

FIVE TOTAL STRANGERS

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To my fellow travelers,
explorers of water and deserts
and everything in between.



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ONE

THE CABIN LIGHTS FLICKER ON AND I BLINK AWAKE, NECK stiff and mouth tacky. An overhead bin rattles. Turbulence. I yawn and one of my ear buds slips out just as we drop through an air pocket, the airplane settling with a jolt. Scattered gasps and snatches of panicked conversation rise in the cabin.

The intercom crackles. “Folks, we’re about twenty miles outside of Newark. As you might have noticed, the weather has intensified, so it’s going to be a bumpy descent.”

My seatmate, Harper, shifts impatiently. “Cue the hysteria.”

I laugh because it’s true. Infrequent flyers always get twitchy when pilots start tossing around words like *turbulence*, *bumpy*, or *weather*. Across from us, a woman with dark eyes and thin lips tightens her seatbelt to the point of obvious discomfort. I imagine painting this scene. I’d focus on her face, blurring out the rest. The mix of fear and energy in her eyes tells the story.

The woman catches me staring and gives a pointed glance at the loose seatbelt across my hips. I ignore her and lean closer to

the window to see better. Unlike Seatbelt Sally, I'm not worried about a little choppy air. Unless the plane is plummeting to Earth on fire, there's no point in getting worked up.

We can bounce all the way down as far as I'm concerned. I just need to get home to my mom.

Without meaning to, I picture my aunt's hand in mine, thin and waxy and bruised with old IV sites. This is not the memory I'd choose. Aunt Phoebe and I had *great* memories. Making homemade fudge. Trying on scarves. Playing together with her paints and color wheels. All these beautiful pieces of my aunt are smudged and watery, but those days from a year ago, the last ones we spent together—they come at me in high-definition.

The smell of disinfectant and medicine. The squeak of my shoes on the hospital floor. My mother's soft, hiccupping sobs. If I let myself think about it too much, it's like I'm still there.

But it's worse for Mom. Phoebe was my aunt, but she was my mother's twin. *It's like losing one of my lungs*, she once told me. *I don't think I'll ever breathe right again.*

A clatter brings me back to the present. In the front of the plane cabin, the flight attendants make their way down the aisle, collecting trash and securing seatback tables. A passenger is arguing with them. I can't hear what he's asking, but the flight attendant is firm. *No, you can't access the overheads. Sir, I can't allow that, it's unsafe.*

I zip my own bag shut as the attendants move on, pleasant and professional even as the cabin bumps and creaks. Beside

me, Harper applies lipstick. With the way this plane is jiggling, I don't know how she's not shoving it up her nose, but she coats it on with utter precision. It's like a magic trick.

I shift in my ratty jeans, feeling sloppy beside her crisp white shirt and wool pencil skirt. Harper's been talking about her college, so she can't be much older than me, but she's sophisticated in a way I doubt I'll ever be.

The plane drops again, enough to make my stomach flip. The wings catch air with a thunk. My teeth clack together and a flight attendant stumbles in the aisle. Someone begins to cry. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I guess they weren't kidding about it being bumpy.

The intercom warbles again. "*Flight attendants, please take your seats.*"

Harper tucks her long dark hair behind her ear. "Great, now I'm stuck holding my cup."

The plane thumps and shimmies its way down through the clouds. It's a hard go. My teeth clack together. Bags bounce up against the undersides of seats. I spend enough time in the air to know it's probably fine, but I still check the window. *Just get down out of the clouds already.*

In front of me, that woman is still crying, but I don't blame her now. Almost everyone looks nervous. Well, everyone except Harper.

"How long is your layover?" she asks, tucking her lipstick into its cap without spilling a drop of whatever's left of her Diet Coke.

“Forty-five minutes,” I say as the plane dips right and then rises. “Tight.”

“It won’t matter in this mess. We’ll all be delayed.” Then she grins. “So, did you think any more about our conversation?”

Normally, I avoid chit chat on airplanes at all cost, but before we even took off, Harper pointed out my silver cuff bracelet, a gift from my dad two Christmases ago. She recognized the jewelry maker by sight, which brought us to the conversation of metal-working, then modern art, and then painting. There’s no stopping me when I get started on all that.

“I dozed off somewhere over Oklahoma, I think,” I say.

She laughs. “Hopefully this blizzard will convince you a transfer to CalArts is a good idea.”

“Transfer?”

“Yes. Look, even if you didn’t have the grades for it before, you said you’re pulling a 4.0 now. And you’re talented. I’ve seen your work.”

“Well, on my phone.”

“I’ve seen enough. You have a focus in your paintings that’s uncommon.”

Focus is what Phoebe saw in my work too. She said I knew how to use color to draw a viewer’s eye to the heart of each painting. That’s how she convinced me to take the money she offered and to transfer permanently to my super selective and pricey art school that is across the country from Mom. I’d gotten accepted as a junior, but I came home early when Phoebe got sick and I

had no intention of going back. Especially with the hefty tuition hike that would affect my senior year.

Phoebe wasn't having that. One of the last conversations we had was her trying to convince me to make the move permanent. She'd pressed a check into my hand and held my wrist tight in her thin fingers. Told me she wanted me to go back, and more than that, she wanted me to go senior year too.

Your work has heart, Mira. You have to follow that. It matters.

I don't know if that's true, but I wasn't about to argue with my dying aunt.

"Anyway," Harper says, bringing my attention back to the present. "No one is going to care that you're at a community college once they see your work."

Community college?

I think over our earlier conversation. I showed her photos of my most recent student exhibit. And I admitted I was a little disappointed in my painting instructor. I'm not sure why she thought I was in community college, but a transfer to any college isn't possible. Because I'm still in high school.

I think about clarifying things, but why bother? If a random stranger on a plane wants to see me as a college freshman instead of a sick-to-death-of-high-school senior, who cares?

"I'll think about it," I say.

"You should," she says. "You can text me if you want me to talk to my friend, Jude."

The plane dips hard left, a wing catching a downdraft. The

crying woman screams, but Harper just sighs and asks me for my phone number so she can text me, still balancing her cup precariously in her left hand. I'm a far cry from a fearful flyer, but this girl is unflappable.

The plane settles into a hard shudder and now lots of people are making noise. Harper huffs, muttering, "Honestly, if we're going to crash, let's do it so we can all be done with the theatrics."

I clutch my armrests, but grin.

Dear, God, if you can hear me, please let me grow up to be like Harper.

"Anyway, Jude graduates next year," she says. "Music history, which is *such* a trust fund major, but he's had great opportunities. You said you're not loving Everglen—Wait, it was Everglen, right?"

I nod—that's the name of my high school. It feels a little weird, letting her continue on this line.

"You probably just need something more robust. You'd love CalArts. Everybody there does."

"Wait, you don't go there?"

"No, I'm an International Relations major at Pomona."

I smirk. "Sounds like a light load."

She sighs. "It would be if I wasn't also majoring in Asian Studies."

The plane lists hard to the right, then pops up and left. Others are crying now, and truthfully, I can't remember a worse descent in my long history of flying. But Harper is still chattering on with a distant look in her eye.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” she muses. “I could drop it to a minor, but I like a challenge.”

“Sounds like.”

She goes on and on, chirping about majors and internships, without a single glance at the window. It’s like she’s absolutely certain the plane will land without incident because she has things to do and places to be.

And she’s right.

We touch down with a squeak of tires and a smattering of applause. Something in my stomach unclenches so I can take a full breath. Guess I wasn’t quite as relaxed as I thought. The flight attendant crackles over the intercom while people throughout the cabin gather bags and laugh in relief. As we’re deplaning, I open my phone and check my messages. Six of them. Zari, Dad, and three from Mom.

I pull up Mom’s messages first, focusing on the last one.

Mom: Text when you land. Working, but weather has me worried.

I frown and run my thumb over the screen, imagining Mom obsessively checking the weather on her phone. Maybe I’m exaggerating. She wasn’t always like this, but after I moved... Well, after Phoebe, really. Everything was different after Phoebe.

“Boyfriend?” Harper guesses.

I shake my head. “Mom texts. The weather. You know.”

She laughs softly. “And I mom-talked all the way here with that transfer advice.”

I snort. “Trust me. You and my mother are polar opposites.”

Which is probably why I immediately liked Harper so much. Or at the least, why I want to *be* like her. Harper is like Aunt Phoebe with a style upgrade and a world class travel log. My mom, by contrast, is quiet and cautious, a post-surgery nurse who’s afraid of infections and airplanes. And, for most of the last year, almost everything else.

Maybe she wouldn’t be so afraid if I’d stayed.

No. I can’t keep doing this. She wanted me to go. She wrote the check from Phoebe for half of my senior year, for Pete’s sake. And Dad jumped in to pay the rest, thrilled to have me on his side of the country a little longer. We *all* agreed this was best for me.

But was it best for her?

I step off the gangway into the airport and take a sharp breath. Every seat in sight is filled, phone cords strung from endless outlets, suitcases stacked in every corner. The walls are cluttered too—lined with shopping bags and strollers and rumpled-looking travelers half-asleep or holding phones.

Something nudges my right arm. I turn to see Harper push past me, leather duffel rolling tidily beside her.

“Aren’t you going to talk to the desk?” I ask, nodding at the airline counter where the entire population of Pennsylvania appears to be gathered.

“Spending Christmas Eve in an airport hotel? No thanks. I’m getting a car.”

I laugh a little, because I’m pretty sure she’s not old enough

to get a car. And I doubt there will be cars available. Outside, I see the barest wisps of flurries. I'm going to go out on a limb and say canceling our flight isn't necessary. Heck, delaying our flight seems over the top. Harper marches on, all steely determination and clicking patent leather pumps.

She pauses, turning back to me. "You should come. If you want. I can drop you in Pittsburgh."

Yeah. I'm pretty sure optimism can only take you so far. I smile and shake my head. "I should probably take my chances in line. I've got to figure out what I'm doing."

"Well..." Harper pauses like she might argue, and then shakes her head. "Text me about CalArts. And best of luck getting home!"

She heads down the escalator, followed by a broad-shouldered guy with dark hair and a family with three young children. Near me, several airport staff members are moving folding cots into the hallway. One of them is watching over the work, a walkie talkie to her ear. The TV's overhead look similarly ominous, one weather forecast displaying the word *Blizzurricane* in shimmering font.

My heart sinks. I don't need to talk to anyone to know what's happening here. Weary travelers. Tangles of charging cables. Passengers sleeping under suit coats. Cots being moved into the waiting areas. I spot the Arrivals and Departures sign on a nearby wall but I don't bother getting close. There's no point in checking for Pittsburgh or possible alternate flights. Every flight reads the same status word. *Canceled*.

I can't get home.

The thought is a needle of panic to the base of my throat. It's not possible. I have to get home. She needs me. She needs me to make her laugh and get her to watch trashy TV. I can distract her from the fact that Phoebe died on Christmas. But not if I'm not home.

I start a dozen text messages that I delete just as fast. There's no way to text her any of this. No careful framing is going to keep this news from reducing her to a nervous wreck.

Finally, I give up and call my stepfather, Daniel. Daniel, a soft-spoken, steady accountant who is the antithesis of my compact, high-energy father in every way, answers on the second ring. Because he always answers on the second ring.

"Mira," he says after the slightest hesitation. "Merry Christmas."

"Well, Christmas Eve," I say. "And it's less than merry. I need you to help me break the news to Mom that I'm stuck at the airport. Like overnight stuck."

"You're stuck at the airport? Do you need help?"

"No, no, it's just weather. It doesn't even look that bad. I'm figuring it out, but I think I'm going to have to fly out tomorrow. I just need you to tell Mom because you know this is a hard day for her."

"I'm not sure..." He pauses awkwardly, like he's distracted. I wonder if I caught him making the noodles. Noodles are his Christmas thing. We have them every year. I painted them once, giant yellow sheets of dough, rolled paper thin over the dining room table. The rolling pin was my focal point.

Daniel coughs. “Maybe you should leave her a message. Have you texted her?”

I cringe. He can’t be serious. “Uh, no, I don’t want her to hear about this at work. What if you have her call me when she gets home?”

“Home?” This pause is different. He doesn’t move or sigh. When his voice comes back, it’s tight and sad. “Mira, I’m not living with your mother. Did she...did she not mention this to you?”

I cover my free ear, sure I heard him wrong. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Your mother and I are getting a divorce. I moved out two weeks ago.”

His sentence feels like a terrible joke. Bits and pieces of questions swirl in the corners of my mind, but I can’t catch hold of anything. Someone pushes past me with a suitcase and the bang into my knee kicks my words loose.

“What are—I don’t—a divorce?”

“I’m so sorry.” He sounds like he is. But it doesn’t matter.

My words vanish again. It’s too sudden and weird. Was there anything—any *clue* that this was coming? I’ve only lived with Dad in San Diego for eighteen months, and I was back for six weeks when Phoebe died. And I’ve visited! Nothing has seemed different. Nothing.

I start forward, suddenly desperate to be in motion. I march without direction, past Arrivals, the Information Desk, the suitcases, cots, and families. Daniel is telling me that he still cares

about me and of course my mother too, and he never meant to hurt anyone, and I'm down the escalator and halfway through the lower level, past baggage claim carousels and rows of plastic chairs in a random curving path to nowhere.

"Mira?" Daniel's voice cuts through the fog of my brain. "Are you all right?"

Funny that he'd ask, but I don't laugh. "I'm... I've got to call my mom."

"I really am sorry. I'm surprised that she didn't talk to you about this."

"Yeah. That makes two of us."

We hang up with him making promises to stay in touch and me agreeing that of course I'll reach out if I need him. And yes, Merry Christmas. And a Happy New Year. My hands are so shaky I can barely press the button to end the call. I stop walking just short of smacking into a concrete pillar, my body thrumming with a strange electric buzz. Energy with nowhere to go.

Daniel is leaving my mother.

Correction. Daniel *left* my mother. Past tense. Old news. But not old news to me.

The world feels sideways, but nothing is different. Passengers pace. Dire weather warnings continue to scroll across every screen in sight. I check through the last three weeks of my mother's texts, a blathering collection of love you, honey and can't wait to see you and do you think a ham will be okay instead of a turkey this year? Why the hell would she not tell me something like this?

Unless she *can't* tell me. She could be in that place where she shuts down. Like when Aunt Phoebe was sick. At the end.

Except *that* time Daniel was there, making her soup and toast. And I was there, holding her hand and forcing her to talk. What is this going to look like when she wakes up alone on Christmas day? Christmas, which was the penultimate holiday in our family—not because of presents, but because we had a list of traditions that we added to and laughed about every year. Mom had to start taking time off work to fit in all the ice skating and cookie decorating and hikes through evergreen forests. We were a ridiculous trio.

And now we are a duo.

Except we aren't even that, are we? I'm here and she's there and completely, one hundred percent alone.

Something rattles softly behind me, and I turn to see Harper with something held high in her hands. Her eyes look red and her face is pale, but she's grinning. "Hey stranger. Change your mind?"

She did it. She has keys to a car.

"I thought you had to be twenty-five to rent one," I say.

"There are a couple of places that let you do it at twenty-one. If you pay practically double," she says, checking her phone with a frown. She pockets it decisively. "So, are you coming with us?"

"Us?"

"Meet my friends, the fellow castaways from Flight 3694." She looks back at three people behind her. They're around her

age, and they're all looking glazed over and rumpled with that shitty-travel-day expression I'm sure I'm wearing too. Harper, however, is still perfectly put together, a little twitchy and tense maybe, but unwrinkled.

She turns for introductions like we're meeting at a fancy lunch and not at ground zero of a travel nightmare come to life.

"This is Josh." A blond with sleepy eyes and some kind of injury—guessing from the intense-looking brace on his knee and the crutches he's using—meets my eyes and gives me a slight nod.

"Kayla." A willowy girl waves. Her hair as pale as mine is dark. I think I saw her on the plane. She boarded near me.

"And Brecken." Brecken steps forward with an extended hand and a wide and inviting smile. Maybe a little too inviting, but who knows. Maybe that's just how college guys are.

I pull my beanie off my head and finger comb my hair back from my eyes.

Harper gestures at me, her bracelets jangling. "And, everyone, this is Mira. We're going to drop her in Pittsburgh with you, Brecken. If she agrees to come."

I open my mouth to argue, because this is ridiculous. I do not climb into cars with a group of strangers or jaunt off into a snowstorm. The window reveals the same unimpressive flurries. Maybe snowstorm is a stretch.

Ridiculous is a stretch too.

Right now, my mom needs me. This isn't something I'd normally do, but to get home to Mom? I'll do whatever it takes.