holding a position as amazing as mine.

Of course, it’s a hard job. That little fact is easy to forget when you’re gazing out across the world and effortlessly soaring through beautiful skies like this. The life of a private pilot is a tough one. I am responsible for this aircraft in its entirety. The buck stops with me. Everything, from the largest mechanical issue down to the tiniest possible defect, rests on my shoulders. If one of the engines cuts out mid-flight, it’s on my head. If the coffee machine craps out before we land, that’s on me, too. I am expected to keep this aircraft in perfect working condition at all times, ready to take off at a moment’s notice. If my employer needs to be flown halfway around the world, I am expected to be up, awake, and ready, with the engines rolling

before he arrives at the air strip. My phone is never off and my uniform is always pressed and waiting to be worn.

But the payoff for my hard work speaks for itself.

I sip on my coffee and keep a close eye on the dials, making sure all the needles are well within the expected range for our current position and altitude. It's a damned fine cup of coffee. Freshly ground and served in a proper mug. No instant grinds, filters, or Styrofoam cups on this aircraft, no sir. This is a top-of-the-range private jet with plenty of comfortable chairs, four living quarters, including one full-size bedroom, with space for another if required, and enough square footage for my employer to travel in luxury to any part of the world he wishes.

Speaking of the boss… I open the microphone channel and speak into the headset.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Donovan. We'll shortly begin our descent into Omaha airspace and should be on the ground within the next hour. This is the perfect time to get washed up and ready. I'll update you again when it's time to strap in for landing. Thank you."

I close the channel and concentrate on flying. Most of the time I'm in the air - depending on the length of the flight - is spent observing the dials, ensuring the plane is on the right trajectory, and monitoring the weather for unexpected patterns. It's everything that happens on either side of cruising altitude that requires years of training and hundreds of hours of practice.

The local air traffic control monitor clicks into my ear and assigns me a flight corridor for the final approach. This particular plane is well-known in the region, so we've long since established a good working relationship. I follow the directions given to me and begin a gentle descent back to terra firma.

Somewhere behind me in the cabin, Michael Donovan gets himself ready to land and disembark. I can easily imagine him in my mind's eye, sitting in one of the comfortable chairs, working away on his laptop with a glass of scotch at his elbow. When he first approached me about the job, he explained his work, but I never really understood it. The technology, software, and artificial intelligence world is a long way outside the scope of my understanding. I know the kind of systems, calculations, and computing that my planes use, and that's about the limit of my knowledge. What I do know for certain is that this man has an unbelievable amount of money behind him; enough to own this jet, hire me, and fly all over the world to

conduct his business at a moment's notice. Sure, our base is in Omaha, Nebraska, in the middle of rural nowhere, but his work takes us both to every far-flung corner of the globe.

The second half of the flight is just as effortless as the first. The various systems and dials accept the new flight course and I ease the yoke forward to lower the nose in a careful descent. Everything goes off without a hitch and the wheels barely make a bump as we greet the tarmac. We're back on the ground two entire minutes ahead of schedule.

I run through the final checks, thank the voice from air traffic control, and roll the G700 to Mr. Donovan's hanger. The polished black limousine is already waiting, with Henry standing by the rear passenger door in his immaculate suit. He raises a finger to his brow in greeting and I offer the same. I shut down the engines, put on my hat, and step through the door into the cabin. Michael Donovan is already on his feet, clutching the laptop bag with one hand while extending the handle of his travel case with the other.

"How was the flight?" I say.

"Fantastic, as always. Thanks, Matthew." He extends a hand to me and we shake. His grip is deceptively strong for a man in his mid-forties with graying hair and a slight belly. "I'm not anticipating another trip for at least a few days. Any plans?"

"Post-flight maintenance, general inspections."

He laughs and shakes his head. "No wonder you don't have a steady girlfriend, you're in love with this plane."

I gesture around at the cabin. The interior of this plane is more comfortable than most of the apartments I lived in while studying for my license. "Can you blame me, with a beauty like this waiting nearby?"

"Well, make sure you spend at least a little time unwinding."

"Of course. I have an appointment with a dental hygienist later this afternoon."

Another laugh. "Not the most fun way to spend your downtime, but hey."

He slaps me on the shoulder and disembarks, walking down the short flight of stairs and greeting Henry with a handshake. I move through the plane, checking this and that, before sitting back in the cockpit and letting out a long breath of satisfaction at a job well done. Then I flip through my diary and confirm that I've got the date right.

Yes, it’s here. An appointment later today with a dental hygienist. The appointment is with someone named Jenna Vickers.

~ Jenna ~

I’m done. Stick a fork in me.

I’ve only been doing this job for a couple of years but I am so over it. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week of sticking my hands in the mouths of people I don’t know and don’t want to know is so boring, I can barely brace myself for, mercifully, my last appointment of the day, some guy I’ve never seen before whose name I’ll soon forget, the way I’ve forgotten every other patient I’ve scraped, flossed, and polished since I took this job.

I don’t know what I was thinking, taking this job.

“Are you doing anything tonight, Jenna?” Marybeth asks from the doorway to my tiny, interior treatment room. “My roommates are going to the club around nine, if you’re interested.”

“I don’t think so,” I tell her, same as always. Marybeth is a good enough work friend but we don’t have anything in common other than work, so I’m always turning down her offers to tag along with her and her friends. Not that I have any friends.

“Oh, come on, Jenna,” she whines. “You’ve been putting me off since your birthday bash. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you don’t really like me.”

I resist rolling my eyes.

Barely.

“I’m just not in the mood, Marybeth. Maybe next week.”

She shrugs and heads back to her own station, where she at least gets to look outside at the parking lot of our corporate dental office on the outskirts of Omaha.

“Jenna, your four o’clock is here,” the receptionist tells me over the office intercom. According to the office policy manual, I’m supposed to go to the waiting room in not less than 30 seconds of receiving notification of the patient’s arrival or I get written up. I kid you not. I check the computer screen for his name, pull myself together as best I can, and trudge through the labyrinth of tiny rooms to meet my last patient.

Who turns out to be not at all what I expected.

“Mr. Hale?” I ask the guy sitting alone in our huge waiting room. “I’m Jenna.”

“Nice to meet you, Jenna,” he says in a deep baritone that matches his movie star good looks.

“Follow me, please,” I tell him as I turn away so he doesn’t see the color rising in my cheeks. “Thanks for being on time,” I tell him, wondering where in god’s name that came from.

“Last appointment of the week, I thought it was the least I could do. I’ve been remiss about getting in for a cleaning lately.”

“Are you new to the area?” I ask as I point to the chair in my embarrassingly spartan treatment room. Suddenly, I’m kicking myself for not adding something more personal to the corporate decor on the walls, prints that look like they came from a clearance sale at Sears before I was born.

“I am,” he says, flashing a gorgeous smile. “How did you know?”

“Well, you’re not wearing jeans and boots, for one thing,” I tell him, recovering quickly. “You look a little out of place for Omaha.”

“Really? I thought this was the biggest city in Nebraska,” he says with a sly smile that makes my knees go a little wobbly.

I roll my eyes. “It is, but that’s not saying much.” He laughs and I’m oddly thrilled by it. “When was the last time you had your teeth cleaned?” I ask as I put my mask on and reluctantly get down to business.

“Do you really have to mask up?” he asks with another killer smile. “You’re too pretty to hide it.”

I blush hard, not because I haven’t heard that cheesy line a hundred times, but because it’s working on me for the first time ever.

“Policy, I’m afraid,” I tell him. “Can’t be too careful, even if Covid is mostly over.”

“Well, you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“No, I guess I can’t.” My guard is up, but damn, he’s good-looking…

Thirty minutes later, we’re finishing up and I’m ready to walk Mr. McDreamy back to the front desk when he touches my arm ever-so-lightly.

“Before we go up front, I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner with me?” he says out of the blue. “I know we just met, but I am new in town, don’t know a soul, and I would love to get to know you.”

“Wow, you don’t waste any time, do you?” I smile to let him down gently, but there’s no way I’m falling for this.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” he says with a shrug and another killer smile. “For what it’s worth, I promise not to try anything. I’m just looking for some company.” He pauses a beat before adding, “for dinner, I mean.”

I side-eye him as we turn a corner in the lab rat maze that is our office, and he’s still smiling, and I’ve been in a dating drought for weeks, and he’s so damn good-looking. But I can’t do this. My mind is swirling with the HR nightmare that would rain down on me if I even think about…

“Quick, give me your phone,” I tell him as I come to an abrupt stop. I scan the hall around the corner as he pulls out his iPhone - points for not carrying an Android - and type my number into his contacts. I hand it back to him and we continue on.

“I’m done here for the day, but give me an hour to change,” I whisper as we arrive at the front desk. Molly, our new clueless receptionist, shoots me a look, or maybe it’s just my imagination, before she turns her attention to McDreamy.

“It was so nice to meet you,” I tell him, offering my hand.

“So nice to meet you, Jenna,” he says in an even deeper voice than I remember from earlier. “I look forward to our next visit.” He cocks an eyebrow, the one Molly can’t see, and I smile and brush back my hair.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Matthew - *“Call me Matt”* - Hale tells me as we sit down to dinner. I met him at the restaurant, one I chose because it’s close and I walked here from my apartment. But also because I come here on occasion, the staff knows me, and I feel somewhat safer than just going in blind. Plus, he didn’t put up a fight about letting me choose, another good sign.

“There really isn’t much to tell,” I say honestly. “I’m from Cedar Rapids originally, but my dad got transferred here when I was in middle school, and I’ve been here ever since. Which isn’t long, it just feels like forever.”

“You don’t like it here?”

I sigh. “It’s fine, really. I just…” I look down. “It’s fine.” Before he can ask another question, I ask him, “What about you? Where did you move here from?”

“Pensacola, born and raised. My parents were in the Navy, so I grew up on the base.”

Uh, oh. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but… "What do you do?"

"I fly," he says, cryptically. "I fell in love with jets when I was a kid."

"Which airline?" I'm intrigued, but still a little wary.

"Private. I used to fly for United but I'm here in Omaha because I just took a job with a guy who owns his own Gulfstream."

"Really?" I say with far too much golddigger energy, but come on! "How did that happen?"

"It's pretty boring, really," he says with a look that says it's anything but. "I wasn't thrilled with how long it was going to take me to get to the left seat, so I signed up with a headhunter and got my new gig through him."

"Where do you fly your new boss?"

"It's only been a couple of weeks, but so far, I've flown him to Singapore and Paris."

"Really?" I just can't help myself. "I've always wanted to go to Paris. I even took French in high school, just in case I ever got to go."

"It was my first time there," he says, warming to telling me of his exploits, but who can blame him? "I was strictly domestic with United, and the chance to see the world was another big reason I took the job."

"I've always dreamed of traveling," I tell him. "A lot of my friends in high school were Buffett millionaires, and they never stopped bragging about summering in the South of France, or skiing in St. Moritz over the Christmas break."

"Buffett millionaires?"

I roll my eyes. "Surely you've heard of Warren Buffett."

"Of course."

"Well, he's still here in Omaha, of course, but he was born here about a million years ago, and a lot of his friends and neighbors invested with him early on. At least, that's what my dad told me. He's in insurance too, but he got here too late to get in on the Berkshire bonanza."

"Berkshire Hathaway?"

"Yup. My father knew about Buffett because he worked in the insurance industry, but he never bought any stock." I shake my head. "Anyway, that's all ancient history." I smile and lean in. "Tell me about Paris."

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2

~ Matthew ~

You can call me a playboy. You can accuse me of sleeping around. In truth, I won't deny either of those things. I'm a pilot with a past. I've indulged in my share of layovers with willing air stewardesses. But this feels different, somehow.

Jenna is a good-looking woman. A really good-looking woman. Far too good-looking to be stuck in a quiet, out of the way, nowhere sort of place like this. I don't think I can really be blamed for taking a chance at inviting her out to dinner.

Besides, I'm far from the only pilot to live life this way. Back in my commercial days, I knew at least a half dozen pilots with no-strings girlfriends in almost every city in the world. I never reached that stage, but I knew my share of badge bunnies.

"Paris," I say, "is an amazing city. Truly beautiful. Not just the things you already know about. I mean, there's all the obvious stuff, right? You have the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, all the usual tourist sights and attractions. But, for me, the most beautiful part of that whole city was buying a freshly baked croissant from a small, independent bakery and sitting down to eat it on a bench overlooking the River Seine as the sun rose. That was magical."

"Wow," Jenna says, with an expression and tone of voice that suggests she truly can't imagine anything more wonderful. "I've never been to Paris. I've never really been anywhere. Just lived in Omaha my whole life." Her eyes grow wistful for a second before she snaps back to reality. "So, you… you hop in the plane and fly to wherever?"

I give a small nod, trying to play it cool. While she's pretty much on the money with how it works, there's the small issue of keeping the aircraft in a constant state of readiness and mechanical perfection that I'm willing to skip over for the sake of our conversation.

"That's pretty much how it goes. The boss says, 'Hey, we need to go here.' And I say, 'What time do you want to be there?' And then I make it

happen. Sometimes he calls in the middle of the night and I need to be ready to go."

"Wow," she says again. "What a life. Paris, Singapore, and now Omaha, Nebraska. It's not exactly complimenting your winning streak of glorious destinations, isn't it?"

We both laugh at that. I give an off-handed gesture. "I don't know. So far, it's turning out pretty well. Good company. Pleasant evening."

A little colour reaches her cheeks. She looks good when she blushes, but I don't say it aloud. Jenna touches her glass of fizzing liquor with a light grip.

"Yeah, but – come on. Those are some of the most incredible destinations in the entire world. I don't imagine you'll be rushing to tell people about your time in Nebraska. I mean, you have all the sights of Paris, like you mentioned. In Singapore – God, I can't even imagine what there is to see! The buildings, the streets, the food, the people… How does any of that compare to Omaha?"

I raise my glass to my lips and take a drink. "Oh, I don't know. The sights of Omaha are pretty easy on the eyes in my opinion."

Her mouth stretches in a half-amused, half-disappointed smirk. "Mr. Hale, are you trying to use a cheesy pick-up line on me right now?"

I meet her charming expression with a smile of my own. "Yeah, maybe that was a little too strong. But it's the truth."

Jenna takes a drink and licks her lips. That simple gesture makes my belly tighten. "You don't need to try so hard. You've already picked me up. We're having dinner. There's no need for fancy lines. This is a date – unless you disagree?"

"Understood. And a lovely date it is. How about this? If I come on too strong again, you just put it in pilot terms so I understand."

She laughs. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if you think I'm trying too hard, tell me to ease back on the throttle and I'll understand."

She gets a curious look in her eyes and says, "What do I say if I want you to come on stronger?"

We lock eyes across the table. I admit, I like the way she's looking at me.

"Yoke down."

There’s a curious, yet powerful, tension in the air between the two of us. We have a good chemistry together. She’s a pleasant woman to look at, and even more fun to talk to. With every moment that passes, I am more convinced that asking her to dinner was the right move. Not just because I’m a man with needs and she’s an attractive woman, but because she’s excellent company. Plus, this restaurant has a nice vibe and a good atmosphere. It’s the kind of place where a man and a woman can get to know one another in an easy, unpretentious atmosphere.

The waitress interrupts our long, meaningful moment of eye contact with the appetizers, before disappearing out of sight again. Jenna allows a playful smile to linger on her lips for several long moments, just long enough for my mind to wander and ask what thoughts might produce an expression like that. Then she changes the subject.

“So, what on earth brings you to the middle of corn-fed nowhere?”

I take a bite of my sumptuous food. “Well, the boss wants to use Omaha as his home base. He’s got a permanent office here. He does everything on his computer, but he bought a penthouse around here somewhere.”

“A penthouse?” One of her eyebrows lifts. “God, I can imagine the view. Downtown parking lots or miles of cornfield.”

We laugh together and pick out our food. It tastes good. Whenever I’m in a new place, I like to sample the local cuisine and culture, but that’s not exactly a priority in the states. Still, it’s always interesting to compare burgers. I allow a nice, comfortable quiet to settle over us before speaking again.

“I guess I’ll probably have to find somewhere to stay while I’m here, you know, some kind of small apartment, or at least I can hang my hat while I’m in town. Unless you can recommend any good hotels?”

Jenna, “You can stay with me.”

Then she realizes what just came out of her mouth. She blinks. A blush creeps up her neck. She hurries to correct herself.

“Oh, I mean, you know, until you – oh gosh – maybe I could help you look for a place. I mean, geez, sorry. Should I ease back on the throttle?”

I admire Jenna’s adorable face, the mixture of guilt and embarrassment flickering across those incredibly attractive features. I say, “I would like that, Jenna. I’d like that quite a lot.”

“Which? Staying with me or might help finding an apartment?”

“Either. Both. The chance to spend more time with you sounds like a good option.”

Looks like she’s fighting the urge to smile.

“Ease back on the throttle.”

I laugh at that and push my empty plate away. The waitress appears again and whisks all the dirty dishes from the table without a fuss. I take another drink from my glass.

“So, your friends, you said they all made money. Are they still around?”

She shakes her head. There’s a trace of bitterness in her face. “Around here? God, no. As soon as they made their money from stocks or investing or whatever, they all took off. There’s literally nothing here in Omaha or even Nebraska. The only kind of people who stay are those who want to and those who can’t get out.”

I study here with a thoughtful face. “Which are you, Jenna?”

“The second one. If I could, I’d be out of here right now.”

That’s interesting. “Then why haven’t you left? I mean, you have a good job. It must pay reasonably well – not to pry, obviously. You’re skilled at what you do.”

She wrinkles her face. “Can I be real with you? Dental hygienist was not even in my top ten things I wanted to do when I was growing up. Just something I fell into. Did a few months of training. Thought maybe I could become a dentist and earn some serious money, but I don’t even like it. That’s so stupid, right?”

I shake my head. She continues.

“I thought it would be a good way to make some money and I could at least use that to get out of dodge. But… you know how it is. You earn money just to stay in one place. I feel like I’ve been running on a treadmill underwater for about the past five, six years. I’ve gone from one dead end job to the next and now I’m here. The thought of sticking my hands in someone else’s mouth tomorrow is…” She shudders for effect. “Honestly, what you’re doing… I can’t even imagine.”

I give a self-deprecating nod. I’m well aware of how obscenely lucky I am to be in this position. It feels like I’ve been lucky my entire life. Being able to afford the training, the lessons, and the hours upon hours of practice and education and study is only a small part of it. Nobody lucks into being a pilot. You have to want to do it and you have to remain committed to that goal for years and years at a time.

The waitress returns with our main courses, two steaks, both rare. I ask for a top up on our drinks. A little crease of concern dimples Jenna's brow as she studies the table. I know that look very well. I wave my hand to dismiss her doubts.

"Don't worry. This is on me."

She gives me a look. "You don't have to do that. My parents raised me to split the bill."

"They sound like good parents. But I'm the one who invited you, so it's the least I could do. After all, here you are keeping me company. Besides, I don't often have an opportunity to spend the money I earn. It's nice to flaunt it on a worthwhile evening."

She gives a warm, wonderful smile. The kind of smile that could melt a glacier in winter. "I'm flattered. What would you be doing tonight if you hadn't made a pass at me in the office?"

I think for a minute. "Well, if I'm being honest, probably sitting on the bed in the first hotel room I could find, eating whatever pizza I could grab along the way."

She laughs at that image. "Believe me when I say this: you don't want to get pizza around here. Not even from a chain. It is, well, it's not good. Let's put it that way. Nebraska isn't known for its pizza making."

We enjoy a wonderful meal together. The steak is delicious. Freshly prepared. Well-cooked. Perfectly juicy. I have no complaints. The pizza might not be the best thing about Omaha, Nebraska, but the steak sure is. We make small talk about this and that until we're finished. As the waitress takes our plates away, Jenna studies me across the table again with a thoughtful expression, slowly sipping the last of her drink.

I say, "What's on your mind?"

"Well, Matthew, right now, I'm debating whether or not to take a chance on you."

"Oh really? May I hear the pros and cons of that argument?"

A coy, yet charming smile tugs at her lips. "Pro number one, most obviously, is that it would be pretty exciting, at least in my opinion. Number two, I've never done anything like this. Number three, I think you're a nice guy. At least, I'm hoping you are and this isn't some elaborate act."

"So far, so good. And the cons?"

“Firstly, again, I’ve never done anything like this before. Number two, as a pilot, I have a funny feeling that this isn’t your first time picking up a woman in some far-flung part of the world.”

I give a nod of my head. “Guilty as charged.”

“Three - I don’t want to get hurt.”

We look at each other across the table. I say, “So which one is winning out?”

She says, “Yoke down.”

~ Jenna ~

I can't believe I just said that out loud. A few hours ago, this man was lying back in my chair with a suction tube hooked over his lip, and now I'm telling him to put the yoke down like I've been flirting with pilots my whole life. Matt doesn't seem to mind one bit. He holds my gaze for a long moment, then raises a hand to catch the waitress's attention and asks for the check without ever looking away from me.

Tina brings it over in a little leather folder and gives me a look over his shoulder that says she'll want details the next time I come in. I've been eating here since I moved into my building, and I don't think she's ever seen me with anyone like this. Matt slips his card inside before I can even reach for my purse. My dad would have a fit, but my dad isn't here, and I'm not about to argue with a man who just bought me the best steak in Omaha.

"So how did you get here?" I ask while we wait for Tina to come back. "Please tell me you didn't take an Uber from the airport."

"Rental car. It's parked out front." He nods toward the window. "I can drive you home, if you'd like."

I think about it for a second. Climbing into a car with a man I barely know is exactly the kind of thing my mother warned me about every time I left the house in high school. Then again, so is inviting him to stay at my place, and I already blurted that out over appetizers.

"I walked here," I tell him. "It's only a few blocks. Why don't you walk me home instead, and you can come back for the car later."

"Or in the morning," he says with that grin.

"Ease back on the throttle, Mr. Hale."

He laughs at that, and some of the tightness in my chest finally lets go.

Outside, the night air has a bite to it, the first real hint that fall is on the way. Matt offers me his jacket before we reach the corner, and I take it, because it's still warm from him and because no man has ever done that for me outside of a movie. It's soft leather, the expensive kind, and it hangs down past my hips.

We walk past my dry cleaner and the sandwich shop that gave me food poisoning last year. I've walked this stretch of sidewalk a thousand times, mostly alone and mostly tired, and it has never felt like anything special. Tonight it feels different. Matt asks me questions as we go, about my neighbors and if I get along with my co-workers, and he actually listens to the answers. I can't remember the last time a man listened to me about anything. But then it occurs to me, that’s the difference - Matt is a man and I’ve been talking to boys my whole life.

"Can I ask you something?" I say when we stop for the light on Dodge Street.

"Anything."

"How many times have you done this?"

He doesn't pretend not to understand the question. I give him points for that. He glances down at the crosswalk, then back up at me.

"More than a few," he says. "I won't lie to you about that, Jenna. But I meant what I said at dinner. I haven't enjoyed an evening this much in a long time."

The light changes and we cross. I decide I can live with that answer, at least for tonight. It's honest, and that's more than I got from the last two guys I dated, both of whom swore up and down they were single right up until they weren't.

My building is a brick three-story walk-up that the landlord calls historic, which is his way of saying the radiators clank all winter and the ancient washing machines in the basement still take quarters. I'm on the top floor. By the time we reach my door, I'm a little out of breath, and I'm not sure how much of that is due to the stairs. I fumble with my keys long enough for Matt to reach over and steady my hand with his.

"Nervous?" he asks.

"No," I lie. "These locks are just old."

I can feel him smiling. "Of course."

I get the door open and switch on the lamp by the couch, and I wince at the laundry basket on the armchair and the dishes I left in the sink last

night. My apartment isn't much bigger than my treatment room at work, and it isn't decorated much better. There's a cheap poster of the Eiffel Tower hanging over the sofa I got at a garage sale. I watch Matt notice it, and I watch him decide not to say anything about it, and I could kiss him just for that. So I do.

I toss his jacket over the back of the couch, turn around, and he's right there. I go up on my toes and take hold of his collar with both hands. He makes a low sound of surprise against my mouth, and then his arms come around my waist and pull me in close. He kisses me the way he talked about Paris, as if there's nowhere else in the world he would rather be. My back bumps against the wall beside the door. The light switch digs into my shoulder, but I don't care, and I don't think he does either.

When we finally come up for air, his forehead is resting against mine, and we're both breathing hard.

"Jenna," he says, low and rough. "Tell me if this is moving too fast."

"Matt." I hook my fingers through his belt loops and pull him back toward me. "Yoke down."

He smiles against my lips. I take his hand and lead him to my bedroom, and for once in my life I don't worry about what anybody at work would say, or my parents, or the HR manual sitting on the shelf in my treatment room. I don't worry about anything at all.

He takes his time with me. That's the part I'll remember later, more than anything else. He sits on the edge of my bed and pulls me in to stand between his knees, then works the buttons of my blouse open one at a time, kissing the skin he uncovers as he goes. By the time he reaches the last button, my legs are shaking. He slides the blouse off my shoulders, lets it drop to the floor, and looks at me for so long that I start to reach for the lamp.

"Leave it on," he says. "I want to see you."

Nobody has ever said that to me before. I unbutton his shirt with clumsy fingers while he unhooks my bra, and I run my hands over his chest and down the flat muscles of his stomach. He's in better shape than any man I've ever brought home, not that the list is very long. When I reach for his belt, he catches my wrist and shakes his head with a smile.

"You first," he says.

He eases my skirt down over my hips and lays me back across the bed, and the old box spring creaks so loud that we both laugh. Then he kneels on

the floor between my knees and hooks his thumbs into the sides of my panties. He kisses the inside of one thigh as he slides them down my legs, then the other, and I have to grab a fistful of the comforter to keep still. When his mouth finally finds me, I forget all about the neighbors and the thin walls. He's patient and thorough, the same way he probably runs through a preflight checklist, and he doesn't skip a single step. He keeps at it until my hips lift off the bed and I come apart with his name on my lips.

I'm still catching my breath when he stands up and lets me unbuckle his belt at last. I push his pants and boxers down together, and the sight of him makes my mouth go dry. I wrap my hand around him and stroke him, and I love the way his breath catches and his eyes fall shut. I take him in my mouth and he moans from somewhere deep. I lick and kiss his balls as I work his shaft with one hand, wishing he would grab my head and have his way with my mouth, but he just lets me do my thing, which is nice too.

After a while, he eases me away and climbs onto the bed, settling between my legs, holding himself up on his elbows so he can watch my face. He pushes into me an inch at a time. I gasp and wrap my legs around his hips, pulling him deeper until there's no space left between us.

"Okay?" he whispers.

"Don't you dare stop."

He doesn't. He moves in long, steady strokes that build and build, and every time I think I've figured out his rhythm, he changes it on me. I dig my nails into his back. The headboard bangs against the wall, and somewhere in the back of my mind I know Mrs. Kowalski downstairs is going to have something to say about it at the mailboxes tomorrow. I don't care. The second time I cum, it hits me even harder than the first, and I cling to his shoulders and ride it out with my face pressed into his neck. He follows me over a moment later with a low groan into my hair.

Afterward, we lie tangled up in my sheets with his arm under my head and his heartbeat settling under my palm. I've stopped thinking about my messy apartment and my boring job and this dead-end town. All I can think about is him, and the last thing I remember before I drift off is the press of his lips against my forehead.

I wake up to a buzzing that isn't coming from my phone. The clock says 2:47. Matt is already sitting on the edge of the bed with his back to me, the

glow of the screen lighting up the side of his face, and he's doing a lot more listening than talking.

"Yes, sir. Understood. Wheels up at eight." He ends the call and sets the phone face down on his knee, and for a long moment he doesn't say anything at all.

"Let me guess," I say. "The big boss?"

He turns around and gives me an apologetic smile. "He has a meeting in Tokyo first thing Monday morning that just came up. I need to get to the airport and start my preflight."

"Two days from now? It's 3am."

"I told you he calls in the middle of the night sometimes." He leans over and kisses my bare shoulder. "I'm sorry, Jenna. This isn't how I wanted tonight to end."

I pull the sheet up around me and watch him get dressed in the light coming in from the street. He's fast and efficient about it, and he has his shoes laced before I can even figure out where my underwear ended up. I tell myself I'm fine with this. I'm a grown woman, and I knew what he was when I typed my number into his phone. He's a man with a girl in every city he flies into, and now he has one in Omaha, too.

Then he does something I don't expect. He picks up the pen from my nightstand, writes on the back of an old grocery receipt, and presses it into my hand.

"That's my cell," he says. "I'll be gone a few days, a week at most. When I get back, I'd like to see you again. If you want to, that is."

"And if I don't?"

He shrugs and gives me that killer smile one more time. "Then I guess I'll have to find myself a new dental hygienist."

I laugh in spite of myself. He kisses me once more, and then he's out the door. I listen to his footsteps on the stairs and the heavy front door of the building swinging shut behind him. I get up, wrapped in my sheet, and stand at the window to watch him walk under the streetlights toward Dodge Street until I can't see him anymore.

Back in bed, I lie there staring at the water stain on my ceiling with a crumpled receipt in my fist. Tomorrow - today, I guess - is Saturday, so I don't have to stick my hands in anybody's mouth for two whole days. I should be wondering whether he'll actually call, or whether I'll ever see him again, or what Marybeth would say if she knew. Instead, all I can think

about is what Tokyo looks like from thirty thousand feet, and how badly I wish I was on that plane.

3

~ Matthew ~

It takes an awful lot of willpower to leave Jenna's arms, her bed, and her apartment at three in the morning. I wouldn't do it for anything less important than my job. In fact, Michael Donovan and the Gulfstream are just about the only things that can get me out of bed at that time in the morning, let alone the bed of a beautiful, wonderful, charismatic woman such as Jenna.

I make the short walk back to the restaurant we ate at just a few hours before and find my car sitting alone and forlorn in the parking lot. There's no sign of life at this hour. In a place like Omaha at three in the morning, there's not a whole lot of anything going on. If I strain my ears, I can practically hear the tumbleweeds blowing across the empty downtown streets. This place might look like a dense, sprawling, urban metropolis, but it's still part of the American Heartland through and through. I get in my car, fire up the engine, and head across town through empty streets and plenty of green traffic lights all the way to the hangar.

This place, at least, never seems to sleep. You can always count on that. Airports and private hangars are like bustling city landscapes, where nothing and nobody ever sleeps. There's always some work to be done; maintenance to complete, a plane to inspect, checklists to be marked. Even now, in the middle of the night, all the lights are blazing bright and small armies of mechanics rush back and forth in their reflective jackets. I roll toward the vehicle drop-off point and leave the car with the rental team, before walking across to Michael Donvan's hangar.

This sight of the Gulfstream never fails to take my breath away. She is, in a word, *majestic*. A sleek, beautiful, perfectly engineered aircraft. The kind of plane every pilot dreams of being able to fly, the absolute pinnacle of aviation. The top tier of the entire industry. It feels like the last hundred

years of engineering have led exactly to this stunning piece of technological prowess.

She's waiting for me in the hangar, exactly where I left her. But today she's not alone. There's a small team of engineers standing by, inspecting every single inch of the aircraft. They've been examining her ever since we disembarked yesterday, running through all the checklists, all the mechanical inspections, all the tests. There are hundreds of thousands of vital points on an aircraft and it's up to incredibly skilled people like these to make sure that everything is in perfect working order every single time we take off.

Just like me, they've had the call from Mr. Donovan and they've leapt into action to run through their final preparations. I chat with Danny, the head of the team, while he finishes the last part of his list. He runs through everything the team has inspected and hands me a clipboard filled with dozens of bullet points. Each one marked by a single tick as they were inspected and verified and passed.

I thank him and begin my own inspection of the plane. It's not as thorough as his, but it's every bit as essential. I double check the parts that I know and confirm that I'm satisfied with the work carried out.

Danny says, "Hey, so Tokyo, huh? Never been."

"Me neither. Don't know how much we'll get to see of the city, but it should be pretty good."

"Got plenty of fuel ready to load just as soon as you give the final figure."

"Thanks."

By the time we're all finished and satisfied with the work, the deep, dark sky has given way to the gray pre-dawn light. A short, powerful box truck clamps on to the jet's front wheel and eases it out of the hangar. The fuel truck rolls into position beside one wing and a team of guys clamp an enormous fuel line into place, injecting the jet with a payload enough to get us across the world.

While that's going on, I board the plane with a checklist of my own and begin running through all the most essential tasks in the cockpit. It's intense, tedious, routine, and utterly necessary. I check and double check each dial, switch, and essential display to make sure nothing's going to crap out on us mid-flight. I use a pen and paper to calculate the fuel load and make sure that all the numbers line up. The general rule with the fuel is to

take more than you need, then a buffer, and then get a little extra, just in case. You can always dump what you don't need, but you can never add additional fuel in the middle of a flight.

Once I've finished everything, dawn light begins to glow on the horizon; soft, distant, and orange, making the Nebraska skyline look uniquely beautiful. There truly is no sky like the sky in your own country. Even though I've never seen dawn break in Omaha before, there's something strangely nostalgic about it.

Now the hard part is done and I'm satisfied that the plane is ready for takeoff. There's still a little time before Mr. Donovan is due to arrive. I grab a fresh pilot uniform hanging in the cockpit and head down into the central hanger area. There are plenty of facilities here for the pilots, where everyone can rest, recuperate, and get cleaned up between shifts. I take a quick shower and shave the shadow on my chin and get dressed. By the time I put the final button into place on my crisp white shirt, I look nothing like the half-tired, well-fucked man who came in here a few hours before. It's almost seven-thirty in the morning. All I have to do is wait for the boss to show up, and we'll hit the runway whenever he wants.

I grab a coffee and sit on one of the comfortable chairs in the pilot's lounge. There's a couple of other guys here, both looking pretty tired, either about to hit the sack or just got out of it. They're older than me, with weathered faces and deep, wrinkled brows and fading hairlines. They give me a courtesy nod, the token male greeting, and resume their conversation.

I sip cheap coffee from a Styrofoam cup and look at my phone. Jenna's number is right there, first in line, a new contact. It was kind of unusual of me to swap details like that. I don't normally take a woman's number. As a matter of fact, when I first invited her to dinner, I had half an idea that whatever happened between us would be a one-and-done deal. Or maybe I'd look her up whenever I was in town for another quick roll in the hay.

But now, several hours later, I'm staring at her number and wondering if maybe it could be something more than that. It's tricky to explain. We had chemistry together, a strange spark that I can't deny. It was the kind of connection that a man or woman only really experiences when there's something far more special than a simple hook up and throw down.

My thumb hovers over the green call button and I debate for a long moment whether to ring Jenna. The only thing really holding me back is that it's early. I've already woken her once this morning, when I slipped out

of bed and left her behind. That's not something I'm proud of doing and the last thing I want is for her to think that it was my way of skipping out in the middle of the night. But still, I want Jenna to know that I am thinking about her. I take a mouthful of frankly inadequate coffee as liquid courage and thumb the call button. The dial tone chirps in my ear a couple of times and then she picks up. Her voice is tired but still warm.

"Hello Mr. Hale. Good morning."

"Good morning Jenna. I just wanted to - well, I just wanted to call. And say hi. So… hi."

She laughs. "You're not in Tokyo yet, surely? I mean, you said it was a good jet but it can't be that good."

We both laugh together. I say, "No. I've just finished all the pre-flight checks and changed into my uniform. Now I'm ready to go. Just waiting for the boss and then we'll take off as soon as we've got clearance. So maybe another couple of hours at most."

"I see."

There's a strange kind of silence down the line for a few seconds as though we both have something to say but we're quite sure how to say it. I go first.

"Hey, look, I just want to apologize for believing so abruptly. I promise, it's not something that I wanted to do. Hooking up and bailing is not my style. To be honest, I was hoping you could show me a good breakfast joint in town."

I can hear the happiness in her voice. "The only breakfast worth having is the one I make for you."

That puts a smile on my face in a way that I can't really explain. Having dinner with Jenna was wonderful. Making love to Jenna was sensational. The idea of sharing breakfast with her, even in that tiny cramped apartment, is delightful.

"Damn, that is a shame. Rain check? I'll take you up on that offer next time I'm in town."

"Sure," she says although it sounds like she's trying to put on a falsely optimistic voice. She hesitates for a second or two. "Do, um, do you know when you'll be back this way?"

I suck air through my teeth. "I don't want to make any concrete plans. For the moment, all I know is that I've got to fly the jet to Tokyo for Monday morning. I don't know if that means I'll be there for a day, a week,

two weeks, or fly to plenty of other appointments and meetings across Japan and Asia or if we'll come straight home. I know which one I'd prefer."

"Me too." There's a soft giggle down the line. "Hey, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure, anything."

"Send me a picture of yourself in your pilot's uniform. It'd be nice to have a proper contact for you in my phone."

"Absolutely. I'll do it now. Maybe I could get a picture of you as well. It'll be nice to see your face while I'm on the other side of the world."

I can see that wonderful smile on her soft lips and see the little gleam of happiness in her eyes. I wonder where she is right now. Maybe still in bed, her hair a mess from last night's energetic passion. The sheets are probably still creased and thrown around from all our frantic movement. Or maybe she put some clothes on after I left, slightly ashamed of herself for hopping into bed with the guy she hardly knows.

Jenna says, "Give me a call when you're in Tokyo. You can describe the sights to me."

"Sure. I'll try to time the call so I don't wake you. Big time difference between here and there."

"Oh, I don't care about that," she says. "Honestly, I'd rather hear your voice than sleep."

My heart lifts in my chest. I tell myself to calm down. Am I blushing? Am I a teenager crushing on his teacher? I say, "No problem."

She says, "I'm going to get up and make coffee. Speak soon?"

"Alright. See you next time, Jenna."

I end the call and lean back in my chair, gazing out through the windows. I admire the airstrip and the controlled chaos unfolding in every direction. Various crews prepare the planes in a coordinated effort, each individual person moving through their own tasks while also being part of a huge, organised whole. Early morning sunlight glints and glimmers off the sleek, metallic bodies of the various planes that aren't already under vast hanger canopies.

One of the older pilots looks at me with a raised eyebrow. He gives a little amused snicker and says, "Ah, young love."

I meet his challenge. "I don't know about love. Just met her last night, but we connected. It was good."

“Oh, they *connected*,” says the other pilot, with a little smirk. “I love a good *connection.* That's why I have so many of them. Here, New York, Paris… connections all over the place.”

The two old guys chuckle to each other. I shake my head and force a smile and drain the rest of my coffee. Deep down, I hope I’m not as cynical and bitter as these guys when I’m that age. As I finish drinking, the familiar shape of the boss’s car rolls into the visitor’s bay. I grab my things and stroll out of the lounge to meet him.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning, Matthew.” He has deep, tired lines on his face, but those eyes shimmer with boyish energy. We shake hands in greeting. “I’m sorry to wake you in the middle of the night. I know I promised you a week off.”

“Not a problem, sir. That’s what you pay me for.”

He gives a grateful smile and pats me on the shoulder. He’s about to say something, but stops and studies my face instead. A small grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. I start to worry that I’ve made some stupid mistake.

“What’s wrong? Have I missed a spot?” I rub my cheeks and chin, but no. My skin is smooth and clean. No errant patches of stubble that the razor missed.

He says, “You met someone, didn’t you?”

I can’t hide my surprise. “How in the hell did you know that?”

“You can’t fool me. I can see it all over your face. Come on. I know a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell, so you can spare me those details. Who is she?”

“Her name’s Jenna. She’s the dental hygienist I said I was going to meet.”

“Picking up a woman in her workplace? Impressive, Matthew. Is she a good woman?”

“Sure,” I say, trying to play it cool. “I mean, we only had dinner and… after. But from that, I’d say she’s good. Honest. Charming. Pleasant. I have no complaints. She showed me the best steak house in Omaha. I skipped out on her in the middle of the night. But I have her number, so I can make up for it next time.”

With that, I force a laugh. But Michael Donovan’s face doesn’t seem amused. Unlike the pilots in the lounge who acted like your stereotypical jocks, he’s a little more sensitive to male-female dynamics.

“You intend to see this woman again when we’re back in town?” His tone is thoughtful and his face is serious.

“Yes, sir. I would like that. She was very nice. Sweet. Thoughtful. We had a connection, I guess that’s the best way to describe it.”

He rubs his chin. “Do you think she’d be interested in moonlighting as an air stewardess? Just for a shift or two. For this trip out East and back. Or is she dedicated to her career in the dental hygiene industry?”

Again, he takes me completely by surprise. My jaw drops and I have to recover before responding.

“Oh, well, I can tell you that she is a good dental hygienist, but she is absolutely not married to it. Actually, it’s kind of the opposite. She would love a change of scenery. Figuratively and literally. Why do you ask?”

He shrugs. “Take it from me, it’s not often that you feel a connection with somebody you’ve only just met. Trust me on that, Matthew. I’ve got a couple of years on you. But to be honest, I think it would be nice if somebody could bring me a coffee while I’m working. Mid-flight.” He checks his watch and adds, “Look, we’ve got maybe an hour before they’ll even give us clearance to get in line. Why don’t you give her a call?”

My phone is in my hand before I even think about what he’s asking. Jenna’s number is right there, waiting for me to dial.

~ Jenna ~

I'm standing in my kitchen in nothing but an oversized T-shirt, waiting for the coffee maker to finish gurgling, when I catch myself grinning at the toaster. Matt called. He actually called, at seven-thirty on a Saturday morning, from an airport hangar, just to say hi. I've dated guys who couldn't manage to text me back within three business days. I pour myself a cup and lean against the counter, scrolling to his number so I can stare at it for a while longer.

Then it lights up in my hand. His name is right there on the screen, and I almost drop my mug.

"Did you forget something?" I ask. "Because if it's your underwear, I didn't see any."

He laughs, but he sounds nervous, which is not something I've heard from him before. "No, nothing like that. Listen, Jenna, this is going to sound crazy, so I need you to hear me out before you say anything."

"Okay," I tell him, and I set the mug down on the counter.

"Mr. Donovan needs someone to work the cabin on this trip. Coffee, meals, that kind of thing. He asked me if you might be interested. He'd pay you, obviously, and he'd fly you home whenever you wanted to go."

I laugh out loud. I can't help it. It's the most ridiculous thing anyone has ever said to me, and I once had a patient propose to me with a mouth full of cotton rolls. Then I realize he isn't laughing along with me.

"Wait, you're serious."

"Dead serious. It's Tokyo, Jenna. We take off in about an hour."

"An hour?" My voice comes out as a squeak. I look down at my bare legs and my chipped toenail polish and the dishes still sitting in the sink. "Matt, I can't go to Tokyo in an hour. I can't go to Tokyo at all. I don't even have a..."

I stop talking because something is nagging at the back of my mind, and it has to do with the junk drawer.

"Hold on a second," I tell him, and I set the phone on the counter without hanging up.

Every apartment I've ever lived in has had one drawer where things go to die, and mine is the one to the left of the stove. I yank it open and dig past takeout menus, dead batteries, three chargers for phones I don't own anymore, and the instruction manual for a blender I threw out two years ago. At the very bottom, under a stack of birthday cards from my grandmother, I find a navy blue booklet with a gold eagle stamped on the cover.

I got it the summer I turned nineteen. A group of girls from my high school class were planning two weeks in Paris, and I worked double shifts at Dairy Queen all spring to save up for my share. I sent in the passport application the same week I paid my deposit. A month later, the whole trip fell apart over a fight about whose boyfriend was allowed to come along, and I never saw that deposit again. The passport showed up in the mail a few weeks after that. I remember looking at my terrible photo and shoving it in a drawer so I wouldn't have to think about Paris anymore.

I flip it open. Every page is blank, and the expiration date is next April.

I pick the phone back up. "Matt? Are you still there?"

"Still here."

"I have a passport." It sounds strange when I say it out loud. "I've had it for nine years, and I've never used it once."

"Does that mean what I think it means?"

I look around my tiny apartment, at the Eiffel Tower poster over the sofa and the laundry I still haven't folded. The receipt with his number on it is sitting on the coffee table where I left it last night. On Monday morning, my first patient is a man named Gary who has needed a crown for two years, refuses to get one, and brings a coffee for himself at every visit but never one for me.

"Yes," I say. "God help me, yes."

"I'll text you the address of the hangar. Get here as fast as you can. Pack for warm weather and a couple of nice outfits, and don't worry about anything else. Mr. Donovan will take care of the rest."

He hangs up before I can change my mind, which is probably smart of him.

I've never packed so fast in my life. I drag my one suitcase out of the hall closet, the same one I've taken to my parents' house every Thanksgiving since college, and start throwing things into it without much of a plan. I have no idea what the weather is like in Tokyo in October, and there's no time to look it up, so I pack a little of everything. Sundresses, jeans, two sweaters, the black dress I wore to my cousin's wedding, and every pair of underwear I own that doesn't have a hole in it. I take the world's quickest shower and pull my wet hair back into a ponytail, because there's no time to dry it.

On my way out the door, I spot Matt's leather jacket draped over the back of the couch. He must have forgotten it in the dark when he left. I fold it over my arm and tell myself I'm only bringing it so I can give it back to him.

My Uber driver is a retired guy named Walt who wants to talk about the Huskers the whole way to the airport. I nod along without hearing a word he says. While he drones on about the offensive line, I pull up my office manager's number and stare at it. Deb runs our office like a prison warden, and she has written me up twice this year, once for being ninety seconds late and once for wearing the wrong color scrubs on a Tuesday. I know exactly what she's going to say. I call her anyway and pray it goes to voicemail, and for once in my life, I get lucky.

"Hi, Deb, it's Jenna," I say after the beep. "I'm not going to be able to come in next week. Something came up, a family thing, and I'm really sorry about the short notice. I'll call you when I know more."

I hang up before I can take any of it back. I have never lied to get out of work, and my stomach is doing flips. Underneath the guilt, though, there's something else, something I haven't felt in so long that it takes me a minute to put a name to it.

I'm excited.

Walt follows his GPS past the main terminal and down a service road to a gate with a guard booth. The guard checks my driver's license against a list on his clipboard, finds my name, and waves us through. I didn't know places like this existed in Omaha. I definitely didn't know my name could end up on a list for one.

The jet is sitting on the tarmac outside an enormous hangar with the morning sun bouncing off its white body. It's bigger than I expected, long and sleek, with a pointed nose and a row of oval windows down the side. I've seen private jets in movies, but I've never seen one up close, and I have to remind myself to close my mouth. A man in a gray suit is standing near the bottom of the stairs, talking on his phone, and standing right next to him is Matt.

He sent me a picture of himself in his uniform while I was packing, just like I asked, and I've already looked at it about forty times. It doesn't come close to the real thing. The crisp white shirt, the stripes on his shoulders, the hat. He spots me climbing out of Walt's Corolla, and the smile that spreads across his face makes the whole crazy morning worth it.

"You made it," he says, taking my suitcase from me.

"Barely." I hold out his jacket. "You left this at my place."

"I was wondering where that went." He drapes it over the handle of my suitcase and leans in to kiss my cheek. He's on his best behavior, I realize, because his boss is standing right there.

The man in the gray suit finishes his call and walks over with his hand out. He's older than Matt, in his mid-forties maybe, with graying hair and kind eyes.

"You must be Jenna. Michael Donovan. Thank you for doing this on such short notice."

"Thank you for asking me," I tell him, shaking his hand. "I should probably warn you, though, I've never done anything like this before. The closest I've come is handing out free toothbrushes."

He laughs. "You'll be fine. Mostly I need someone to keep the coffee coming and make sure I eat something besides peanuts. Matthew tells me

you're a quick study."

I glance at Matt, who is very busy looking at his shoes.

Mr. Donovan asks to see my passport so the crew can file it with the flight plan. I hand it over, and he flips through all those empty pages before raising an eyebrow at me.

"First stamp?"

"First anything," I admit.

He smiles and hands it back. "Then we'd better make it a good one."

The inside of the plane is nicer than any house I've ever been in. There are cream leather seats that look more like armchairs, a long sofa, polished wood on every surface, and carpet so thick my sneakers sink into it. Matt walks me back to the galley, which is bigger than my kitchen, and shows me where everything is. The coffee machine grinds its own beans, and there are real ceramic mugs in a cabinet built to hold them in place during turbulence. He seems prouder of that coffee machine than he is of the plane itself.

When he's finished showing me how to work it, he glances over his shoulder to make sure we're alone. Then he backs me up against the counter and kisses me properly, the way he did last night, and for a few seconds I forget all about Mr. Donovan and Deb and the fact that I'm about to fly halfway around the world with a man I met yesterday afternoon.

"Second thoughts?" he asks when he pulls away.

"Only about a hundred of them."

"And?"

"Ask me again over the Pacific."

He grins and taps the brim of his hat at me, then heads up to the cockpit. I find a seat across the aisle from Mr. Donovan, who already has his laptop open and his reading glasses on. I fasten my seatbelt and pull it tight, then pull it tighter.

A minute later, Matt's voice comes over the speaker. "Good morning, Mr. Donovan, and welcome aboard, Miss Vickers. We've been cleared for departure. Flight time to Tokyo is a little over thirteen hours, and the weather looks good the whole way. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

Mr. Donovan looks up from his laptop and gives me a wink. The engines rise from a hum to a roar, and the plane starts rolling. We pick up speed faster than I thought possible, and I grip the armrests as the runway blurs

past my window. Then the wheels leave the ground, and my stomach drops, and I'm pressed back into the soft leather as we climb.

I press my forehead to the window and watch Omaha get smaller. I can pick out downtown, then the river, then the grid of streets and parking lots, and then nothing but cornfields stretching out in every direction. I've spent my whole life down there, feeling trapped. From up here, it doesn't look like a trap. It just looks small.

My phone buzzes in my lap. I turn it over and see Deb's name on the screen, along with the first few words of a text. I don't read the rest. I switch my phone to airplane mode, which is the first time I've ever done that on an actual airplane, and turn back to the window just as the clouds close over Nebraska.

I expected to feel scared, or at least a little guilty. What I feel instead is relief.

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4

~ Matthew ~

In all the years I've been a pilot, I've never been this nervous during take-off before. I force myself to knuckle down and focus on the essentials. Thankfully, I'm well trained, focused, and disciplined, so it's not too difficult to push all thoughts of Jenna Vickers out of my mind and concentrate on the job in hand. I run through every step of the long, convoluted, intensive process, and by the time the jet is taxiing down the runway and picking up speed, I'm not even thinking about anything beyond the cockpit. The jet becomes an extension of my own body. When I ease back and give the yoke a gentle tug, the nose of the jet lifts from the ground and points toward the horizon. It feels as natural and effortless as breathing. The jet ascends toward the heavens, leaving the world behind. One moment, we're bound by the laws of gravity. The next, we're airborne.

I steal a few quick glimpses at Nebraska from above while tilting the craft toward the flight corridor assigned to me by air traffic control. From above, it is a big, empty place. Omaha looks as big as a coin from this height, surrounded by vast expanses of great green nothingness; just fields of corn stretching in all directions. It's hard to imagine someone living in such a place for their entire life without having the chance to escape and try something new. My heart goes out to Jenna, but I still can't think about her yet.

The first thirty minutes of any flight is the longest and shortest at the same time. As a pilot, I'm so busy running through hundreds of individual lists – both mental and physical – confirming, reconfirming, checking and double checking everything I've done that there is precious little brainpower for anything else. Once the plane reaches altitude, I begin to sit more comfortably in my chair and guide us along the prescribed flight corridor. Now I finally allow myself a small smile of satisfaction on another takeoff well done. I open the microphone and talk to the passengers in the back.

"Good morning Mr. Donovan and Miss Vickers. We are now at cruising altitude, so please feel free to get up and stretch your legs. The weather

ahead looks clear. We don't currently predict any turbulence or bumpiness in our flight path. If that changes, I will press the seatbelt button and ask you to get comfortable again. Have a restful and productive flight. Thank you."

I flick off the button and get comfortable. This is going to be a long flight, but not a bad one. I maintain contact with air traffic control as we pass over the incredible, endless expanse of America, heading toward the ocean beyond it. At this moment, the ocean is barely visible as a pale, shimmering blue strip, somewhere on the farthest horizon. It's little more than a faint glow in the morning sunshine, a trick of the light cast by the curvature of the earth.

After maybe ninety minutes of flying, there is a soft knock at the door connecting the cockpit to the rest of the plane. The sound takes me by surprise at first. It's been quite a while since I flew a commercial jet and had various flight attendants wrapping on that door. Mr. Donovan tends to leave me alone while we're flying, which means there's only one person who might want my attention. Now we're cruising, the jet is on autopilot, meaning that it's going to maintain this speed, this altitude, and exactly these settings until I decide otherwise. I get up from my seat and unlock the door.

Jenna stands on the other side, but not the Jenna I know. She's wearing a similar blue jacket to myself. A cute air stewardess-style hat rests on her head at a jaunty angle. If I didn't know better, I'd believe she was a career flyer. She smiles and nods down to the tray of coffee and snacks she holds.

"Good morning Mr. Hale. May I offer you a refreshment?"

It's impossible not to smile. "Of course. Thank you, Ms. Vickers."

I glance over her shoulder, down into the cabin. Mr. Donovan is already hard at work on his laptop, but he pauses just long enough to meet my eyes and smile. A curious flood of relief ripples through my chest. Until that moment, I wasn't aware how much I needed the boss to like this woman. This is after all, his jet, his company, his dime. If he wanted, he could instruct me to land at some other airfield in the middle of nowhere, USA, and order Jenna to leave and I would have no choice but to do as instructed. But it seems that he's as charmed by her as I am. Her smile brightens. I step back into the cockpit and let her in.

"Would you mind placing that down there, please?"

"Of course, Mr. Hale."

She follows me into the cockpit and sets the tray down on a fold-out table hinged on the back wall. It's out of my sight and out of my reach when I'm sitting down, but that's the point. A pilot is not supposed to have any distractions. I return to the pilot's seat. Jenna brings the coffee over and I take it with gratitude. I say, "Have you ever seen the world from this view before?"

"No. I've never even…" She lets the thought linger.

I nod to the empty seat beside me. "Go ahead. Sit down, take a minute."

Jenna sinks into the copilot seat and gazes through the windows of the Gulfstream, looking across the world at thirty thousand feet. White clouds hang in the air all around us – above, below, to the side. At this height, they seem less like one giant meteorological mass of pillowy marshmallow and more like a series of separate and unconnected islands made of cotton candy. The beautiful blue sky is above us. Bright morning sun beams across the world from behind the jet, giving the endless vista a beautiful golden hue. Miles and miles below us is a swath of undetailed green and brown and yellow streaks, like paint daubed on the canvas of the world. That series of loose brushstrokes is the place we both call home. Everything we've ever known is so tiny and far away and inferior.

I cast a furtive glance in her direction, watching her reaction to seeing this incredible sight for the very first time in her life. Her beautiful eyes shimmer with emotion. Her lips are parted. She gazes at the world with breathless joy, exactly the way I once saw it. It's still special to me, but nothing ever beats the first time.

"Wow," Jenna says, her voice soft. "Oh, wow. No wonder you like doing this job."

I toast her with my cup. "It's something special, isn't it?"

"More than special. It's stunning. Thank you for… well, everything."

I smile at her across the central control column. I haven't had a co-pilot flying beside me in the Gulfstream before now. Matter of fact, I haven't had a co-pilot since my commercial days. It's nice to have the presence of somebody else again. Especially someone as engaging and attractive as her. I say, "I love the hat. Don't tell me you brought that with you from home?"

She laughs and reaches up, fingers brushing the hat though she'd forgotten it was there. "No, this isn't mine. Mr. Donovan found it in one of the overhead storage lockers. Apparently, it came with the jet. I've never been much of a hat girl, but I could get used to this one."

“It suits you.”

I sip the coffee. It’s sensational. The coffee on board this jet is always fantastic, but coffee made by someone else always has that extra flavor. I let her enjoy the view again for a moment before I speak.

“Thanks for coming. I know it probably seems insane, now that I think about it. We barely know each other, and I just told you to drop everything and hop on a flight to the other side of the world.”

Jenna laughs. “Honestly, Matthew, it is insane. I know I probably need my head examined for even doing it, but how often will I get a chance like this? If I didn’t do it, I’d regret it forever. I spent my whole life just spinning my wheels, stuck in one spot. It’s like I’ve never been able to move. Sometimes it feels like my life is on the Monopoly board. I’m constantly moving past Go, but never collecting my two hundred bucks. Does that make sense?”

“It does. It makes perfect sense to me.”

She says, “Well, I should get back to work. I don’t think Mr. Donovan invited me on board so I could sit and chat with you. As much as I’d like that.”

“I would, too. Thank you for the coffee.”

“Anytime. If you need another one, please don’t hesitate to ask. I am here to work, after all.”

There’s an excitement on her face that I’ve only seen twice before now. The first time was at dinner last night, when I described my job. The second time was during the early hours of this morning when I asked if she wanted to make love again.

Jenna rises from the co-pilot seat and straightens out her jacket, looking at me with pride. The jacket suits her. The color. The cut. The look. She bends and places her lips on mine. Just a fleeting, brief, stolen kiss. But that touch of our lips tells me everything about how much this means to her and how grateful she is. Jenna turns and walks out of the cockpit, pulling the door behind her. I hear her voice briefly.

“May I offer you anything, Mr. Donovan?”

Then the door clicks shut, leaving me alone, soaring above the world.

It’s a strange sensation, flying like this. Jenna and I, we barely know one another. Yet it feels like I’ve known her my whole life. This might be the first time I’ve ever flown a plane where one of the passengers was someone

I cared about. Of course, back in my commercial flying days, I enjoyed the attention and the company of more than a handful of flight attendants. But that, as crude as it may sound, was different. There's an unspoken rule in that kind of work. It's almost expected that men and women who fly together in small teams like that will inevitably hook up at some point. That's part of the job really. Long shifts, distant countries, cramped hotel rooms. Inevitable.

Even though Jenna is someone I just met yesterday, and we aren't boyfriend and girlfriend, and we're not lovers, and we're not even dating in the traditional sense, I care about her more than I can admit. It's a strange thing to acknowledge. But it's the truth.

The jet soars over America and reaches the coastal cities, then begins the long, long stretch of the journey crossing the vast and endless ocean. I get a feeling in my belly and I haven't felt before for a long, long time. It's excitement. I'm excited about this. Excited about showing Jenna the sights of Tokyo and experiencing them with her for the first time. I'm already excited about the prospect of spending more time with her during this fleeting visit to Japan.

Sure, we might not be boyfriend and girlfriend. We might not be dating. We might not even be "official", whatever that word means in this day and age. But I feel like what we have is something better, something different, something wholly unique. And I for one, I'm excited to see where it goes next.

I reach over to the microphone button and flick the switch.

"Good afternoon Mr. Donovan and Miss Vickers. We're about to begin our approach into Japanese airspace. Please get comfortable and fasten your seatbelts."

~ Jenna ~

The first thing I notice about Japan is how neat it is. Even from the air, as we come down over Tokyo Bay, everything looks like someone took the time to line it up properly. The buildings sit in tidy rows. The boats in the harbor all seem to point in the same direction. When the wheels touch down, it's so smooth I don't realize we've landed until Mr. Donovan closes his laptop and says, "Welcome to Tokyo, Jenna."

I spent the last hour of the flight in the bathroom trying to fix my hair, and I'm still wearing the jacket and hat Mr. Donovan dug out of the overhead locker. I keep meaning to take the hat off, but every time I reach for it, I remember the look on Matt's face when he saw me in it, and I leave it right where it is.

There's no long line at customs, one of the perks of flying private. A man in a crisp uniform meets us in a small terminal that looks more like a hotel lobby than an airport. He bows, takes our passports, and walks them over to an officer sitting behind a desk. I watch her flip through those nine years of empty pages until she finds the first one. Then she stamps it, and the sound is so loud and final that I flinch.

When the man hands my passport back, I don't put it away. I stand in the middle of the terminal, holding it open, looking at the little red rectangle with the date and the word Haneda printed inside. One corner is smudged, but it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"You know, it doesn't go anywhere if you close it," Matt says. He finishes his paperwork for the plane and comes up beside me without me noticing, trying hard not to laugh.

I deadpan him. "I'm aware of how passports work, thank you."

"Just checking. You've been staring at it for about five minutes."

"Three," I tell him, tucking it into my jacket pocket, right over my heart, where I can feel it.

Mr. Donovan has a car waiting for us outside, a long black sedan with a driver in white gloves who opens the door for me and bows when I thank him. I slide into the back seat and spend the entire ride with my face pressed against the window. Tokyo goes on forever. Elevated highways stack on top of each other, with train tracks running between them, and buildings so tall I have to tilt my head back against the glass to see where they end. Every sign glows in colors I didn't know signs came in. On one corner, I see a vending machine selling hot drinks in cans; on the next, a temple sits between two office towers, as if it got there first and refuses to leave.

Mr. Donovan spends most of the ride on the phone, but when he hangs up, he catches me gawking and smiles.

"I remember my first time here," he says. "I didn't sleep for two days. I just walked."

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep either," I admit.

"Good. Don't waste it." He hands me a little envelope with the hotel's crest on the front. "That's your room key. I'll be in meetings most of tomorrow, so you're on your own until the flight home. Order whatever you like and charge it to the room."

I open my mouth to tell him that's too generous, but he's already back on his phone. I look over at Matt, and he just shrugs, as if this is the kind of thing that happens to him all the time. Maybe it is.

My room is on the thirty-eighth floor. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. The whole far wall is one giant window, floor to ceiling, and the city spreads out on the other side, lit up as far as I can see. There's a bathtub big enough for two people, a robe hanging on the back of the door, and a pair of slippers lined up neatly at the foot of a bed that could sleep my entire family. I sit down on the edge of it and bounce a little, just to see. It doesn't creak at all.

There's a knock on my door before I've even unpacked. It's Matt, out of his uniform and back in jeans and a sweater, looking every bit as tired as I feel.

"We should sleep," he says.

"We should," I agree.

"Or we could go out for an hour or two. Fight the jet lag. It's supposed to be the best way to adjust."

"Is that true, or are you making it up?"

He grins. "Does it matter?"

We take the subway to Shibuya, because Matt says I haven't seen Tokyo until I've seen the crossing. He's right. When the lights change, people pour into the intersection from every direction at once, hundreds and hundreds of them, and somehow nobody bumps into anybody. Matt takes my hand so we don't get separated. We walk across with the crowd, and when we reach the other side, I make him turn around so we can do it again.

After that, we wander. We end up in a narrow alley lined with tiny bars, each one no bigger than my treatment room back home, with lanterns hanging over the doors. Matt picks one at random. There are eight stools along a wooden counter and an old man behind it grilling skewers over a little charcoal grill. He doesn't speak any English, and we don't speak any Japanese, so we point at things on the menu that look interesting and hope for the best. Some of it is chicken. Some of it I decide I don't want to know

about. All of it is delicious. The old man pours us two cold beers in tiny glasses, and he smiles every time Matt tries to say thank you in Japanese.

"*Arigato*," Matt tells him for the fourth time.

The old man shakes his head, still laughing, and says something to the woman sitting next to me. She leans over and tells me in perfect English, "He says your boyfriend has a very strong American accent."

I don't correct her about the boyfriend part. Neither does Matt.

By the time we get back to the hotel, it's almost midnight, and I've been awake for something like thirty hours. I should be exhausted. Instead, I feel wide awake and a little bit drunk, and not only from the beer. Matt walks me to my door, and I take his hand and pull him inside before he can even pretend to say goodnight.

I don't turn on the lights. I don't need to. The whole city is glowing through that window, and it's more than enough to see by.

He kisses me in the middle of the room, and I start pulling his sweater up over his head before he's even finished. Last night, at my place, he took his time with me, and I loved every second of it. Tonight I don't want to wait. I unbutton his jeans and push them down his hips, and he laughs against my mouth and tells me to slow down. I tell him to shut up and help me with my zipper.

When we're both naked, he turns me around to face the window. I put my hands flat against the cool glass and look down at the city, at all those lights and all those people going about their lives thirty-eight floors below me. Matt presses up behind me and kisses the back of my neck. His hands slide around my waist and up over my breasts, and he holds me there for a long moment while we both look out at Tokyo.

"Nobody can see us up here," he murmurs against my ear.

"I don't care if they can."

That surprises me as much as it surprises him. He lets out a low groan and slides one hand down between my legs, and I'm so ready for him that my knees almost give out. He teases me with his fingers until I'm pushing back against his hand and begging him. Then he nudges my feet apart and slides into me from behind, and I gasp so loud I fog up the glass.

He holds my hips and takes me in long, deep strokes, and I brace myself against the window and push back to meet every one of them. The city blurs in front of me. I can see our reflection in the glass, faint and ghostly over all those lights, his body moving against mine, my mouth open. I've never

watched myself like this before. I can't look away. When he reaches around and finds me with his fingers again, it doesn't take long at all. I cum with my forehead pressed to the glass, crying out his name, and he follows right behind me with his arms wrapped tight around my waist.

Afterward, we make it to the bed before we collapse. He falls asleep almost at once, one arm thrown across me, his face buried in my hair. I lie there listening to him breathe and waiting for sleep to come, but it never does. My body has no idea what time it is. It's somewhere around ten in the morning in Omaha, and my brain knows it.

Eventually, I give up. I slide out from under his arm, wrap myself in the hotel robe, and dig my phone out of my jacket pocket. My passport comes out with it, and I flip it open one more time to look at the stamp. Then I sit down in the armchair by the window and switch my phone back on for the first time since we left Nebraska.

It takes a full minute to catch up. There are four texts from Marybeth, each one more frantic than the last, the final one just a string of question marks. There's a missed call from my mom, who probably wants to know if I'm coming for dinner next Sunday. And there's Deb's text, the one I refused to read on the runway.

~ Jenna, a "family thing" on a Saturday morning with no details? I've heard that one before. Don't bother coming in Monday or any other day. Your final check will be mailed to your home address. ~

I read it twice. Then I read it a third time to make sure I'm not missing anything.

I wait for the panic to hit me. I've just lost my job, the one I've complained about every day for two years, but it was still a job. It paid my rent and my car insurance and kept my refrigerator mostly full. I should be scared. I should be calculating how many weeks I can last on what's in my savings account, and whether my dad will let me borrow money without making me sit through the speech.

The panic never comes. I sit there in my robe, high above Tokyo, with my first passport stamp in one hand and my phone in the other, and I laugh so hard I have to cover my mouth so I don't wake Matt.

There's nothing waiting for me back in Omaha. No job, no Gary, no Deb, no HR manual. For the first time in my life, there's nothing holding me in place at all.

I look out at the lights stretching all the way to the horizon, and I wonder where we're going next.

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5

~ Matthew ~

I sleep the most wonderful, restful sleep anyone can possibly enjoy. It's not merely an effect of this heavenly bed or this luxurious hotel room, but also the warmth of the woman who has shared it with me. My things are still in a suitcase in my room somewhere else on this floor. All I did was hang up my pilot uniform ready for the next shift and get changed. So far, I've spent more time in Jenna's room than in my own.

Something coaxes me back to consciousness from the blissful emptiness of this deep, peaceful slumber. There is a wonderful, wet, soft warmth on my body.

On a specific part of my body.

At first, it feels so gentle and serene that my mind mistakes it for part of a dream. Then my senses slowly kick back into gear like the lights flickering to life, one by one, in a warehouse, and I emerge from slumber. This is not a dream. These warm, wet, stimulating sensations are not part of my sleep. Far from it, in fact.

Reality is far, far sweeter than any figment of the imagination. A warm, wet, sensual caress glides up and down my manhood, gently yet lovingly, bringing me back to reality. I let out a moan of erotic contentment into the quiet room. My eyelids flutter open. The room is still mostly dark, but the glow of the Tokyo lights illuminate the space well enough to see. Through those huge windows, pre-dawn is beginning to flicker into life in the distant sky somewhere beyond this vast metropolis.

Jenna is not beside me, but I don't need to worry about where she might be. Even in my semi-conscious state, I already know. There is a human-sized mound beneath the sheets, between my legs, reaching all the way up to my groin. The topmost part of that mound is rising and falling in time with the wonderful warm feelings washing over my aching member.

I have never woken up to anything this exquisite. Usually, I'm groggy and bleary-eyed after a long flight, but this makes me feel more alive than I've felt in years. I relax into the sheets for a long, long moment, letting her enjoy me as much as she wants, loving her skill and enthusiasm and steady

control. I don’t pretend to be a lothario, nor do I pretend to be a prude, but you can tell when a woman performs an act because she wants to, and when she’s doing it out of obligation. What Jenna is doing right now is unmistakably the former.

Oh my god, I can feel that enthusiasm all the way down to my toes.

Finally, I lift the sheets and peek underneath, and see her shining, gleeful eyes looking back at me. I can’t help but smile.

“Good morning, Miss Vickers.”

She smiles up at me, her lips stretching around my aching shaft, buried deep in her throat. That’s all the response I need. I glance at my wrist, but my watch isn’t there.

“What time is it now?”

Jenna eases back, releasing me from her wet embrace, yet wraps her hand around my manhood, as if unwilling to let go even for a moment. She kisses one of my balls and says, “Don’t know.” She kisses the other. “Don’t care.”

She takes me back inside with even more eagerness than before. My hands grip the sheets so tight I almost rip them clean in half. I watch her bob up and down in my lap for several long, wonderful minutes. The sight of her in action is like nothing else in the world. I can’t get enough of this. The sight of her lips stretched around me; the way she leaves a glistening, gleaming trail of drool in her wake; the silky caress of her tongue. Her touch is so divine it almost brings me to the edge several times. I’m forced to bite the inside of my cheek to avoid overflowing too soon and ruining this wonderful moment.

Once Jenna is fully and completely satisfied, she releases me again with a wicked smile. My manhood pulses in the air, craving further stimulation. Jenna obliges. She climbs up the bed, mounting me. There’s no question what she wants and no doubt that she’s going to get it.

She guides the head of my manhood to her softest, warmest, most intimate place. We exchange a knowing, hungry look. Jenna slowly sinks over me. That perfect, delicious, silky tightness envelops my member in the most sacred way possible. We let out twin groans of unadulterated satisfaction. There is no feeling in the world as wonderful as this, and nobody in the world as wonderful to experience it with than Jenna.

I lace my fingers through hers and we slowly begin to work together, moving as one. We rise, fall, grind, pump. Every movement, methodical,

considered, carefully paced. Not as slow as we were the very first time. Not as rushed as we were earlier this evening. We exist in that sweet spot somewhere in between. The only urgency is our shared need to enjoy this to the full.

We sink into the exquisite, marshmallow-soft mattress together. The bed doesn't make a sound beneath us. She gazes down on me, wearing nothing but that sultry smile. The sight of her like this – so powerful, so divine, so perfectly feminine – makes my heart ache with joy.

"Somebody woke up on the right side of the bed."

She pokes her tongue out at me. "Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. I thought maybe, for your first experience of jetlag, you might be a little groggy. Maybe even kind of cranky. I'll take this any day."

She laughs, a breezy, wonderful, tinkling sound. The laugh of a woman with no cares at all. "I'm in a great mood. I got fired from my job."

My first instinct is to ask if she's okay and to show concern, but she smiles and laughs and says it again, as if loving the way it sounds.

"I got fired from my job! Oh, god, that's so good…"

"Me? Or the job?"

"Both." Jenna sinks onto me with a little more energy now, those hips beginning to buck faster as need overwhelms her. "It might be the best thing that's ever happened to me, Matt. For years I've been stuck in Omaha. Stuck in Nebraska. Trapped in a life I didn't even want. Too scared to move or break out. And now… now I've got nothing keeping me there. No reason to stay."

I start to roll my hips in response to her newfound urgency, driving up inside her, meeting each down stroke with a thrust of my own. Our breathing becomes harsh and ragged. Her breasts shake with the increasing momentum.

"And now, I can do anything I want," she says, her voice urgent, almost shrill. "I can go anywhere I want. You see, Matt? Isn't that the best feeling in the goddamn world? This is how I felt when I sat in the cockpit yesterday, above the clouds. This is how you see the world, isn't it? Endless potential. Limitless possibilities. No barriers. Nothing holding me back. When we get back to Omaha, I'm gonna pack my bag and do something new. Anything." She giggles and lets out a gasp. "Maybe I'll come out here to Tokyo. They need dental hygienists here, right? Especially ones who speak English."

Her bubbly giddiness almost makes me laugh. I say, “But don’t you hate being a dental hygienist?”

“Yeah, sure – oh! – but at least I’d be a dental hygienist in Tokyo!”

She tosses back her head and lets out a cry that fills the room and spurs me on, driving me wild. I’m on the cusp already, but I need to bring her there, too. I want to experience this together.

We fall into a tense silence. The only sounds in the room are the frantic, furious, wet impacts of skin colliding against skin, mixed with savage, harsh exhales and wordless groans of erotic satisfaction.

Desperation begins to overcome us both. Our steady, passionate love-making morphs into relentless, furious fucking. She lets go of my hands. She cups her breasts. Squeezes. Cries out to the ceiling in a blissful, erotic wail.

Jenna’s warmth tightens around me, clenching, squeezing. Her eyelids flutter. Her body tenses. I can feel her climax. So close. So close. Just a little more-

She finally cums. I climax with her, unable to hold any longer despite my best efforts. For one perfect moment, there is no sound in the room. Our bodies fall still. We inhale as one. We exhale as one; a long, furious burst of pleasure dispersed as a mutual wailing cry. She tightens around me. I erupt into her. We shudder together, convulsing with waves of delirious intensity. Jenna trembles above me. She holds still for a moment, as long as she can, allowing the aftershocks to gently roll through her. Then she falls forward onto me. Her head rests on my chest. Our bodies remain entwined in that perfect union. I drape my arms around her and kiss her damp forehead.

I’m filled with mixed emotions. What we just did was incredible. Beyond amazing. Truly, there are no words to describe it. But I also feel bad about costing this woman her job. That was not my intention when this opportunity came up, but it’s too late now. As they say, sorry doesn’t pay the bills. She lets out a soft, contented sigh and kisses my neck.

I say, “Well, this was the best wake-up call I’ve ever had.”

We giggle together, basking in the delicious glow of our shared warmth. I can feel my load clinging to her inner walls. It feels like bliss.

She says, “You’re more than welcome, Mr. Hale.”

“Hey, listen, I’m really sorry about your job.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t be. It was just a job. It was a shitty job and I hated it. The only good thing that’s ever come out of that job is you, Matt.

You. Honestly. It was all worth it to meet you and experience this. Not just the sex – although I'm not complaining."

"You're welcome," I say, with a chuckle.

"But you've shown me a whole other life that I can't really believe. I've had a blindfold over my eyes for my whole life. Now it's been taken off and I can see again. I've never felt so good." She giggles. "Hey, maybe I'll become a stewardess for real. I could use this as experience. Maybe I need a qualification or something, but I can go get one. I've done it before. If I work hard, if I can prove myself, I'll be fine. Yeah, I'll be fine."

I kiss her head again. "I'm happy if you're happy. That's all that matters."

"How long do we have in Tokyo?"

I point to my phone on the nightstand beside the bed. "When Michael Donovan calls that phone, we spring into action and head back to the jet. He's got a meeting in the city first thing in the morning. And then, who knows? He might stay a day, a week. Or he might need to shoot back home straight away. Anything could happen. He's an unpredictable guy. But that's the way I like it."

"I like unpredictable," Jenna says, her voice sounding sleepy now. "I've been predictable for so long. Same apartment, same routine, same route to work, same grocery list. A little unpredictable is nice. It's new, it's exciting."

I gently brush some hair out of her face. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking that if we don't fuck in that massive bathtub at least once, then we're going to have to come back to Tokyo."

We wake together, still entwined, and get ready for the day. I rush back to my room to grab a change of clothes. In the end, I bring my things back to Jenna's room. No sense pretending that we're going to spend any time apart during this trip.

We change into some fresh clothes and grab a late breakfast together at the hotel. We charge it to the room, as Mr. Donovan always insists we do. Once we're satisfied – and how could we not be? The food is every bit as stunning as the rest of the city – we walk out of the hotel and into downtown Tokyo, hand in hand.

The city is a different beast in the day. There's still just as many glaring neon lights, but they seem less twinkly and glamorous during the day. It's

still a beautiful place, filled with things to see and admire. Everywhere we look, we see something more breathtaking than before.

In all the times I've traveled with Mr. Donovan, I've never been able to share the experience with somebody else. Now that Jenna is here, we experience all the tourist things together. We visit as many stops as we can across Tokyo, zipping this way and that, consulting a fold-out map with such frequency that the seams begin to weaken. We laugh. We take pictures. We try our best to learn a few lines of Japanese from accommodating locals.

At some point in the late afternoon, Jenna poses for a picture. She stands against a railing overlooking a gorgeous view beyond, smiling into my phone as I tap the button. It's a nice photo. Jenna makes an excellent subject. But there's a strange lightness in my chest. I have this overwhelming need to sweep her into my arms and hold her tight and squeeze and never let go.

That's when I realize, as crazy as it might seem, that I don't really want Jenna to go back to Omaha and Nebraska and do something else. I don't want to be apart from her again.

~ Jenna ~

By the time we get back to the hotel, the sun has gone down, and my feet feel like I've walked across half of Japan. According to my phone's step counter, I pretty much have. I kick off my sneakers the second the door closes behind us, flop face down on the bed, and don't move for a good five minutes.

Matt sits in the armchair by the window and unlaces his shoes. He's been quiet since the afternoon, ever since he took that picture of me at the railing. I keep catching him looking at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention, with a funny expression I can't quite read. It isn't a bad look. It's more like the look he gets when he's working out fuel numbers on a notepad and doesn't like the total.

"You okay over there?" I ask into the comforter.

"Fine. Just tired."

"Well, I know a cure for that." I roll over and point at the bathroom door. "I made you a promise this morning, Mr. Hale, and I always keep my promises."

That at least gets a smile out of him.

The bathtub is deep and wide, set into a marble platform next to a window overlooking the city. A little panel on the wall has buttons labeled in Japanese, and it takes me three tries and a lot of giggling to figure out which one fills the tub and which one turns on the jets. I pour some bath salts from the little glass jar on the counter. Then I pin up my hair, peel off my clothes, and climb in while the water is still rising.

Matt leans in the doorway, arms crossed, and watches me sink into it. I let out a groan that is honestly a little embarrassing.

"Are you coming in, or are you just going to stand there?" I ask.

"I'm enjoying the view."

"Enjoy it from in here."

He pulls his shirt off over his head, and I take my turn enjoying the view. He steps out of his jeans and boxers, and I scoot forward so he can climb in behind me. The water rises up over my breasts. He settles in with his legs on either side of mine, pulls me back against his chest, and for a while we just lie there in the heat, the city glittering through the window, his arms wrapped around me. His chin rests on my shoulder. I can feel his heartbeat against my back.

It doesn't stay innocent for long. His hands start to wander under the water, sliding over my stomach and up to cup my breasts, and when his thumbs brush over my nipples, I arch back against him and feel exactly how much he's enjoying himself. I reach behind me and wrap my hand around him. He breathes against my neck.

"I thought you were tired," I tease.

"I got a second wind."

I turn in the water to face him, sending a small wave sloshing over the tub's side onto the marble floor. Neither of us cares. I straddle his lap with my knees on either side of his hips and kiss him, long and slow, while his hands slide down my back to grip my ass. He lifts me, and I reach down between us to guide him into me. The heat of the water and the heat of him at the same time make me gasp against his mouth.

I ride him in the warm water, slow at first, rocking my hips while he holds me close. Every time I move, more water spills over the edge, and I start laughing in the middle of it, and then he starts laughing too. I've never laughed during sex before. I didn't know you could. Then he leans forward and takes one of my nipples in his mouth, and I stop laughing in a hurry.

I grab the edge of the tub behind his head and move faster. He holds my hips and pulls me down onto him harder each time, and the water churns around us. I can see us both in the dark window, my hair coming loose from its clip, his hands on my body. I cum first, shaking and gripping the marble so tight my knuckles turn white. He holds out for a few seconds longer, then buries his face in my neck and follows me with a groan that echoes off the tile.

Afterward, I lie back against his chest again, boneless and happy, while the jets hum around us. The bathroom floor is covered in water. I'm going to feel bad about that later, but not right now.

"Jenna," Matt says after a while.

"Mm."

"I've been thinking about something. Today. About Omaha." He stops. "Not that there's anything wrong with Omaha. Well, there is; you've made that pretty clear. But that's not what I mean."

I tilt my head back to look at him. He's staring up at the ceiling, frowning.

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean, when this trip is over, and we fly back, I don't..." He blows out a breath. "I've never been very good at this part. Usually I don't get to this part."

I'm trying very hard not to smile. He looks so serious, and so completely out of his depth, and it's the cutest thing I've ever seen. This is a man who flies a jet across the Pacific Ocean without breaking a sweat, and he can't get through a single sentence.

"Matt," I say. "Are you trying to ask me not to go back to Omaha?"

He looks down at me, and some of the tension goes out of his shoulders. "Yes. That's exactly what I'm trying to ask you."

"Good. Because I wasn't planning to."

"You weren't?"

"I got fired, remember? I don't have anything to go back to." I turn around so I can see his face properly. "I don't know what this is yet. I'm not going to pretend I do, and I don't think you know either. But I know I'm not done with it."

He kisses me, and I can feel him smiling against my mouth.

Of course, as soon as we start talking about it for real, all the practical stuff comes crashing in. We climb out of the tub, wrap ourselves in the hotel

robes, and throw every towel in the bathroom on the floor to soak up the mess. Then we sit cross-legged on the bed, and I start counting on my fingers.

"I still have a lease on my apartment until March," I tell him. "I have a car sitting in my parking spot with a dent in the bumper and about a quarter tank of gas. I have a houseplant that is probably already dead. I have maybe four thousand dollars in my savings account, and a credit card I don't like to think about."

"I can help with some of that."

"No, you can't," I say, nicer than I mean. "My parents raised me to split the bill, remember? I'm not going to start my new life by having you pay for my old one."

"Fair enough," he says. "What else?"

"My stuff, I guess. Not that I have much. And my parents." I wince. "My parents have no idea where I am."

"None at all?"

"I haven't talked to them since last week. My mom called on Saturday, and I didn't call her back. I didn't know what to say. Hey, Mom, I met a pilot on Friday afternoon, and on Saturday morning I flew to Japan with him. How's Dad?"

Matt laughs, and I throw a pillow at him. That's when my phone starts buzzing on the nightstand.

I look over at the screen, and my stomach drops. It says Mom. It's ten o'clock here, which means it's eight in the morning in Omaha, and she's sitting at her kitchen table with her coffee and reading glasses, and she's decided she's done waiting for me to call her back.

"Are you going to answer that?" Matt asks.

"I'm thinking about it."

"Jenna…"

"Fine." I take a deep breath and swipe to answer. "Hi, Mom."

"Jenna Lynn Vickers." My mother only uses my full name when someone is in serious trouble, and it's usually my dad. "Do you have any idea how worried we've been?"

"I'm sorry. I meant to call you back. Things have been a little crazy."

"A girl named Marybeth called us yesterday. She said she went by your apartment and nobody answered, and your car was sitting in the lot, and you

haven't answered any of her texts. She said you don't work there anymore. Is that true?"

I close my eyes. Matt pulls his robe up over his mouth, and his shoulders shake. I point a warning finger at him.

"It's true," I say. "But it's okay. It's actually kind of a good thing. Mom, I'm fine. I promise. I'm just not in Omaha right now."

"Well, where are you?"

"I'm in Tokyo."

There's a long silence on the other end of the line. I can picture her face perfectly, her coffee mug frozen halfway to her mouth.

"Tokyo?" she asks. "Tokyo, Japan?"

"Is there another one?"

"Don't get smart with me, young lady. What on earth are you doing in Japan?"

I look over at Matt. He has given up trying to keep a straight face and is now lying flat on his back with a pillow over his head, laughing so hard the bed shakes.

"It's a long story," I tell her. "I met someone. He's a pilot. His boss needed someone to work on the plane, and they asked me, and I said yes. I'm working, Mom. Sort of. I'm getting paid, anyway."

"A pilot," she says in the same voice she once used for a tattoo artist. "Jenna. Oh, Jenna."

"He's nice, Mom. You'd like him. I'll tell you everything, I swear, but can it wait until I'm back? It's really late here."

Another silence. Then she says something that makes all the blood drain out of my face.

"Well, you'd better call your father, then. He left twenty minutes ago."

"Left for where?"

"Your apartment. He took the spare key. He said if you weren't there, he was going to call the police and file a missing person report."

I sit up so fast my robe falls open. "Mom, call him back! Tell him I'm fine. Tell him to turn around."

"I can't. He left his phone sitting right here on the kitchen counter."

I hang up after promising three more times that I'm safe, then sit on the bed with my phone in my lap and my mouth hanging open. Matt pulls the pillow off his face and looks at me.

"What happened?"

"My dad is about to walk into my apartment."

"Is that bad?"

I think about the state I left it in on Saturday morning. The sheets are torn halfway off the bed, and my Friday night clothes are still lying on the bedroom floor where Matt dropped them. Every piece of underwear I decided not to pack is spread across the comforter. My half-finished cup of coffee is sitting on the kitchen counter next to an open junk drawer.

"Matt," I tell him, "I never made the bed."

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6

~ Matthew ~

Jenna stares at the phone in her hand, a mix of shock and disbelief on her face. I'm still lost in giggles on the bed. For reasons that I can't fully explain, the idea of this grown woman having to explain herself to her mom is just too damn funny. I wipe a tear away from my eyes.

"What is it, what's happening?"

She turns those panicked eyes toward me. "I think my dad is about to report me missing or kidnapped."

Now I laugh even harder. This time she joins in. What else are we supposed to do? We're on the other side of the world. Everything about this is so absurd that it's become funny instead of scary. Maybe if we were in Omaha and Jenna was in my hotel room instead of her home, things would be different. But these are the cards we're dealt, so we have to play them.

Her body faces me across the bed. The robe spills open, hiding nothing of her stunning body. I cannot help admiring the sight of her nude figure. It's a great view. I'm sure Jenna would agree with me there.

She starts talking to herself, musing aloud, trying to solve a ridiculous problem before it gets worse. "It's about twenty-five minutes from their place to mine. Dad set off twenty minutes ago, but he'll be driving fast because he's worried about me. He doesn't have his phone, but…"

Jenna scrolls through her phone and begins dialing another number. She puts the phone to her ear, nibbling her bottom lip in worry.

I say, "Who are you calling now?"

"Mrs. Thompson in the apartment next door. It's either that, or I call the local cops and tell them not to worry about the man raving that his daughter's gone missing."

That makes me giggle all over again. She listens to the dial tone for a long moment, then breathes a sigh of relief.

"Hi, Mrs. Thompson, it's Jenna from number twenty-nine." She winces. "Yes, I know it's early, I'm really sorry. I wouldn't bother you unless it was urgent. Listen. My dad is coming over, he might even be at my place right

now, but I’m not there and he hasn’t got his phone. Can you – please? Aw, thanks.”

We fall silent. Somewhere on the other side of the planet, Mrs. Thompson leaves her apartment and strolls along the hall. My mind, however, is on other things. Namely, the sight of Jenna’s bare breasts peeking around the edges of her white cotton robe. I defy any red-blooded man not to let his attention wander when faced with something so wonderful.

“He is?” Jenna’s eagerness brings me back to reality. “Can you put him on?”

Her posture shifts as the phone is passed across to someone else. Now I notice a new tension in the way that she’s sitting, a little stiffness in her arms and neck.

“Hey, Dad!”

She flinches from the phone. Judging from her reaction, I would guess that Jenna’s father isn’t in the calmest frame of mind right now.

“Yes, yes, I’m really sorry. Calm down, Dad. It’s okay. I’m okay. No, I haven't been kidnapped or anything like that. Something came up unexpectedly. No, it wasn’t like that. I, uh, I met a guy. A nice guy.” She glances at me. We exchange smiles. “He’s treating me really well. No I have not been taken by force, I promise. You think someone could make me do something I don’t want to? Come on.”

I cup a hand to my mouth to stay quiet as fresh giggles rise in my chest. This situation is both wholesome and absurd at the same time. She falls silent for a moment, nodding, listening hard.

“Uh, yeah, I just spoke to mom. I’m not actually in town right now. No, I’m uh… I’m in Tokyo. Yes, Japan. That one. Is there another Tokyo?” Her face falls. “Yes, sorry Daddy, I know it’s not funny. I would have called you before but… you know how it is. This opportunity came up at the last minute and it was really early in the morning.”

She looks at me and mouths, Sorry. I wave a hand, letting her know that it’s all good. I grab a bottle of water from beside the bed and sip.

“No, Dad, my place was not ransacked, I promise.” She laughs. “Because I was in a rush! That’s why it looks like that!” Another short pause. She tenses. “The… the bed? Because I hopped out in a rush. N-no, why would you think I had someone over?”

Her eyes meet mine again. “The guy I met is a pilot, that’s kind of how I ended up in Tokyo. His name is Matt, he’s a – oh, okay.” She offers me the phone. “My father would like to talk to you, Matt.”

We exchange a look. I try not to let panic register on my face. I haven’t dealt with a girl’s father since prom night, when my date’s dad pulled me aside and showed me his gun cabinet while talking about the dangers of teenage pregnancy. I accept the phone and put it to my ear. I try to sound brisk and business-like, imitating Michael Donovan.

“Hello? This is Matthew Hale.”

The voice at the other end of the phone is stern and unamused. It reminds me of a cop in the interrogation booth. “You came to the phone quick. I assume that means you’re close to my daughter right now?”

“Uh… Yes, sir.” That sir slips out of my mouth, unbidden.

“In the same hotel room?”

“We have separate rooms. We’re sitting together at the moment. We had dinner in the hotel.” It’s a delicate blend of half-truths and obfuscation. The last thing I want is some enraged father hopping on the next flight to Japan with the intention of giving me an ass-whooping.

“And you’re a pilot?”

“That’s right.” For reasons I can’t explain, I stiffen on the bed, sitting upright, shoulders back, head up. “I fly a private jet for a client.”

“And you fled the country with my daughter.”

My eyes meet Jenna’s across the bed. Why on earth is there a flicker of panic in my chest? She moves closer, listening to the call, and shakes her head.

“I wouldn’t say we fled the country sir. We went for dinner together and had a lovely evening-”

Jenna shakes her head again, more vigorously, panic in her eyes.

“-but unfortunately, I had to leave early and fly my boss to Tokyo, so nothing happened. Not that I was hoping anything would-”

Jenna pinches my arm. I flinch so hard I almost miss her dad’s voice in my ear.

“I’m standing in Jenna’s room right now. Why did you take her halfway around the world without even a phone call?”

I haven’t felt this kind of guilt in my chest since hopping into bed with my very first girlfriend, back when I was a teenager, and her sister burst into the room while we were getting intimate. It takes a lot of concentration

to keep calm. I say, “It came out of the blue, sir. I was expecting to have a few days in Omaha before the next flight but the boss needed to go. It was his idea for me to ask Jenna if she wanted to work a shift as a stewardess.”

“A stewardess?” He says the word as though the idea appalls him. “My daughter, a stewardess?”

“It’s all on the level, I promise. She has her passport, she’s getting paid for the work, and she’s fine.” A surge of bravado floods my chest. “I’m treating her with the utmost respect.”

There’s a brief pause on the line. I exchange a look with Jenna. A wicked smirk touches her lips.

“Put my daughter back on.”

I pass the phone to Jenna. She leans back. Now her robe is completely open, concealing nothing, exposing everything. I get that masculine hunger in my gut that a man always does around a beautiful woman in a state of undress.

Jenna says, “Yes, Dad. Of course. No. I promise. Again – I’m really sorry to worry you, I should have messaged. I didn’t expect Marybeth to… Oh, that? It was just a job. I can get another. No, you don’t need to clean up. The apartment only looks like that because I was rushing so much. I forgot to make the bed.” She winks at me. “I love you too, Dad.”

She hangs up the phone, lets out a sigh of relief. We giggle together. Two adults getting into trouble with a girl’s father. I guess some things never change, no matter how old you get. I say, “What was the outcome?”

“Pretty sure he bought it. Or at least wants to believe it. You know, if you spend the night with his little girl you might have to marry me.”

That makes us both giggle again like children. Jenna recovers and continues.

“He wants a postcard, a souvenir, and a picture of us together in Tokyo to prove that I’m okay.”

“Done, done, and done.”

She tosses her phone to the side and runs a hand through her hair. “You know, I didn’t even think about them as I was rushing to get ready, is that selfish of me?”

I place a hand on her cheek. Warm. Soft. Smooth. “Why would it be selfish? You weren’t expecting them to freak out, right?”

“No.” She rests her head in my hand. “But maybe I could have sent a text on the way to the jet or once we landed.”

I chuckle. “That might have made it worse, wouldn’t it? Sending something like, I’m going to Japan, back Monday, don’t call.”

We laugh together. She recovers from her worries. That naughty look returns to her eyes. I love that expression and what it means. I guide Jenna onto the bed, letting her recline on the pillows. The robe is completely open now, revealing her body in all its splendor. Her thighs part by themselves, revealing that sweetest, most sacred fruit. She smiles at me from the pillow.

“Sometimes it’s okay to be selfish,” she says.

“I couldn’t agree more, Ms. Vickers.”

She gives me a knowing smile, one eyebrow lifting as if waiting for me to begin. I move into place between Jenna’s parted legs and give her inner thighs a series of gentle, loving, delicate kisses. My lips move slowly toward the goal. Jenna watches me with a warm, lazy smile, her chest rising and falling. I press my mouth to her intimate lips, giving her the sweetest, most passionate kiss a man can give a woman.

She responds with a sighing groan, arching her back, parting her legs wider and giving me full access to every wonderful part of her soft warmth. I move slowly, gently, without hurrying, letting my tongue do all the work. I caress her from the top of her lips and glide all the way down, then work back up again. Every movement is measured, controlled, and delicate. I put on a masterclass of infinite tenderness.

Jenna’s delightful gasps and groans act as my guide. I quickly learn which areas are her most sensitive, and how she responds when I change the pace and the pressure. I drape her legs over my shoulders. She rests a hand on the top back of my head, holding me in place as her hips begin to roll up to meet my exploring tongue.

“Oh, Matt…”

Her erotic sigh spurs me on, but I force myself not to go too fast, not to rush this moment. Her body flowers open before me, that delicious fruit growing sweeter with every passing lick and kiss. I alternate between teasing her entrance and circling the most sensitive part with my tongue.

Passionate moaning fills the air like music. She is the orchestra and I am the conductor. I take my time, not hurrying, even as her gasps turn breathless and desperate. My steady, tender licks remain slow and steady, never hurrying. As much as I want her to finish, I also want her to enjoy the journey.

Jenna’s breath catches in her throat. She says, “Right there, right there, don’t stop, oh god-!”

I hold her on the edge, balanced on the precipice between frustration and climax, for as long as I dare before finally allowing her to crash over to the other side. Jenna orgasms for me with furious, desperate intensity. She unleashes a symphony of passionate cries, grinding against my mouth and tongue. Her hips roll in that wonderful, unconscious, primal way, when a woman’s body responds by instinct instead of thought. I continue my gentle lapping, circling, and teasing, sending her higher and further than ever before.

Jenna taps my head and I gently ease back. My lips and chin gleam with her lust, shining almost as bright as her eyes. She giggles, that wonderful warm giggle of post-orgasmic bliss.

I say, “How are you enjoying your time in Japan so far?”

“It’s the best trip I’ve ever taken.” She moves in a new position, rising to her knees and grabbing the headboard, her back to me. “But this trip isn’t over yet, is it?”

“Far from it.”

I take up my place behind Jenna, wrapping my arms around her waist slowly gliding forward. My aching member eases back inside her as if it belongs there. Maybe it does. Maybe this is the reason she and I were put on this world.

Jenna groans for me and I moan for her. Our bodies start to steadily rock back and forth all over again. Through the window, the Tokyo skyline glitters as neon lights become jewels in the darkening sky, sparkling as they cheer us on.

~ Jenna ~

Matt's phone buzzes on the nightstand a little after eight in the morning, and I watch him read the screen with one eye still closed. Then he turns it around so I can see.

~ Meeting’s running long. We'll be here at least two more days, possibly three. Enjoy the city. MD ~

"Two more days," I say, smiling. "Maybe three."

"Maybe three," he agrees with an even bigger smile. He rolls over and pulls me against his chest.

I could stay right here in this bed for all three of them, honestly. But I made my father a promise last night, and Bill Vickers is not a man who forgets a promise. He wants a postcard, a souvenir, and a picture of the two of us together, so he can see with his own eyes that his daughter hasn't been sold into some kind of international crime ring. I know there will be hell to pay if he doesn’t get the picture at least.

"Get up," I tell Matt, poking him in the ribs. "We’re on a mission."

"What kind of mission?"

"Proof of life. And I'm in charge today."

He opens one eye. "Is that so?"

"You've picked every single thing we've done since Saturday. The restaurant, the crossing, the cute bar with the eight stools. And I'm grateful, I really am. But today I'm the one with the map."

He salutes me from the pillow, which looks ridiculous when he's naked, and I laugh so hard I almost fall out of bed.

I found the place I wanted to see in a guidebook at the hotel gift shop while Matt paid for breakfast yesterday. It's called Asakusa, and it's the old part of the city, or what's left of it. We take the subway across town, and when we come up the stairs onto the street, the whole city changes. The glass towers are still out there in the distance, but down here the buildings are low and wooden, with curved tile roofs and red paper lanterns hanging over the doorways.

At the end of the block, a huge gate stands with the biggest lantern I've ever seen hanging in the middle. It's red and black, taller than Matt, and about two hundred tourists stand underneath it taking selfies. Past the gate, a long, narrow street runs all the way up to a temple, with little shops packed in on both sides.

"This is it," I tell him. "This is where we find my dad's souvenir."

It turns out to be harder than I thought. My father isn't the kind of man who collects souvenirs. He's been in insurance for thirty years, and he likes things that do something. I pick up a little ceramic cat with one paw raised, and Matt tells me it's supposed to bring good luck to businesses. I put it back down. My dad would set it on his desk and spend the next ten years wondering why it was waving at him. I look at fans and chopsticks, and a kimono that would make my mom laugh till she cries, but none of it feels right.

Then I find a stall near the temple selling little silk pouches on strings, embroidered in every color you can think of. A woman behind the counter explains in careful English that they're called *omamori*, charms meant to protect you. There's one for health, one for studying, one for love. She taps a dark blue one with gold thread.

"This one is for traffic safety," she says. "For the car."

I think about my dad driving across Omaha at seven in the morning without his phone, breaking every speed limit on Dodge Street to get to my apartment. I buy it on the spot, and Matt has to turn away so the woman doesn't see him laughing.

"He's going to love that," he says once we're out of earshot.

"He's going to hang it from his rearview mirror and tell everyone at church about it. You don't know my father."

"Not yet," Matt says, and the way he says it makes me forget what I was going to say next.

Outside the temple, a row of wooden drawers, a metal canister full of sticks, and a sign in English explain how it works. You drop a coin in the box, shake the canister until one stick falls out, and the number on it tells you which drawer to open. Inside is a slip of paper with your fortune. Matt goes first and pulls out a fortune that says Great Blessing in English, right across the top. He holds it up for me to see, grinning from ear to ear.

I shake the canister and get number forty-two. My slip says Bad Fortune.

"Oh, come on," I say. "Can I try again?"

"I don't think that's how it works."

A wire rack nearby is covered in hundreds of little folded papers, and the sign says that if you get a bad fortune, you tie it to the rack and leave it behind at the temple. I read my slip again. Something about travel and patience and a person from the past. Then I fold it up small and tie it to the wire as tight as I can.

"There," I tell Matt. "I'm leaving it here."

"That's the spirit."

We find a little café on a side street with three tables and a window full of pastries, and I buy a postcard from the rack by the register. It's a picture of the big red lantern at the gate. I sit down with my coffee and a pen and stare at the blank side for a long time, until Matt asks if I'm writing my father a novel.

"I'm thinking," I tell him.

I don't know how to fit everything into such a small space. In the end, I just write what's true.

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry I scared you. I'm safe, I'm happy, and I'm being treated well. I know this seems crazy, and it probably is. But I've spent my whole life waiting for something to happen, and this week, something did. I needed to say yes. I think you would have said yes too, at my age.

I love you. I bought you a present. Don't laugh.

Jenna

I read it over twice before I let Matt see. He reads it, then hands it back without saying anything, and squeezes my knee under the table.

The photo is the last thing on the list. Back at the gate, I try to take a selfie of us under the lantern, but my arm isn't long enough, and every picture is mostly Matt's chin. An older Japanese man in a bucket hat watches us struggle for a minute, then walks over and holds his hand out for my phone. He backs up, waves us closer together, and says something that makes everyone around him laugh. Matt puts his arm around my waist. The man counts to three in English and takes about fifteen pictures in a row.

When he hands the phone back, I flip through them right there on the sidewalk. Most of them are blurry. But one of them is perfect. Matt is looking at the camera, but I'm not. I'm looking up at him, laughing about something, with the giant red lantern hanging behind us and the crowd blurred out around the edges.

I stare at it the way I stared at my passport stamp. I've been in plenty of pictures with guys before, at weddings, bars, and birthday parties. I've never been in one where I looked like this.

"Send that one," Matt says over my shoulder.

"I'm going to."

It's after midnight in Omaha, but my mom texts back within a minute, which tells me she wasn't sleeping either. Her message is short.

He's handsome. Call your father.

I call him from a bench outside the temple. He answers on the first ring, wide awake, and I can hear the TV on in the background. I tell him about the lantern, the temple, and the man in the bucket hat. I don't tell him about the bad fortune. When I tell him I bought him something for the car, he goes quiet for a second, then laughs, really laughs, for the first time since

Saturday. He makes me promise to call every other day. He makes me promise to let him meet Matt when we get home. I promise both.

Before he hangs up, he says, "You sound different, Jenna Lynn."

"Different how?"

"I don't know," he says. "Good, I think."

We get back to the hotel as the sun sets. I'm tired in the best way, with sore feet and a little silk charm in my purse. Matt orders room service, and we eat it sitting on the floor by the big window, watching the city light up one building at a time. Neither of us says very much. We don't need to.

Halfway through dinner, Matt reaches into his jacket pocket and sets something down on the carpet between us. It's another little silk pouch from the stall by the temple, pink with white thread. I didn't even see him buy it.

"What's this one for?" I ask, even though I'm pretty sure I already know. The woman at the counter pointed it out to me herself.

"The lady said it was for love," he says, shrugging as if it's no big deal, but he won't quite look at me. "I figured after that fortune of yours, you could use a little extra luck."

I pick it up and turn it over in my fingers. I don't trust myself to say anything, so I lean in and kiss him instead, then tuck it into the pocket of my robe, right where I kept my passport the day we landed.

When he finally pulls me up off the floor, it's different from the other nights. There's no tearing at each other's clothes, no rush. He undresses me in the glow from the window, one piece at a time, and kisses each part of me he uncovers. When he lays me down on the bed, I pull him on top of me and hold his face in my hands so I can look at him.

He takes his time sliding into me, and once he's all the way inside, he stays there without moving, his forehead resting against mine. Then he starts to rock his hips, long and deep, and I wrap my legs around him and move with him. I don't close my eyes. I don't want to miss anything. Every time I start to get close, he slows down and kisses me until I'm begging him, and then he starts again. By the time I cum, I'm shaking all over, holding onto him with everything I have. He follows me with my name on his lips, his face buried in my hair.

Afterward, he falls asleep with his head on my chest. I lie awake, running my fingers through his hair and listening to him breathe.

I think about the bad fortune tied to that wire rack across town. Something about patience, travel, and a person from the past. I think about

my dad's voice telling me I sound different. And I think about how I looked at Matt in that picture.

I've known this man for five days. I know it's crazy. I know exactly what my mother would say, what my friends would say, and probably what any sane person on earth would say.

But I'm falling in love with him anyway.

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7

~ Matthew ~

I wake before Jenna and lay beside her for a moment, listening to the slow, steady breathing of a woman in deep, serene sleep. Even now, in the half-light or early morning Tokyo, she looks stunningly beautiful. Her chest rises and falls with every gentle exhale. I wonder if she's dreaming about anything. Am I part of the vision dancing through her subconscious mind right now?

I grab my phone and check the screen. No messages from Michael Donovan. No urgent requests to leave. No need to hop back on the plane. For now, I'm going to assume that we have the time he gave us. Which means I'll need to go and check on the plane tomorrow and ensure it's ready for takeoff. But that's a job for tomorrow. Right now, it's just me, the gorgeous woman at my side, and the whole of Tokyo to enjoy.

My heart warms at the thought. I slide across the bed and wrap an arm around Jenna, my body melding against hers. It's curious how well we fit together. Like two pieces of an immaculate puzzle. My lips find her neck and gently, slowly, place a series of soft kisses on the most sensitive part of her skin. Jenna's breathing hitches for a moment. A soft unconscious acknowledgement of me and my touch. Now every gentle exhale sounds almost like a sigh of surrender.

The warmth of her body and those wonderful moans drive me crazy. I keep kissing her with all the gentleness a man can muster. The arm that's draped around her waist glides south. My fingertips find Jenna's silky lips and begin to caress her in the most intimate way possible.

Her breathing hitches again. It sounds like a lover's groan. The sounds of passion that Jenna unleash in the heat of the moment are unlike any I've ever enjoyed before. Not one of my previous lovers, girlfriends, or one-night stands has ever made noises like this. She makes me crave more. Always more. I can't get enough of her.

I should probably let her sleep after all the walking yesterday and the wonderful lovemaking last night. Jenna could use a good long rest. But I have a sneaking suspicion that she won't want to miss a single moment of

daylight while we're in Tokyo. Who knows when she'll have the chance to experience this place again?

My fingers apply a little more pressure now, gliding across her delicate button in steady circling motions. Her lips part with a gentle gasp. Her body begins to grind against mine. Her eyelids flutter open. She says my name in a breathless, gasping exhale.

'Matt…'

'Yes, Jenna.' I kiss her shoulder again. 'It's me.'

'Mmm… Don't stop.'

Her hips push back into me. My manhood rises to attention, responding to the warmth, the pressure, and the sensation of this wonderful woman. Before I know it, we are locked together once more, making gentle, tender, unhurried love against the Tokyo sunrise. We breathe hard together. She reaches back and clutches me. I keep circling her with my fingertips, bringing Jenna closer and closer to the edge. Her body trembles and shudders as need swells in her belly. Those soft, gasping moans get a little louder, a little more breathless.

She cums first. Her orgasm is as gentle and unhurried as our lovemaking. Instead of a violent, powerful explosion, it leaves her throat as a crying sigh of relief, as if her body needed this more than she could express. She clenched around me, pushing back to pull me as deep as I can reach.

Her climax spurs me on. She starts pushing back into me with more force, more need. She says, 'Now you, now you. I need it, Matt. Please, don't make me wait.'

My body needs this as much as she does. I bury myself inside with one smooth stroke and hold still, trembling and pulsing inside the deepest part of Jenna Vickers. We groan together in perfect unison. The day has begun in the best way possible, and we haven't even left the bed yet.

Our day continues in the same unhurried manner. A warm shower together. A delicious breakfast as a couple. A steady, careful exploration of parts of downtown Tokyo. This time we leave the map behind and go by instinct. When we find a bustling street or one of the numerous alleys that we haven't yet explored, Jenna squeezes my hand and we turn in that direction.

I can’t get enough of her eager delight. Every fresh discovery thrills her more than the last. She’s the perfect companion for exploring a new city, especially one as seemingly endless and fantastic as Tokyo.

By the time dusk starts to settle over the city and those neon lights twinkle like jewels once more, we’ve managed to complete an enormous, exhausting loop around a good chunk of the city. Part of me wishes we could spend longer here. I want to take her the whole way across Japan and see the entire country. The shrines in the north; the beautiful islands just off mainland Japan; Mount Fuji; everything.

Jenna says, “Hey, look.”

I snap out of my daydream to see what’s got her so excited. It’s the bar from our first night where we sat down on the stools, where the attractive woman referred to me as Jenna’s boyfriend and neither of us felt inclined to correct her.

Jenna smiles. “I could go for a drink.”

“Sure. We’ve worked up a good thirst, right?”

We head inside and approach the bar. The same bartender is working this evening, and I recognize a couple of waitresses. I don’t know why that detail stands out to me. Maybe it’s because, back home in America, you can go to the same bar or the same restaurant three, maybe four times a week and see different faces on every visit. The bartender recognizes us and his infectious smile makes Jenna giggle. He ushers us to the bar stools and insists that we sit in the same seats as before, seeming proud to have repeat customers. We order a bottle of sake and share it together, drinking out of ornate ceramic shot glasses. The liquor has a kick in all the right ways.

After the second shot, I excuse myself to freshen up in the bathroom. The sight of my reflection makes me pause. I look five years younger than I did just one week ago. It’s hard to explain. There’s a twinkle in my eye, a youthful smile on my face, and a few of the lines on my brow seem to have softened. Is this down to spending quality time in Tokyo? Or because I’ve been enjoying Jenna’s company for a few days now? If I had to guess, the latter. Jenna is bringing out a side of me that I didn’t know was there.

When I return to the bar, Jenna isn’t alone. She’s talking to the Japanese woman, the one who called me her boyfriend last time we were here. Apparently, the woman is a regular. They’re both laughing at something and sitting close together on the bar stools. I return to my seat. The woman greets me with a smile and a raised glass.

“Hello, Mr. Not-Boyfriend.”

“Hi.” I return her smile and lift my cup of sake. “Nice to see you again.

Jenna giggles. “This is Sumi. We were just talking about how lovely you are.”

“Me? What did I do? I wasn’t even here.”

“No.” Jenna touches my leg. “I was telling her about the charm you bought for me yesterday. The love one. She said it means we’ll be together for a long time.”

“I sure hope so.” I kiss Jenna on the cheek. She tingles at my touch.

Sumi beams in delight at us. “You two are a good couple.”

“Thanks,” Jenna says, throwing a wink in my direction. “We work pretty well together.”

“Will you join me for a drink?”

I’m about to tell her that we already have, but Sumi hops down from the barstool and walks to the far end of the bar counter. Jenna and I exchange a look and decide to follow without a single question being asked. I’m expecting Sumi to slide into one of the empty booths or grab a spare table, but instead she turns a corner and brings us to the elevator. She presses the button and the doors slide open. Jenna steps inside first.

“Where are we going?”

“More tables upstairs,” Sumi says. “You will like it.”

The elevator doors close and the three of us ascend all the way to the roof of the building. Up here, the view is even more stunning than the one from our hotel room. We’re on a rooftop overlooking the city, gazing down on the endless gleaming lights of Tokyo. The air is a little chilly, but there’s no breeze thanks to other, taller buildings flanking us from two sides.

Jenna’s jaw drops. “This is beautiful.”

Sumi smiles and touches Jenna’s chin. “It’s almost as beautiful as you.”

Jenna blushes and takes my hand. We follow Sumi to one of the tables set up in the middle of the space. There are a few other people up here already, locals sitting together and enjoying an early evening drink. I take Jenna’s chair and push it in behind her and then do the same for Sumi, who makes a noise of appreciation.

“Such a gentleman,” she says. “I see why you like him.”

“I’m very lucky.” Jenna beams at the compliment. “I can’t believe it myself, to be honest.”

“Speak for yourself,” I say, sliding into a chair on Jenna’s right, facing Sumi over the table. “I haven’t stopped smiling since we met.”

Sumi eyes Jenna for a moment, fingers resting against her glass. “How long have you been together?”

“Uh…”

We exchange a look, embarrassment rising across our faces. Jenna starts giggling at the absurdity of it all. I try to meet Sumi’s confused expression and say, “Uh… almost a week.”

“A week?” She can’t hide her surprise.

“Yeah!” Jenna shakes her head. “Matt is a pilot, he asked me to join him and I said yes.”

“You look so comfortable together. I thought you had been married for years.”

That cracks us up. We laugh together, shoulders rubbing. Sumi seems more than a little surprised by our reaction. Jenna is the first to recover. She says, “Oh, no, we’re not laughing at you, I promise. To be honest, this whole situation is completely crazy. We barely know each other and yet, we’re all the way over here…”

“It does not sound crazy.” Sumi gives a soft shrug. “If something works, it works. You cannot explain love.”

I place my hand on top of Jenna’s. Sumi continues.

“But you can explain chemistry. And good sex. I trust you have good sex?”

“Very good,” Jenna says, with a laugh. “The best, actually.”

“Easily,” I say.

Sumi’s smile grows wider. “Maybe, while you are in Tokyo, you want to try something new?”

Jenna leans closer, intrigued. “Try what? We’ve done a few things…”

Our new friend touches Jenna’s cheek. “Maybe you want to open up? Both of you?”

That takes us both by surprise. “Both of us?” Jenna blinks, but doesn’t pull away. “You mean, like… a threesome?”

Sumi’s eyes gleam in excitement. “Why not? You are both young. Beautiful. No need for regrets.” She takes a card and a pen out of her purse and hands them to Jenna. “I have to leave now, give me your number. We’ll talk more later – if you are interested?”

Jenna takes the pen and writes her number on the card. Sumi takes it. She finishes her drink and stands. She bends down and gives us both a kiss on the cheek before walking back to the elevator. The doors close and she descends the building.

“Huh,” I say, a little taken aback by her boldness. “That was… odd.”

“Yeah,” Jenna says. “Really odd.”

But her face is flushed in a way I know all too well.

~ Jenna ~

Matt is right; it was odd. It was probably the oddest conversation I've ever had with a stranger, and I've had a man try to tell me about his gallbladder surgery while I was cleaning his teeth. So I'm not sure why my face is still so hot, or why I can still feel the spot on my chin where Sumi touched it.

I finish my drink in two long swallows and set the glass down harder than I mean to. Across the table, Matt watches me with a small half-smile, the one he gets when he knows exactly what I'm thinking and is polite enough not to say it.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing." He holds up his hands. "I didn't say a word."

"You're thinking a word."

"I'm thinking about dinner," he says. "I'm starving. Aren't you?"

I am, now that he mentions it. We've been walking since breakfast, and the only things I've eaten since then are a bag of rice crackers and half a melon bun Matt bought from a cart. We ride the elevator back down, wave goodbye to the bartender, who bows to us like we're old friends, and head back out into the crowd.

Matt asks a woman at a crosswalk where we should eat, using a lot of pointing and a translation app that seems to make things worse. She thinks about it for a moment, then walks us halfway down the next block herself and points to a narrow doorway with a blue cloth curtain hanging over it. Inside, every table has a flat steel griddle built into the middle. A young waiter seats us in a corner and switches ours on, and I can feel the heat right away.

The place makes something called *okonomiyaki*, and from what I can tell, it's a cross between a pancake and an omelet, with cabbage, pork, and a

bunch of other things mixed in. The waiter brings us a bowl of batter and two metal spatulas, mimes the whole process for us twice, then leaves us on our own. Matt rolls up his sleeves and studies the griddle the same way he studies his instruments before takeoff.

"Stand back," he says. "I got this."

He does not have this. The first one sticks to the griddle and comes apart in three pieces when he tries to flip it. The second one goes over the edge and lands on the table. By the third one, the couple at the next table have stopped pretending not to watch, and the waiter has come back twice to check on us. When Matt finally flips one in a single piece, the whole corner of the restaurant claps, and he takes a little bow from his seat.

"My hero," I tell him with a smile.

"Thirteen hours across the Pacific, no problem, but a cabbage pancake almost broke me."

We cover the thing in brown sauce and mayonnaise, the way the waiter showed us, and eat it right off the griddle with our spatulas. It's messy and hot and one of the best things I've ever tasted. For a while we don't talk at all, and I almost manage to stop thinking about the rooftop. But I keep picturing Sumi leaning across the table, the way she said, *both of you*, like it was the most natural thing in the world. The way she looked at Matt. The way she looked at me. I've never had a woman look at me like that before, at least not in a way I noticed. I'm not sure I would have noticed, back in Omaha. I'm not sure I would have let myself.

I set my spatula down and try to make my voice sound light and easy, like I'm asking him to pass the salt.

"So," I say. "Sumi."

Matt looks up from the griddle. "What about her?"

"Nothing. I just mean, that was pretty wild. Imagine if I'd said yes right there at the table." I laugh, a little too loud. "Can you imagine?"

I mean it as a joke. That's what I tell myself, anyway. But I'm watching him closely when I say it, and we both know it. If he laughs it off, I'll know one thing. If he gets that hungry look men get when you mention two women at once, I'll know something else. I'm honestly not sure which answer I'm hoping for.

He doesn't do either one. He puts his spatula down, wipes his hands on a napkin, and takes a long moment before he answers. That's what I'm

learning about Matt. He takes questions seriously, even the ones I don't mean seriously.

"Do you want the polite answer or the honest one?" he asks.

My stomach does a little flip. "The honest one."

"She's beautiful. I'd be lying if I said I didn't notice." He holds my gaze while he says it. "And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, after what she said up there. But that's all it is. Curious. I'm not sitting here hoping you'll say yes, Jenna. If you never mention her again, I'll be just as happy as I was this morning."

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't that. I wait for the jealousy to kick in, the little burn in my chest I used to get when a guy I was dating so much as glanced at a waitress. It doesn't come. Instead, I feel something warm and nervous low in my belly, and it takes me a moment to understand what it is.

"Have you ever done anything like that?" I ask. "With two women?"

He could lie. He doesn't. "Once. A long time ago, when I was flying for United. It was a layover in Denver, and I'd worked with a couple of flight attendants for a while. Friends."

"Just once?"

"Just once."

"What was it like?"

He laughs and rubs the back of his neck. "You really want to hear this over dinner?"

"I really do."

So he tells me. Not every detail, but enough. How it started as a joke over drinks at the airport hotel, just like Sumi's offer. How nervous everybody was at first, and how nobody really knew who should do what, and how they all ended up laughing about it. How it was strange and fun and a little bit awkward, all at the same time. How the three of them had breakfast together the next morning, and nobody felt weird about it, which surprised him most of all.

"Were they…?" I start, and then I lose my nerve. I try again. "Did the two of them do things with each other? Or was it all about you?"

"Both," he says. "That was kind of the point."

I pick up my spatula and push a piece of cabbage around the edge of the griddle so I don't have to look at him. My face is burning, and it's not from the stove.

"Can I tell you something embarrassing?" I ask.

He smiles, thank god. "Always."

"I kissed a girl once. In college. It was at a party. We were both pretty drunk, and it was on a dare. My roommate's friend from home." I glance up at him. "I never told anybody. Not my roommate. Not anybody."

"Did you like it?"

That's the question nobody ever asked me, mostly because nobody ever knew to ask. I think about it for a long moment: the dark kitchen at that party, her lip gloss, how I spent the next two weeks trying very hard not to think about it.

"Yeah," I admit. "I think I did."

Matt reaches across the table and puts his hand over mine, and he doesn't say anything clever or try to make a joke of it. He just holds my hand next to the hot griddle while the restaurant goes on around us. I didn't realize how much I needed him not to laugh until he didn't.

"For what it's worth," he says, "nothing you decide about any of this changes how I feel about you. Yes or no. I want you to know that before you decide anything."

"I'm not deciding anything," I tell him. "I'm just curious."

"Curiousity is allowed."

"Is it?" I laugh, and it comes out shaky. "A week ago, I was scraping tartar off molars and going home to eat cereal for dinner. Now I'm in Tokyo talking about a threesome with a woman I met in a bar. If I put that on a postcard, my dad would have a stroke."

"Maybe leave it off the postcard."

"Maybe."

The waiter comes by to clear the griddle and shut off the heat, and Matt asks for the check. While we wait, I look at him across the table, at his hands, his shoulders, that easy smile, and I try to picture it. Matt and me and someone else. Sumi's fingers on my chin. Sumi's lips on mine while Matt watches. The picture comes much faster than I expect, and it's much clearer, and I have to cross my legs under the table.

I've spent my whole life being careful. Careful with money, careful with men, careful about what people back home might say. I took the safe job and the safe apartment and dated the safe guys, the ones I knew wouldn't ask me for anything I wasn't sure I wanted to give. And where did that get

me? Stuck in a cubicle with a policy manual, counting down the hours until I could go home and do it all again the next day.

Then I said yes to Matt. I said yes to Tokyo. Every single good thing that's happened to me this week started with me saying yes to something I would have run away from a month ago.

Matt signs the check and slides it back across the table. I reach for my purse, and that's when my phone buzzes against the bottom of it.

I almost ignore it. It's probably my mom again, or Marybeth, who's sent me eleven texts in the last two days, each with more exclamation points than the last. But when I pull it out, the number on the screen isn't one I recognize. It's long and starts with a plus sign.

> *~ Hello Jenna. It is Sumi. I am home now and I cannot stop thinking about you both. Come over tonight if you want. Bring your pilot ~*

Below the message there's a little red pin, dropped on a map of a neighborhood I've never heard of, about fifteen minutes from where we're sitting.

I read it twice. My heart is pounding so hard I can feel it in my throat. Across the table, Matt is putting on his jacket, and he stops halfway when he sees my face.

"Who is it?" he asks.

I don't answer him. I just turn the phone around and slide it across the table so he can read it for himself. He looks down at the screen, then back up at me, and he waits. He doesn't say yes, and he doesn't say no. He's leaving it up to me, just like he promised.

I take the phone back, stare at that little red pin for a long time, and don't put it away.

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8

~ Matthew ~

Jenna never directly confirms her decision one way or the other. But she doesn't have to say anything. I can tell by the look on her face and the twinkle in her eyes that she's intrigued and excited by Sumi's proposal.

We leave the restaurant together, hand-in-hand, discussing the meal we just enjoyed and our favorite parts. Neither of us mentions where we are heading or what the destination might be. Jenna keeps her phone out and we glance at the screen now and then, making sure our path follows the blue line heading toward that big red pin. We wind our way through the labyrinth of wide, tourist-friendly streets and narrower alleys, drawing nearer to a destination that neither of us dares to speak aloud.

It takes less than fifteen minutes to reach the main entrance to Sumi's apartment building. Only then do we stop talking and look each other in the eye with a questioning gaze. Still, we don't talk aloud about what we're doing here or what might happen next. We just gaze at one another as if confirming that we're both happy and comfortable to go through with it.

Jenna types a quick message on her phone, telling Sumi that we are outside her building now. The response arrives within seconds. Our new friend tells her which button to buzz on the entry panel. Jenna points a finger at the button for apartment fifty-eight and glances at me again, asking silent permission, chewing her bottom lip.

I say, "Let's press it together."

My finger joins hers, hovering over the button. We press it as one. There's a short, sharp buzzing sound and the door clicks open for us. We walk into the lobby.

The inside feels like any apartment block back home, except nicer in every way. The floors are cleaner, the air smells fresher, the mailboxes on the wall look more elaborate, and even the emergency advice posters seem better presented. It might be an apartment lobby, but this one feels closer to a hotel entrance. We step into the elevator, an immaculately clean cube with gleaming mirrors on three sides. All the buttons here are in Japanese but thankfully we're able to recognize the numbers. It looks like apartment

fifty-eight is on the fifth floor. We press the button for number five and ascend.

Jenna takes my hand. I study her face in the reflection. She doesn't look concerned, worried, or even apprehensive. If anything, Jenna is the picture of calm relaxation. She catches my eye and giggles. That makes me laugh along with her.

"What's so funny?"

"There's a lot of things I haven't done before this week. Now I can add going to a total stranger's apartment for an impromptu booty call to that list."

I smile back at her. "There's a first time for everything."

"Yeah." Her eyes shine in happiness. "And hopefully more than just one time."

We step out onto the fifth floor and walk down a neat hallway that smells faintly sweet, like an air freshener is being pumped through the building. All the doors have shoes outside. Number fifty-eight is already ajar, waiting for us. I knock on the door and Sumi's voice calls to us from within.

"It's open."

We kick off our shoes and leave them beside Sumi's and walk in. Our host is waiting for us. Her hair is swept back into a neat bun, and she wears a beautiful red silk kimono – and apparently nothing underneath. The neck of the robe reaches all the way down to the swell of her chest and the bottom hem touches her upper thighs. It's a garment that's both comfortable and playful at the same time. I'm a fan already.

She bows to us in greeting. Jenna and I bow in return. Jenna says, "Thank you for inviting us. It's very kind of you."

"Thank you for accepting. It is always nice to make new friends." She smiles at us both, then takes Jenna by the hand. "Come with me, let us get you more comfortable."

Sumi guides Jenna toward the bedroom, a door standing half-open off the main apartment. She glances back to me and adds, "I have beer in the fridge for you. Please take one."

Jenna smiles at me, her eyes filled with glee. The two ladies vanish into the bedroom and close the door. I do as I'm instructed and open the fridge. Sure enough, there are a couple of bottles of Asahi beer in the door. I take

one, pop the cap, and sip. It's cool and refreshing, with a light taste that's different to beers brewed in the States.

The sound of giggling drifts from behind the bedroom door. My mind wants to wander and imagine but I don't let it. Instead, I stay focused on the here and now, standing in Sumi's modest yet comfortable apartment. It has all the furnishings you might expect; a small couch, a TV, photos of Sumi throughout the years. Yes, it's smaller than most apartments back home, but lacks none of the comforts. The kitchen is compact and stocked with every appliance you might need. It looks like a good home for a single woman in Tokyo.

Those giggles grow louder. The bedroom door clicks open and our host emerges, followed by Jenna. My face goes slack. Jenna wears a matching kimono just like Sumi. Red. Silk. Vibrant. Nothing underneath. I can barely take my eyes off her.

"Oh… wow." It takes an effort to find the words. "You look stunning."

"You like it?" Jenna smiles, with a little blush of pride.

"It's amazing. It suits you."

Sumi wraps her arms around Jenna's waist, in a gentle embrace. She presses her mouth to Jenna's smooth, creamy neck. A soft sigh of encouragement fills the apartment. Part of me was wondering how this was night going to work, but it seems our host is more than happy to take the lead and guide us.

I watch the two women kiss. Jenna is shy at first, then grows bolder as her passion swells. It's a slow, tender kiss; two soft mouths pressing together for the first time. A new feel, a new taste, a new texture. Sumi is gentle and unhurried, allowing Jenna to enjoy this at a leisurely pace without pressure. Her hands glide around our host's slim waist, drawing Sumi closer with need. They kiss for a long, sensual moment before parting. Jenna blushes.

Sumi says, "Do you like it?"

Jenna nods.

Sumi turns those dark eyes toward me. Her pupils shimmer like the stars above this city. "And you? You like it, Mr. Pilot?"

My throat is tight, but I manage to nod and smile. "I like it very much."

With that, the ice is shattered. No need for awkwardness. No need for dancing around the subject. We're all here for the same reason. Sumi approaches me with a wicked smile playing on her pretty face.

“Let us make you more comfortable, Mr. Pilot.”

Her small, soft hands slip beneath my shirt and she guides it above my head. Jenna joins and now both women work together, fingers popping buttons, clasps parting, soft giggles. Before I know it, I’m left in just my shorts. Sumi places a hand on my chest and gently pushes me onto the couch. She takes the beer from my hand, putting it to the side, forgotten. Now Sumi and Jenna stand over me, arms around one another, their lips meeting again.

I can’t wipe the dumbstruck, giddy look from my face. It’s not the sight of Jenna entwined with another woman that’s doing it for me – well, not just that. I can’t deny that the image of her locked in a passionate kiss with another woman is one of the most arousing things I’ve enjoyed this week. But it’s more than that. It’s the sight of Jenna enjoying herself to the full; the confidence, the arousal, the excitement. That’s what does it for me, more than anything else.

Now Sumi kneels at my feet. Jenna joins her. Both of them wear naughty, knowing smiles. They grasp my shorts and ease them to the floor. My manhood springs free, already stiff and eager. To join the fun. Sumi giggles.

“Mr. Pilot is ready for take-off, isn’t he?”

Sumi leans closer and places her soft, small mouth to my manhood. A groan sighs through my lips. Jenna joins in. Now I’m experiencing the unrivaled joy of two warm, eager mouths; two hot, hungry sets of lips; two silky, exploring tongues. They concentrate on me for a long moment. Up and down. Around the shaft. Kissing. Licking. Teasing. Caressing. It feels like heaven, better than heaven. Mouths, tongues, hands. It takes all my willpower not to explode right here. Even Sumi seems impressed by my resolve. She leans back, flushed and eager.

“We make a good team, me and your girlfriend, don’t we?”

“That you do,” I say, almost breathless. “The best team ever.”

She winks, then nods to Jenna. “You sit.”

Jenna joins me on the couch. I’ve never seen her with such an excited face, even when she stepped onto the jet for the first time. Sumi parts Jenna’s knees. Her face glides between those wonderful thighs until her mouth reaches that warm, sacred, most intimate of places. But I’m not watching that. I’m watching Jenna’s face. She’s looking at me with a breathless smile, letting me witness one of the most wonderful, beautiful,

intimate things I've ever seen. Her eyelids flutter, her lips part. She gasps and groans. She arches her back and surrenders to Sumi's mouth. Her voice is a breathless, panting gasp of pure ecstasy.

"Th-thank you so much, Matt! I – love – you!"

It feels like my heart could explode right now. "I love you too, Jenna."

I kiss her cheek, then slide to the floor and kneel beside Sumi. We each drape one of Jenna's thighs over us and press our mouths to her warmest spot together, working as one. Our tongues move in tandem, lapping, flicking, caressing, gliding. Each touch makes Jenna gasp more than the last. I already know how sensitive and responsive her pussy is to stimulation like this. Now she's receiving it twice at the same time. She loses control after barely a minute and begins to shudder on the couch. Her entrance spasms and tightens and clenches before us, those slick juices flowing. We lap every drop, not daring to waste any of her love, working together with furious consistency. Neither of us dares to let up until Jenna's voice is nearly shrill. She climaxes for us both, making sounds I've never heard a woman make before. Jenna trembles and shudders as her orgasm builds to a crescendo. Her leg shakes around my shoulder. Her wail of bliss turns into a breathless gasp.

We don't stop our steady, passionate, desperate lapping until Jenna begs. Sumi and I ease back, watching our lover's rapture slowly subside. Light returns to Jenna's glassy eyes. Her body is limp on the couch, as if all her strength failed.

Sumi cups my cheeks and gives me a long, lingering kiss. We share the exquisite taste of Jenna on our tongues. I tug at the silk sash holding Sumi's robe shut. It falls open to reveal her exquisite nakedness. Her small firm breasts, slender body, creamy waist, and that trimmed triangle of dark hair pointing south, as if guiding the way. She looks at me with an expectant smile. I admire her wonderful body for a few seconds.

"You've been a great host Sumi, allow us to show you our gratitude."

Now she lets out a giddy laugh and sits beside Jenna on the couch. Both women sit naked and splayed, facing me. I'm spoilt for choice. I kiss my way up Sumi's thigh, moving slowly inward, drawing closer to my prize. Before I reach her warm, flowering lips, my eyes meet Jenna's, silently asking for permission. She's breathless with anticipation, almost as much as Sumi. She gives a short, urgent nod of encouragement. I let my tongue play over Sumi's tenderness and hear a sharp inhale at the sensation.

Then I begin to pleasure her, dragging my tongue over those soaking, smoldering lips, applying just enough pressure to make her feel every sensation. She lets out a breathy, high-pitched moan delight, grinding her hips into my mouth, pushing back into me.

Sumi tastes different from Jenna. Both of them are delicious in their own right; the difference is one of those curious things my mind notices in the heat of the moment. I can't get enough of her. Devouring Sumi's sweet pussy is one hell of a thrill, but having Jenna here, watching and encouraging, turns the dial up to eleven.

I press my tongue inside Sumi's yearning entrance and drink straight from her fountain. She moans somewhere above me, making all the right noises, whispering encouragement in a mixture of English and Japanese. I don't need to be a linguist to understand the words. My tongue dances and swirls across her tender lips. Her thighs grip my head. I allow myself to get swept up in the pleasure of her passion.

Her moaning falls silent, as though muffled. I glance up to see Jenna leaning closer, their mouths pressed tight in a passionate kiss. Both women groan against each other in a sensual embrace, tongues dancing, hands exploring and cupping each other's breasts. Jenna's hand slides south across Sumi's soft creamy skin until her fingertips find the sweetest, softest, most sensitive part.

Jenna's fingers and my tongue dance together in tandem across the same part of Sumi. Our host's moans become furious, almost frantic, still muffled by Jenna's hungry mouth. Eventually, I relent and move further south, surrendering Sumi's pulsing clit to Jenna and concentrating on that juicy, yawning entrance.

For somebody who has never touched a woman in this way – never done anything more than exchange her drunken kiss in the heat of a moment – Jenna sure knows what she's doing. She's a quick study in the art of love. Sumi trembles from head to toe, her entire body thrumming under our steady, relentless touch, moaning in bliss, babbling in full Japanese now, barely able to speak in our tongue, but it doesn't matter. We both understand.

Her climax is short, sharp, and intense. She gasps and unleashes a squealing, high-pitched wail. She shudders and rocks on the couch, grinding her hips up to meet us both, then falls back, panting hard, eyes wild, lips parted. She doesn't beg us to stop, so we keep going, coaxing her through

the various rolling aftershocks that ripple across her body and force fresh gasps of erotic bliss from her mouth.

Now all three of us are flushed and excited and eager for more. I ease my tongue free, savoring the taste of my first Japanese pussy. Jenna lifts her fingers and studies them for a moment, fascinated by the gleam on the tips. Then she licks her fingers clean. A flicker of surprise crosses her face; maybe surprised that she's tasting another woman, or surprised that she likes it.

Sumi says, "You are good new friends. I like you very much."

We giggle, exchanging equally excited looks. I say, "We're glad to be your friends, Sumi. It's lovely to meet you. Thank you for welcoming us into your home."

She climbs up from the couch on unsteady legs and takes us both by the hand. "I have not shown you my apartment yet. Come. I want to show you my bedroom. Follow me."

~ Jenna ~

My legs are still shaking when Sumi pulls me up off the couch. I don't think I've ever cum that hard in my life, and I'm not sure my thighs have gotten the message that it's over. Matt catches my elbow before I can stumble, and Sumi laughs and takes my other hand. The three of us cross the little living room together like we've been doing this for years.

I said, *I love you*. I said it out loud, in a stranger's apartment, with her face between my legs and Matt's hand in mine. Of all the places I imagined saying that for the first time, this was not on the list. But the crazy part isn't that I said it. It's that I meant it, and that he said it right back, and neither of us took it away afterward. I keep waiting to feel embarrassed. Instead, every time I look at him, I want to say it again.

Sumi's bedroom is small and tidy, like the rest of her apartment. A low wooden bed with a white comforter, a paper lantern glowing in the corner, and a window looking out over a jumble of rooftops, power lines, and blinking signs. She lets go of our hands, turns to face us, then unties my kimono sash and slides the silk off my shoulders. It pools at my feet. I'm standing completely naked in front of a woman I met a few days ago, and I don't want to cover up at all.

"So beautiful," she says, running her fingertips down my breast and over my hip. Then she turns to Matt, gives him a little push in the chest, and he falls back onto the bed. "Lie down, Mr. Pilot. You have been very patient."

"I'm a patient man," he says, grinning up at us.

"Not for long," she tells him.

She climbs onto the bed beside him, looks back at me over her shoulder, and holds out her hand. When I take it, she pulls me to my knees next to Matt and leans into my ear.

"You first," she whispers. "He is yours."

I don't need to be told twice. I swing my leg over Matt's hips and straddle him. He reaches up and holds my waist the way he did in the bathtub in our hotel. He's so hard it almost hurts to look at him. I reach down and guide him into me, and I sink onto him a little at a time while Sumi watches. I want to remember the sound Matt makes when I take all of him for the rest of my life.

I start to ride him, slow and deep, the way I know he likes. Sumi kneels behind me. Her small hands slide around my waist and up over my stomach to cup my breasts, and she kisses the back of my neck and shoulder. Her body is warm against my back. Her nipples brush my skin every time I move. I've never felt anything like it, a man inside me and a woman holding me at the same time, and for a minute I can't think at all. I just lean back against her and let myself feel it.

"Look at him," Sumi murmurs in my ear. "Look how he watches you."

I look down. Matt stares up at me, not at Sumi or at the two of us. He's looking at me. His hands are on my hips, and his lips are parted. He isn't even blinking.

Sumi's fingers slip down my belly and find my clit, and she starts to circle it in time with my hips. That's all it takes. I cum for the second time with Matt deep inside me and Sumi's mouth on my neck. I'm so loud I'm sure the neighbors in the adjoining apartments can hear every bit of it. I don't care. Sumi holds me through it all, whispering something in Japanese, and when it's over, I slump back against her, gasping.

Matt is still hard inside me. He hasn't finished. I can feel how close he is, his whole body wound tight beneath me, and I know he's holding back on purpose. I look over my shoulder at Sumi. She's flushed and smiling, looking at Matt the way she did on the rooftop. Then she looks at me, and she raises her eyebrows. She's asking me. She's asking permission.

This is the moment I've been wondering about since dinner: whether I'd get that burn in my chest. Whether I'd watch him with somebody else and feel sick to my stomach, or angry, or small. I wait for it. I'm almost holding my breath.

It never comes. What I feel instead surprises me more than anything else tonight. I feel proud. Proud of him, and proud of me, and proud of what the two of us are brave enough to share.

I lean back and kiss Sumi on the mouth, our tongues intertwining. Then I climb off Matt and lie down beside him on the comforter.

"Go ahead," I tell her. "He's been very patient."

Sumi laughs and kisses me again, softer this time, before she moves over him. Matt looks at me one more time, just to be sure. I nod, take his hand, and lace my fingers through his. Then Sumi lowers herself onto him, lets out a long, shivering sigh, and tilts her head back toward the ceiling.

I watch them. I can't look away. She's smaller than me, and she moves differently, quicker and lighter, rolling her hips in tight little circles. Matt groans and grips her thighs with his free hand. But he doesn't let go of mine. Not once. Every time I squeeze his fingers, he squeezes back, and every few seconds, his eyes find mine.

After a few minutes, I can't just lie there anymore. I sit up and kneel beside Sumi, and I kiss her while she rides him. Her mouth is soft and sweet, and she moans into me when I put my hands on her breasts. They're small and firm and fit perfectly in my palms, and when I brush my thumbs over her nipples, she shudders all over. I've never touched a woman like this. I always figured I'd be nervous, or clumsy, or that I wouldn't know what to do. It turns out I know exactly what to do. I just do to her what I like having done to me.

Sumi starts moving faster. She's babbling in Japanese again between kisses, breathless and high. I slide my hand down her belly and find her clit the way she found mine. She cries out against my mouth. Her whole body tightens, and she cums on top of Matt with my fingers on her and my tongue in her mouth, and it might be the hottest thing I've ever been a part of.

When she's done, she rolls off him, laughing and gasping, and flops down on her back on the other side of the bed. She points at Matt and then at me.

"Now you finish," she says. "With her."

Matt doesn't need telling twice. He pulls me down onto the bed and climbs on top of me. I wrap my legs around him, pull him inside me, and he kisses me so hard I forget there's anybody else in the room. It's fast and deep and desperate. He's been holding back all night, and he can't hold back anymore. Sumi lies beside us, strokes my hair, and watches. I cup Matt's face in my hands, the same way I did last night, and look him right in the eyes.

"I love you," I tell him. On purpose this time. No accidents.

"I love you," he says, and then he cums inside me with a groan that shakes the whole bed, and I hold onto him while he shudders against me until it's over.

For a long time afterward, none of us says anything. We just lie there in a tangle on top of Sumi's white comforter, all three of us sweaty and breathing hard, while the paper lantern glows in the corner and the city hums outside the window. Sumi's head is on my shoulder. Matt's arm is across my stomach. I keep waiting for it to get strange, the way things always do after you do something you can't take back. It doesn't.

Eventually, Sumi props herself up on one elbow and looks at us.

"One week," she says, shaking her head. "I still do not believe it."

"Neither do we," I tell her.

"He said I love you." She pokes Matt in the chest. "I heard. And you said it too. Twice."

My face goes hot all over again, which is ridiculous given everything we've just done. "I heard that too."

"Did you mean it?" she asks me.

I look at Matt. He lies on his side with his head on the pillow, watching me, waiting to hear what I'll say. He doesn't look nervous. He looks like he already knows.

"Yes," I say. "I meant it."

Sumi smiles and lies back down, satisfied. "Good. I told you. The charm works."

We stay until almost two in the morning. Sumi makes green tea in a little iron pot, and we drink it sitting cross-legged on her bed in our borrowed kimonos, talking and laughing like old friends at a slumber party. She tells us about growing up outside Osaka and moving to Tokyo for school. She tells us about her job in an office she says is very boring, and I tell her about mine, and she laughs so hard at the part about Deb and the wrong color

scrubs that she has to set her tea down. When we finally get dressed to leave, she hugs us both at the door for a long time, and she makes me promise to text her before we fly home.

The streets are almost empty on the walk back to the hotel. A few taxis roll past with their lights on, and a man on a bicycle rides by with a stack of newspapers, but mostly it's just the two of us and the hum of the vending machines on every corner. Matt holds my hand the whole way. For the first few blocks, neither of us says much.

"Are you okay?" he asks finally.

"I'm more than okay." I squeeze his hand. "Are you?"

"I'm good," he says. "Better than good. I just want to make sure. Tonight was a lot."

"It was a lot," I agree. "But it didn't change anything. Not the important stuff."

He stops walking, right there on the sidewalk under a streetlight, and turns me to face him.

"The important stuff," he says. "You mean what you said?"

"In the living room or the bedroom?"

"Either one."

"Both," I tell him. "I meant both."

He kisses me under the streetlight, slow and sweet, until a taxi honks at us from the corner and we break apart laughing. Then he takes my hand again, and we keep walking toward the hotel.

A week ago, I didn't know this man existed. A week ago, I'd never left the country, never been with a woman, and never said yes to anything that scared me. Now I'm walking through Tokyo at two in the morning, legs sore and a red silk kimono folded in my purse because Sumi insisted I keep it.

I should be tired. I should be confused. Instead, I feel more like myself than I have in my entire life.

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9

~ Matthew ~

I don’t know what time it is when we finally get back to Jenna’s hotel room, but it doesn’t matter. Neither of us feels like sleeping. We’re tired, yes, but also wide awake and filled with renewed energy. The idea of sleep simply doesn’t appeal to us. I feel alive and Jenna has that gleam in her eyes, the one I’ve come to know and love.

We undress without ceremony and slip into her bed. Then we do one of the most intimate things that new lovers can do: talk. We talk for hours. We start by recapping the events of this unforgettable night, checking in with each other, making sure we’re both okay and comfortable with everything that took place. Then we get into the weeds and discuss our favorite memories of the night with giddy smiles.

“You know, I’ve never done anything like that before,” Jenna says. “After we both said… what we said-”

“I love you.”

She looks at me, a flicker of hope in her eyes. “Yes. *I love you*. After that, I thought maybe I’d freak out, seeing you with another woman. But it was amazing. It’s hard to explain exactly. It was like watching you open a gift on Christmas morning, does that make sense? Like I was sharing something wonderful with you and I couldn’t wait to see you enjoy it. I think my favorite part was that you didn’t forget about me while you were with her.”

“How could I?” I squeeze her hand. “There’s no way I could forget about you, Jenna. If I’m being completely honest, as good as everything felt, the hottest part was watching you and seeing your reaction. That’s what really did it for me.”

She blushes. She kisses me. We lie together in each other’s arms. Body to body. I feel the heat of her skin and the delicate flutter of her heart. My arm slides around her waist. For the first time, we’re content to simply exist in this glow, rather than use it to encourage us. After basking in the warmth for a few long, delicious moments, Jenna speaks again, with a shy giggle in her voice.

“So… how did that compare to your last threesome? With the flight attendants?”

I laugh. “There is no comparison. None at all. This was better in every conceivable way.”

“You’re not just saying that because I’m here right now?”

“I mean it. The last time, I was nervous, a little shy. There was alcohol involved, I won’t lie. But this - wow. This was on another level. The sexiest part for me was just seeing how bold and confident you were. The way you touched Sumi and the look in your eyes. That was unforgettable.”

She laces her fingers through mine. Her voice is softer now. “I still can’t believe any of this happened. I can’t understand it. But I’m so, *so* glad I’m here.”

Another soft, slow kiss. My body stirs at the touch of her lips, but neither of us is in any hurry. After a night like this, we feel almost content. Almost. She pulls back, glowing and smiling, but her eyes are bright with tears.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I was just thinking about how crazy it is.” She shakes her head. A lock of hair falls free and I brush it back into place. “Falling in love with a man who spends his days flying around the world. When all of this is over and you drop me back in Omaha, who knows how long it’ll be before I see you again?”

The thought tugs at my heart. Jenna has been in my life for just over a week now, yet the idea of being apart from her for even twenty-four hours is almost too much to bear. I hold her body tighter against mine.

“Then we’ll have to make the most of our time together. Like we’re doing right now. Next time I’m back in town, you can show me all the sights of Omaha.”

Jenna laughs. “What sights? You’ve seen the one good restaurant. You’ve seen downtown. That’s pretty much Omaha. Unless you want to take a drive out west to see the self-proclaimed World’s Biggest Corndog.”

“In that case,” I say, smiling, “we’ll just have to spend all our time in bed.”

We kiss again, slow and soft and sensual. Now we finally fall asleep in each other’s arms.

We wake to the sound of a message beeping on my phone. I squint at the screen through heavy, lidded eyes. It's a message from the boss. ~ *Departure confirmed tomorrow morning. MD*. ~

My heart sinks. One more day with Jenna, and then who knows what comes next. She's right. Once we leave here, we'll fly back to Omaha and drop her off. From there, it could be a week before I see her again. It could be several. It could even be months. This job worked fine with me when I had no strings, no connections. But now, the thought of being parted from her is a real, physical ache.

Jenna kisses my cheek. "What is it?" I show her the message. She nods and forces a smile. "One more day in Tokyo. What do we want to do?"

I offer a sad smile in return. "You can do whatever you'd like. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to spend a good chunk of the day at the hangar. I've got to check over the jet, run inspections, pre-flight diagnostics, make sure she's ready to go."

"Can I help?" she asks, with such eagerness that my chest swells.

"If you want to come, you're welcome. But I have to warn you, it won't be much fun to watch. Just me, the ground crew, and a clipboard for several hours. If you'd rather explore on your own and meet me later, we could have dinner together."

"Okay." Jenna puts on a brave face and nods. "Dinner it is. What time do you need to leave for the hangar?"

I check the clock. It's still early. "After breakfast, probably.

"So… we don't need to rush off right now? We have some time this morning?"

"No," I say, a slow smile spreading across my lips as I catch her meaning.

We get out of bed and shower together, though we spend precious little time actually cleaning ourselves. Warm water cascades over us from the powerful jets, almost like a massage. Jenna wraps her arms around me and lifts one leg. I slide my arm under her raised thigh, press her gently against the warm tiles, and ease back inside her. The sound she makes - that mix of relief and comfort and need - is absolute music to my ears.

"Oh, *Matt*…"

We make love in the shower, standing up, looking each other in the eyes, kissing with unrelenting passion. When Jenna finally reaches the edge, she looks directly at me and says those wonderful words over and over again.

“I love you, Matt. I love you, Oh, I love you, Matt.”

And when it becomes too much for me to hold back, I answer in the same way.

“I love you, Jenna. I love you, Jenna. I love you.”

We moan in unison and climax together. After we’re finished, we wash up and freshen ourselves for the day ahead.

We eat breakfast together downstairs. The hotel staff have come to recognize our faces by now. The waitress doesn’t know our names, but she greets us as *Mr. and Mrs*. with such bright, giddy enthusiasm that it’s impossible not to enjoy. We dine on another sensational breakfast, then step outside. I squeeze Jenna’s hand while we wait for the taxi.

“Where are you going to go today?”

She glances left and right. “Anywhere and everywhere. I’ve never had this much freedom before. Just me and the whole of Tokyo at my fingertips.”

The cab pulls up. I give Jenna a long, lingering kiss and promise to see her later. She waves to me as the car rolls away. The cab carries me out of downtown Tokyo to the wider edges of the city, where the hangar sits alongside the airport. Planes lift into the sky every few minutes, and the sight of those metal wings glinting in the morning sun puts a smile on my face. I can picture the cockpit clearly; the pilot and co-pilot working with constant communication; hands on throttles; eyes on instruments.

The Gulfstream looks absolutely spectacular. Not just because she’s a beautiful aircraft, but because the ground crew have washed and polished her exterior to a brilliant shine. I’ve never seen her looking so immaculate. The sight almost brings a tear of joy to my eye.

A middle-aged Japanese man with a weathered face and sharp eyes greets me. I’d been bracing for a language barrier, but his English turns out to be far superior to my Japanese. He walks me through everything the crew has done, and makes a point of commenting on the plane’s condition with obvious pride. My chest swells as though he’s complimenting my child.

We run through the checklist together. I handle the elements that require a pilot’s eye and hand off the more detailed mechanical items to him. I’m good at my job, but I don’t know every component of a Gulfstream inside and out. There are hundreds, if not thousands of tiny pieces that require consideration. We break after a couple of hours for coffee, which is - I note

with appreciation - considerably better than the cup I tasted at the hangar in Omaha several days ago. Then we get back to it.

I lose track of time and push thoughts of Jenna Vickers to the back of my mind, at least while I'm working. By the time both the chief mechanic and I are satisfied that the jet is ready for departure, it's nearly mid-afternoon. I check my phone and find two messages from Jenna, both sent about an hour ago. The first says, *Have you eaten yet?* The second says, *Nevermind. I'm bringing snacks.*

The thought of food makes my belly rumble. Before I can type a reply, a new taxi rolls to a stop in front of me. A familiar, beautiful, smiling woman climbs out, holding a box of fresh-baked goods. Jenna has a garment bag slung over one shoulder, carrying my pilot outfit and her own flight attendant gear.

I hug her and ask, "What's that for?"

"I had them dry cleaned in the hotel. I figure they can stay in the plane until we need them tomorrow, right?"

"Great thinking." It's impossible not to smile. I take her hand and we step on board the jet together. "So, what have you been doing today?"

~ Jenna ~

"Well," I say, "I got lost, I made a new friend, and I did something my mother is going to kill me for."

Matt stops halfway down the aisle and turns around. "Should I be worried?"

"Probably." I set the box of pastries down on one of the leather seats, hang the garment bag in the closet by the door, and prop my foot up on the armrest. Then I roll up the cuff of my jeans and peel back the clear bandage on my ankle. "Ta-da."

He leans down to look. It's small, about the size of a quarter, just a simple little paper airplane in thin black lines, tilted up like it's taking off. The skin around it is still a little pink. Matt doesn't say anything for a long moment, and I start to get nervous that he hates it.

"Jenna," he says finally. "You got a tattoo."

"I got a tattoo."

"In Tokyo."

"In Tokyo." I can't stop grinning. "Do you like it?"

He crouches down and runs his thumb along the edge of the bandage, careful not to touch the ink. When he looks up at me, he's grinning too. "I love it. Now tell me how this happened."

So I tell him. After his cab pulled away from the hotel this morning, I stood on the sidewalk for a good five minutes trying to decide where to go. I've never had a whole day to myself in a city I don't know. Back home, a day off meant laundry, groceries, and maybe a movie if I was feeling wild. I dropped our uniforms off with the concierge for dry cleaning, then walked to the subway station with no plan at all, which turned out to be my first mistake.

My second mistake was getting on a train because it had a pretty color on the map. I rode for a long time, looking out the window and feeling proud of myself, and by the time I realized I was going the wrong way, the skyscrapers were long gone. I got off at a station with a name I couldn't pronounce and climbed the stairs into a neighborhood of little houses, narrow streets, and lots of bicycles. No tourists. No English signs. Not even a convenience store.

I tried my maps app, but my phone had about eight percent battery left after all the pictures I took yesterday, and it died while it was still thinking about it. I stood there on the corner holding a dead phone, and for about ten seconds, I panicked. I didn't know where I was, I couldn't read a single sign, and I couldn't call Matt.

Then something funny happened. I stopped panicking. I thought about the girl who stood in her kitchen last Saturday holding a passport with no stamps in it, and I thought she would have sat down on this curb and cried. I'm not her anymore. So I picked a direction and started walking.

I walked for maybe twenty minutes before I found a little shop selling rice crackers and tea. The woman behind the counter was about my grandmother's age, and she spoke maybe ten words of English. I didn't speak her language at all. I held up my dead phone and said our hotel's name about four times; she frowned, then waved me behind the counter and plugged my phone into the wall next to her register.

While it charged, she made me a cup of green tea, fed me rice crackers, and showed me pictures of her grandson, who lives in Seattle. By the time my phone came back to life, we were best friends. She walked me all the way back to the station, pointed me to the right train, and bowed so low I

didn't know what to do, so I hugged her. I think I surprised her. She laughed and patted my cheek.

The tattoo shop was two blocks from the hotel. I'd walked past it twice already this week without noticing it: a narrow doorway with a small English sign that said, "Walk-ins welcome." I stood outside it for a long time. I thought about my mom saying ‘*a tattoo artist*’ in that voice she saves for things she disapproves of. I thought about the paper airplanes I used to fold as a kid and throw off the roof of my dad's garage, watching them glide across the backyard and wishing I could go with them. And I thought about the grocery receipt with Matt's number on it, still folded up in my wallet. Then I went inside.

The artist was a young guy with a shaved head and tattoos all the way up both arms. He sketched it on a napkin while I watched, and when I nodded, he had it done in about twenty minutes. It stung more than I expected, but I didn't care. When he finished and held up a mirror so I could see my ankle, I almost cried, which seemed to embarrass him a little.

"Then I came back to the hotel, picked up our uniforms, bought these at the bakery on the corner," I tell Matt, pointing at the pastry box, "and texted you, and here I am."

He's been listening to all of this with a look I haven't seen on his face before. It isn't surprise, exactly. It's more like he's seeing something about me for the first time.

"You got lost in Japan with a dead phone," he says. "And you figured it out by yourself."

"With a little help from my new grandmother."

"And then you got a tattoo."

"And then I got a tattoo," I agree. "Are you going to keep repeating everything I say?"

"Maybe." He kisses me, quick and hard. "You're incredible. You know that?"

I don't know what to say, so I hand him a melon bun instead, and he eats it in about three bites.

This morning he told me he'd be finished by mid-afternoon, but it turns out there's more to it than that. The mechanics are done with their part, but Matt still has his own cockpit checks to run, and he needs to work out the fuel for tomorrow's flight. He apologizes about six times. I tell him to stop apologizing and get back to work. I'm happy to watch.

And I mean it, because watching Matt work turns out to be one of the sexiest things I have ever seen.

I've seen him in his uniform before. I've seen him charm waiters, flip cabbage pancakes, and talk my dad down on the phone. But I've never seen him like this. He sits down in the left-hand seat with his sleeves rolled up and a headset hanging around his neck, and something about him changes. His shoulders settle. His face goes still and focused. He flips overhead switches without looking, reads numbers off the screens in a low, steady voice, and writes them on a clipboard balanced on his knee in quick, neat handwriting. At one point, the chief mechanic leans in through the cockpit door to ask him something, and Matt answers in a stream of numbers and letters that means absolutely nothing to me, and the mechanic nods like it all makes perfect sense.

I lean against the doorway behind him and try not to stare. I fail. His forearms are tan and strong, his jaw tight, and every so often he taps his pen against his bottom lip as he thinks. I've never once in my life been turned on by somebody doing math. I am now.

He catches me looking in the reflection off one of the screens and raises an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Nothing," I say. "Keep working. Pretend I'm not here."

"That's not possible," he says, but he goes back to work, and I can see him trying not to smile.

When he's done with the fuel numbers, he takes the clipboard and goes down the stairs to sign some paperwork with the chief mechanic. He tells me he'll be ten minutes. I stay up front, alone in the cockpit.

It's so quiet without him. The screens are dark again. Through the windshield, I can see the hangar doors wide open, the airfield beyond them, and a big commercial jet lifting off in the distance, the sun glinting off its wings. I look at the seat on the right side, the one I sat in on the flight over, when I brought Matt his coffee and saw the clouds from up front for the first time.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I climb in and sit down.

The seat is firmer than the ones in the cabin, and it holds me snug on both sides. A second set of controls sits right in front of me: a yoke like Matt's, and rows of switches and dials that mirror his side. I don't touch anything - I'm not crazy - but I put my hands in my lap, look out through

the glass, and pretend, just for a minute, that I know what it all does. That I belong here.

"Comfortable?"

I jump about a foot. Matt stands in the cockpit doorway with his arms folded, leaning against the frame and smiling at me.

"Sorry," I say, starting to climb out. "I didn't touch anything, I swear."

"Stay," he says. He slides into his own seat beside me and swivels to face me. "It looks good on you."

"I bet you say that to all the girls who sit in your co-pilot seat."

"You're the only one who's ever sat there. On this plane, anyway." He runs his hand along the edge of the console between us. "It's strange, actually. I've been flying her solo since I started. Most jets this size fly with two pilots, at least on the long trips. Thirteen hours is a lot for one guy."

"So why doesn't Mr. Donovan hire another one?"

"Funny you should ask." He leans back in his seat. "He called me at the hangar this morning to go over the flight plan, and he brought it up again. He's been talking about it for a couple of weeks now. He says he wants a co-pilot for the long hauls, for safety, and so I can get some rest on the way over."

I look down at the yoke in front of me. "That makes sense."

"He said he has somebody in mind." Matt shrugs. "He wouldn't tell me who. You know how he is. He likes his surprises."

I run my fingers over the armrest of the seat I'm sitting in. It's silly, I know. It's an airplane seat that doesn't belong to me, a job that I could never do, and tomorrow I'm flying back to Omaha with no job at all. But I can't help wondering who'll be sitting right here the next time Matt flies over the Pacific. Whoever it is, they'll get to see the sunrise from the front of the plane every time. They'll get to hear Matt reading off his numbers in that low, steady voice.

"What's that face?" Matt asks.

"No face," I say. "I'm just thinking about how lucky they'll be. Whoever it turns out to be."

He reaches across the console, takes my hand, and we sit side by side in the cockpit for a while without talking, watching the planes take off one by one into the late afternoon sky.

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10

~ Matthew ~

By the time I'm finished and every check, inspection, and clearance has been completed, it's late in the afternoon. Every now and again, I catch Jenna looking at me with big wide eyes. I ask her what she's staring at. The only thing she says is, "You, you're amazing, Matt. Do you know that? The things that you can do are incredible."

I hand the paperwork to the Chief Mechanic. By now, both Jenna and I are getting hungry. As good as that melon bun tasted, it still left me craving more. We walk through the cabin of the jet, looking over the space one last time. Jenna trails a hand across every surface – all the comfortable leather seats, the small tables, the recliner – as if trying to commit them all to memory. As if she'll never get the chance to experience something like this again. The thought makes my heart ache. The idea of flying somewhere else and leaving Jenna behind in Omaha hurts more than an express.

We reach the bedroom at the back of the cabin and gaze at the bed. Calling this a bedroom is maybe overselling it a little bit: it's a space where one or two occupants can comfortably sleep on a soft king size mattress that almost fills this corner of the plane, with a sliding door for privacy. Jenna glances at me with a curious look in her eyes, and I know what she's thinking.

Before either of us can share that thought aloud, the Chief Mechanic strolls back into the cabin with an apologetic expression. He says, "You forgot signature."

I scribble my name on the bottom of the sheet and hand it back. He gives a short bow and leaves the jet. His footsteps fade out of earshot, and I turn back to Jenna, but the moment has passed. Whatever courage she briefly felt while looking at the jet's bed is gone now.

We link hands and disembark, heading across the tarmac and leaving the Gulfstream behind. She says, "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I could eat."

"Where should we go?"

“Oh, I know a place.” I offer a cheeky grin. She doesn’t ask any questions. After all the time we’ve spent together, we’ve developed enough of a relationship that she trusts my decision making.

We take a cab back from the airport area and head into Tokyo again. But this time, we head away from the tall, glittering towers and the impressive structures of the main metropolis and into the smaller, but still sprawling, suburban areas. Jenna looks out of the window with wide eyes, taking in all the sights. We’re a long way from the main tourist center now, and that’s kind of the point.

The cab drops us in the middle of a nondescript collection of apartment buildings, each with air conditioning units mounted to the wall. The streets are so narrow that only the thin local cars can comfortably drive between buildings. Power lines dangle in the air above our heads, propped up by poles every twenty meters. There’s a constant, steady flow of people moving this way and that; residents heading to their next chore, people in office dress rushing to an appointment, business owners on their way to earn some money. This is a long way from the delicate urban sprawl of downtown Tokyo, but that’s the point. There’s a place here that I’ve heard about and always wanted to try. One of those secret, *if you know, you know,* kind of places.

Jenna looks all around. There are plenty of small glowing signs daubed in Kanji script, advertising local businesses, but nothing that looks like a restaurant. I take her by the hand and walk to a simple wooden sliding door beneath a square sign.

“This?” Jenna looks around. “Isn’t this someone’s home?”

“Boy, that would be awkward, wouldn’t it?”

I open the sliding door and we step inside. The interior of the space almost looks like someone’s home for a moment. There are no tables and no large, open kitchen as you might expect. Instead, the only seats are a row of stools facing a bar counter. A woman in a suit stands behind the counter, ready to serve. The kitchen is a tiny space off to the side, barely large enough for the oven and the chef. The décor is tasteful, elegant, and fashioned from wood. It’s like stepping back in time.

“What is this place?” Jenna gazes around with awe.

“It’s called Shimbashi Shimizu. Do you like it?”

She nods. The woman in the suit introduces herself as Ito and guides us to our seats at the bar. She speaks fabulous English and offers drinks. The

chef greets us like old friends. His name is Yamamoto and he talks into his phone to make it translate.

We sit and enjoy one of the most exquisite meals of our lives. It's not a fancy place and the dishes aren't elaborate and overwrought. Instead, each portion is immaculately prepared and presented with utmost care. Everything is bursting with flavor. Yamamoto watches our reactions with an eager smile and Ito serves drinks that perfectly accompany every plate. Sushi. Shrimp. Beef. Chicken. I've eaten these foods before, but I've never tasted anything like this. Ito engages us in pleasant conversation in the brief lulls between courses, recommending things for young lovers to do in Tokyo. Jenna and I exchange a blushing look, but we listen anyway.

By the time we finish the single most delicious maccha ice cream of my life, we're pleasantly full. Ito hands me the check and I pay without looking. Jenna glimpses the numbers on the page and her eyes almost bulge out of her head. We thank Ito and Yamamoto. I leave a generous tip on the counter that is immediately put back in my hand as if I've committed some grave mistake.

Jenna giggles. "You know they don't tip over here, right?"

"Yeah, but it was a really good meal, and I wanted to show my appreciation."

"We ate every crumb. That's appreciation enough."

Our hosts bid us goodnight and we leave, stepping through the sliding door and into a different world. It's after quitting time and this part of Tokyo is now heaving with salaried employees rushing home. We decide to walk back instead of hailing a cab. After all, neither of us is in a rush.

Jenna looks at me with tears in her eyes. "That wasn't a cheap date. You know how much that cost in dollars?"

"I have a rough idea. But it was worth every cent."

"It was too much, I need to pay you back."

"No, you don't." We stop walking under a streetlight and I look into her face. "I get paid well and I've never had a good opportunity to spend any of it. Until now, anyway. It's nice to have someone to spoil."

A silvery trickle rolls from the corner of Jenna's eye, cutting a shimmering path over her cheek. I wipe it away with a thumb. Her voice trembles.

"I hope you're not being overly dramatic because it's our last night together."

“No. I want you to remember this trip forever. I want us both to remember it.”

She hugs me tight. People weave around us on the sidewalk but we don’t care.

“Matt, I promise I’m never going to forget any of this. None. Literally, since the moment you sat down in my chair, it feels like my life has been completely different. I can’t thank you enough.”

For a wild, crazy moment, I try to imagine what would happen if I stopped being a pilot. Would I be able to live a grounded life? Could I be happy finding some normal job? What if I stayed in Omaha with Jenna? Do I love flying more than I love her?

I push the questions aside and hug her back. This isn’t the time for those thoughts. This feels like the last day of the best vacation of our lives, except more intense than that. This has been better than any mere vacation. This has been the single most wonderful week of my entire life, and it’s all thanks to Jenna.

She slides her arm through mine, and we walk along the streets, heading in the rough direction of our hotel. Some of these roads are almost familiar to us now. Once upon a time, they were strange and alien. Now we have a pretty good sense of direction and a lot of familiar landmarks to use.

It takes less than an hour to get back to the hotel. The concierge at the desk greets us with a warm smile and hands over a neatly typed note on hotel branded stationery. It’s from Michael Donovan and it simply says, Take off at 8 a.m. Jenna reads it over my shoulder. I give the concierge a smile that doesn’t quite reach my eyes and put the note in my pocket.

Eight in the morning. One final night. Now we’re both on borrowed time. We take the elevator up and head inside Jenna’s hotel room without a word being spoken. The moment the door closes behind us, we burst into a flurry of passion; kissing, embracing, tugging at each other’s clothes.

I push her against the wall, kissing hard, hands roaming her soft, creamy skin, unbuttoning her jeans and tugging them to the floor. We don’t say a word. We don’t need to. The first time we make love is filled with raw urgent need as if we’re racing the clock. We do it right there, against the wall, beside the door, hearing the occasional soft footstep of somebody passing by in the hall.

I take Jenna with an insistence that borders on rough, but she doesn’t complain. If anything, she enjoys it more than usual. She encourages me

with gasping exhales and furious, cooing moans. Once she climaxes, I turn her around and take her like this, standing up, from behind. She spreads her hands against the wall and pushes back into me. Once I've joined her in the ecstasy of the afterglow, we make our way to bed and entwine our bodies again.

This second time is slower, softer, and gentler, but still with an unspoken underscore of frantic need, as if we need to make every moment count because we don't know when we'll get the chance to do anything like this ever again. We take turns rolling on top, both determined to stretch every second and make the most of our dwindling time. Afterward, we lay together side by side, my arms around her waist, feeling her heart settle back into a steady rhythm.

We both gaze through the windows, watching the Tokyo skyline. I don't want to miss a single moment of this; not her, not this country, none of it. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or how our lives might change after that. The only thing I know for sure is that meeting Jenna was the best thing that ever happened to me. I can't imagine being away from her.

"I love you, Jenna," I say, giving her cheek a soft kiss.

"I love you too, Matt," she says, with a thick, emotional voice. "So much."

~ Jenna ~

I wake up before the alarm, a little after five, and lie still for a while. Matt is asleep with his arm across my waist. Outside the big window, the sky over Tokyo is turning from black to gray, and the lights in the towers are starting to blink off one at a time. I try to memorize it all. The window, the city, the weight of his arm, the hum of the air conditioner. I know I'll never stay in a room like this again, and I want to be able to close my eyes back in Omaha and see it.

When the alarm finally goes off, we get up and pack without saying much. I fold Sumi's red kimono and tuck it into the bottom of my suitcase, under the sweaters I never needed. I put the two silk charms in the zipper pocket of my purse, right next to my passport. Before we leave the room, I take out my phone and send Sumi the text I promised her.

We're leaving this morning. Thank you for everything. I'll never forget you.

Her answer comes back before we even reach the elevator. *Safe travels, my new friends. Come back to Tokyo soon. The charm will bring you.*

The cab ride to Haneda is quiet. I watch the city go by through the window, the stacked highways, the train tracks, and all those neat little buildings, and I try not to cry. Matt holds my hand the whole way. Neither of us mentions Omaha.

We pull up next to the hangar at seven-thirty. The Gulfstream sits on the tarmac, still shining from yesterday, with the stairs already down. A woman I've never seen before walks around the nose of the plane with a clipboard in her hand.

She's tall, maybe as tall as Matt, with blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and a navy flight suit that fits her a lot better than my borrowed jacket ever fit me. She's young, too, probably around my age, and even from across the tarmac I can tell she's gorgeous. She crouches down by the front wheel, looks at something underneath it, and makes a note on her clipboard.

"Is she one of the mechanics?" I ask.

Matt is frowning. "I don't think so. I've never seen her before."

We climb out of the cab and walk over with our bags. The woman stands when she sees us coming and breaks into a big, easy smile.

"Morning," she says. "You must be Hale."

Her accent is pure Texas. Matt stops walking. "That's right. And you are?"

"Mackenzie Morgan." She tucks the clipboard under her arm and holds out her hand. "Your new co-pilot. Nobody told you?"

Matt shakes her hand, but I can see from the look on his face that nobody told him anything. "He said he had someone in mind. He didn't say you'd be here this morning."

"Well, that sounds like him." She laughs. Then she turns to me, and her eyes move over me from head to toe, quick but not rude. "And you must be Jenna. I've heard about you."

"You have?" I ask. I can't imagine what Mr. Donovan would have said about me. That I spilled coffee on the way over, maybe.

"All good things, I promise." She shakes my hand too. Her grip is firm and warm, and she holds on a second longer than I expect. "Cute tattoo, by

the way."

I look down. My jeans ride up over my ankle, and the little paper airplane peeks out above my sneaker. "Thanks. It's new."

"I can tell. It's still pink." She winks at me and lets go of my hand.

Before any of us can say anything else, a black sedan glides up beside the hangar, and Mr. Donovan climbs out of the back seat with his briefcase. He takes one look at the three of us standing together and grins like a kid who just pulled off the perfect prank.

"Good, you've met," he says. "I wanted it to be a surprise. Matthew, I know I've been talking about this for weeks. Ms. Morgan flew regional jets out of Dallas for three years, and she comes very highly recommended. I've had my eye on her for a while. When I found out she was in Tokyo visiting a friend this week, it seemed like fate."

"It's good to have you aboard," Matt tells her, and he sounds like he means it, but I know him well enough by now to hear the little edge in his voice. He's not upset, exactly. He just likes to know who's sitting next to him before the engines start.

"Thanks," Mackenzie says. "I've been reading up on this bird all week. I can't wait to see what she can do."

Matt and Mackenzie head off to finish the walk-around, and Mr. Donovan asks me to come up to the cabin with him for a minute. I follow him up the stairs, and my stomach is in knots the whole way. He sets his briefcase down on a seat and turns to face me, and for some reason I'm certain I'm about to get fired from a job I've only had for a week.

"I'll get right to it, Jenna," he says. "I want you to stay on. Permanently."

I just stare at him, and he keeps going.

"Full time, with a proper salary and benefits. Health insurance, the works. You'll fly wherever we fly, and you'll have time off between trips." He smiles. "I don't know if you've noticed, but Matthew has flown better this week than he has in months. He's sharper. He's happier. I think you're the reason. And frankly, I like having you on board. The coffee's better, and so is the conversation."

"Mr. Donovan, I don't know anything about being a flight attendant. I've been making it up as I go."

"So was I, when I started my first company." He picks up his briefcase again. "You'll learn. Think about it on the flight home, and let me know when we land."

"I don't need to think about it," I tell him. "Yes!"

He laughs, and he shakes my hand. Then he goes to his favorite seat by the window, opens his laptop, and that's that. My whole life just changed in about two minutes, and he's already checking his email.

I make it to the bottom of the stairs before I start shaking. Matt comes around the tail of the plane with Mackenzie, takes one look at my face, and drops his clipboard.

"What happened?"

"He offered me the job," I tell him. "For real. Full time."

"And?"

"And I said yes."

He picks me up right there on the tarmac, spins me around in a circle, and kisses me hard enough that I forget the ground crew watching us. Mackenzie lets out a long, loud whistle.

"Well, damn," she says when he finally puts me down. "Is it always like this around here?"

"Pretty much," I say, and all three of us laugh.

We take off at eight on the dot. I slip into my freshly dry-cleaned uniform and take my usual seat across from Mr. Donova, watching Tokyo shrink beneath us until the clouds swallow it. I don't cry. I thought I would, but I don't. It isn't goodbye anymore. It’s *See you later.*

A few hours out over the Pacific, Mr. Donovan falls asleep in his recliner with his reading glasses still on. I'm in the galley making a fresh pot of coffee when Mackenzie comes back from the cockpit, stretching her arms over her head.

"Your man says I'm on my rest break," she says. "Is that coffee?"

"It's the best coffee you'll ever have at forty thousand feet. Matt makes me tell everybody that."

She laughs and leans against the counter beside me while I pour her a mug. Up close, she's even prettier than I thought, with freckles across her nose and eyes so blue they almost don't look real. She blows on her coffee, takes a sip, closes her eyes, and makes a happy little sound.

"Okay," she says. "He's not wrong."

We end up talking for almost an hour. She tells me about growing up outside Fort Worth with three older brothers who all wanted to be pilots and never made it, and how she beat every one of them to the cockpit just to prove a point. She tells me about the regional airline, the early mornings,

and the terrible hotels. She tells me about the ex who left her for her own flight instructor, and I tell her about the guys back in Omaha who swore they were single right up until they had to admit they weren't. She laughs so hard that she has to set her mug down.

"So how long have you two been together?" she asks. "You and Hale."

"About a week," I admit.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "A week? Girl, you two look at each other like you've been married for ten years."

"You're not the first person to say that."

"I believe it." She studies me over the rim of her mug for a long moment, with a little smile I can't quite read. "He's a lucky man. I hope he knows it."

"He knows it," I tell her, and I'm surprised by how sure I sound.

"Good." She finishes her coffee, hands me the empty mug, and her fingers brush mine as she does. "I'd better get back up there before he thinks I've stolen his flight attendant."

She heads back up the aisle toward the cockpit. I stand in the galley, holding her mug longer than I need to, thinking about the way she looked at me on the tarmac this morning, and the way Sumi looked at me on that rooftop. I don't know what it means. I'm not sure I want to know yet. But I'm curious, and I've learned this week that curious is allowed.

We land in Omaha at seven in the morning on the same day we left Tokyo, which my brain flat-out refuses to accept. The sky is gray, the wind is cold, and cornfields stretch as far as I can see past the end of the runway. I expected to feel trapped when I saw it again. I don't. It just looks like a place I used to live.

As we taxi up to the hangar, a silver Buick is parked by the fence. My father leans against the hood, arms crossed, in his winter coat and his good Sunday hat, scowling at the plane. Hanging from his rearview mirror, I can see a little blue silk charm with gold thread.

"Oh no," I say.

Matt leans out of the cockpit door and follows my eyes. "Is that him?"

"That's him."

"He looks thrilled."

"That's his happy face," I tell him. "Trust me. If he wasn't happy, he'd have brought my mother."

Matt takes a deep breath, straightens his tie, and puts on his hat. I watch Mackenzie in the right-hand seat hiding a grin behind her hand.

"Wish me luck," he says.

I come down the stairs first, and my dad pushes off from the car and walks toward me. He doesn't say anything. He just wraps me up in a hug so tight it lifts me off my feet, the way he used to when I was little. Over his shoulder, I can see Matt coming down the stairs behind me with our bags, standing up straight like he's reporting for inspection.

"Dad," I say, when he finally lets go of me. "This is Matt."

My father looks at Matt for a long, long time. Then he sticks out his hand. "Bill Vickers."

"Matthew Hale, sir. It's very nice to meet you."

"We'll see," my dad says. But he's almost smiling when he says it.

Mr. Donovan told me in the cabin that our next trip leaves Monday morning. Three days. Three days to pack up my apartment, return my keys, hug my mom, and tell Marybeth everything over a very large glass of wine. Three days, and then I'm gone again, to somewhere I haven't even heard of yet.

I stand there on the tarmac between my father and the man I love, with the jet shining behind us and the cold Nebraska wind in my face. For my whole life, Omaha has been the only place I ever thought I'd be. Now it's just a stop along the way.

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