

***SECONDS
TO
SPARE***



RACHEL REISS



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This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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EVELYN

LOOP 194

I can't believe I've become *that girl* sitting in seat 17C on a mostly empty flight over the Pacific Ocean, ranting to anyone who will listen that the plane has only minutes left before it plummets toward the sea.

But here I am.

My knee bounces so quickly it rattles my seat, even shaking the extended tray table in front of me.

I'm twenty-three minutes in. *Only five minutes left.*

"There, there, dear," Margaret Evans murmurs in concern. She's an older woman with a British accent, tucked against the oval window of the Boeing 737. I glance past her out the window but can see nothing except the wing of the plane against the dark sky. It's made of metal squares welded together like patchwork. A series of flaps trail the edge, moving up and down as the wind pushes through them. But I can't hear the wind. All I can hear is the white noise from the roaring twin engines, a constant hiss that makes me feel like someone's breathing down my neck.

Margaret reaches over the empty middle seat between us and opens her hand, revealing a couple of small white pills tilting in the crevices of her palm. “These will take the edge off. They’re all natural. Lavender and magnesium, I think, you can look for yourself.” With her other hand she holds out the bottle for me to inspect—it’s some sort of generic drugstore supplement. But I shake my head back and forth in jerky movements.

“I’m with you,” Margaret attempts, in the spirit of camaraderie. A strand of gray hair escapes from behind her ear. She decided decades ago that she was going to age naturally, she told me once, and laughed that the grays multiplied like bunnies. “I’m a bloody terrible flier myself,” she adds, assuming it’s just routine anxiety plaguing me.

As if I’m fearing a possibility, instead of an inevitability.

“Mags,” I mutter, and she flinches at her childhood nickname, certain she’s never told me her name in the first place. “*Listen to me.*” I lean forward, gripping the armrest. She jolts and the jacket that’s draped across her lap like a blanket falls to the floor. “The plane is going to pitch forward and shoot toward the ocean.” I raise my unsteady hand to illustrate, holding it horizontally and then tilting it into a mostly vertical position. “That happens right after the woman in the very back row collapses.”

Margaret watches me carefully. She shakes another pill from the bottle into her hand and holds out three.

I fling back the metal seat belt and I’m on my feet, rushing down the narrow aisle. I hit a few knees invading the pathway, which earns me some unpleasant mutters and dirty looks. But I couldn’t care less.

It’s time.

I pause right before I reach the two bathrooms at the rear end of the plane and stare at the woman napping in the aisle seat, in the very back row. *Janelle Fiori*.

I study her face as if there's a clue hidden there, a new piece of information buried somewhere in her dark eyebrows that have been filled in with a pencil or the deep creases in her forehead. Like a novice detective who flunked out of sleuthing school, I lean in, examining her dainty earrings and thin-chained golden necklace with a simple teardrop pendant.

I have no idea what I'm looking for, but I search for something unusual. Out of place. *Suspicious*.

But nothing stands out. Everything appears painfully ordinary.

I don't know much about Janelle, just a handful of facts that I've learned after rummaging through her carry-on bag. She's forty-four, lives in Boston, was visiting Hawaii for two weeks and staying at a small motel on the western side of the Big Island. She traveled alone.

But they're impersonal tidbits, and still after all this time, I have no clue who she really is. What her laugh sounds like. Her favorite type of music. Who she loves.

Janelle's face is relaxed, round, and peaceful, but at this exact moment her eyes open, just like I knew they would. She glances around, in a startled state, as if she isn't quite sure where she is. Then she stares up at me. Confusion spreads across her face. Her expression seems to say, *Who are you and why are you looking at me like that?* But she doesn't say a word.

Instead, her shoulders roll forward and she grabs the edges of her solid black cardigan, drawing them together as if she's fending off a sudden chill.

I scan the two seats next to her. They're empty, aside from

silver knitting needles and a small bag filled with multicolored yarn. At some point, perhaps at the very beginning of the flight, she had been knitting something long and thin. Maybe a scarf.

But I don't remember much from the beginning of the flight. It didn't seem important, and I wasn't paying attention. I had other things on my mind.

The empty row must've been the reason Janelle chose this seat in the first place. To stretch out and nap. I can't imagine any other reason someone would choose the last row of a mostly empty airplane. The seats can't recline, and anyone sitting in them is accosted by the stench of the bathrooms. They're also the last to deplane.

Except on this flight, no one is getting off.

Janelle hunches forward, as if something's wrong. *Is it her stomach? Her heart?* I search her face for clues but find none.

She's standing now, as if she's about to head to the bathroom. But she'll never get there.

I step forward and grab her hands in mine. They're warm. "I want to help you." My voice is high-pitched and desperate, quivering at the edge of each word. I grip her hands tighter, pulling them close. My eyes plead with her, begging for her to give me something. *Anything.* "How can I help you?"

Janelle stares at me, her hazel eyes nothing but saucers of fear. It's a haunting look. One I know well. But I can't shake the feeling, lodged somewhere deep in my gut, that she's trying to tell me something. That there's something she needs me to know.

Her fingers tremble as she leans toward me. In a small voice, nothing but a whisper, she mutters something. But it

isn't clear. The words are mumbled, slurred together in one long meaningless sound.

Then her eyes roll back, and her legs collapse from underneath her. She falls in a single fluid motion.

I release a small cry that's lost in the whirling white noise.

A man rushes over, pushing me to the side. It's Gary Peterson, a pediatric nurse who works in a small practice in Boise. He presses two fingers against her neck. "I have a pulse," he calls, "but it's faint."

I slump against the backrest of the seat beside me, watching the rest of this play out the way I know it will.

One of the flight attendants, Lydia, rushes to help Janelle while another, Cheyanne, cups her hands over my shoulders in an attempt to usher me back to my seat. This time I allow it. After all, I've learned that it's much easier to be sitting when the next part happens.

I reach my row and try to pull Cheyanne into the empty seat beside me but she wrenches her arm free of my grip with a horrified look. She has no clue what's coming. But there's no time to tell her it's not me she needs to worry about.

She hurries down the aisle and I grab the metal buckle of the seat belt and sling the wide strap across my lap. I pull it tight, even though it'll never be tight enough.

Despite the fact I've been through this 194 times now, nothing can prepare me for what comes next. There's no getting used to it. No readying myself for what will happen. Despite the foreknowledge, it always manages to hit me like a sneak attack, a surprise ambush from behind. A punch to the skull that leaves me gasping for air.

My breath slows. Time creeps to a crawl as I count the

remaining seconds silently in my head. *Four . . . three . . . two . . .*

I never get to one.

Because at that moment, the plane tilts forward.

There's a moment of sheer silence. Everything stills. My limbs, my feelings, my entire understanding of existence. It all hangs in the cool recycled air like an empty thought bubble. Floating and waiting.

It's so quiet. Even the humming white noise pauses. Blood pounds in my ears as the plane tips at a painfully steep angle.

Primal fear rips through me as my head jerks back and I'm immediately flung forward, the seat belt digging into my stomach. It's the horrifying sensation of being shoved from behind and yanked from the front at the same time.

I can't think. I can't breathe. I can't form a single thought. All I can do is cross my arms over my chest, each hand gripping the opposite elbow, hugging myself with all my strength as I squeeze my eyes shut. A scream lodges in my chest that will never get out.

It's less than a second until everything synchronizes. The different forces, the push and pull of physics, the competing laws of motion, all align. They come together, merging into a single streamlined movement as gravity kicks in.

Then we begin to fall.

EVELYN

LOOP 265

“Sorry, folks.” The pilot’s deep, muffled voice fills the cabin. “We’ve lost internet connection. It will hopefully be back up soon. And please remain in your seats. We’re approaching a patch of turbulence.”

On cue, the wavy red seat belt icon above my head flashes on.

That’s how it always starts. The pilot has said the exact same thing for what’s now the 265th time.

My lips are cracked and my eyes itch from the air blowing through the circular vent overhead. I grab ChapStick from my pocket, coat my lips, and blink a few times, willing my eyes to moisten.

It never works.

It’s possible my numbers are slightly off. I think it’s happened 265 times but I’m not exactly sure. And if I write it down, it’ll disappear in twenty-eight minutes when the next time loop starts.

To be honest, I’m not sure why I even attempt to keep

track of them anymore. In the beginning, it felt like a good thing to record. Important, even. Like how shipwreck survivors scratch their days stranded on a desert island into a palm tree trunk. But after a couple of hundred, it became routine. Something to do.

The baby in the seat behind me wails. A bloodcurdling, earsplitting shriek that would haunt my nightmares, if I had nightmares anymore. Instead, I'm just living one.

I reach beneath my seat, grabbing the pacifier from where I know it will be. It took me a while to find it the first time since it's wedged far under the seat, stuck between a metal rail and a carry-on bag, and it's nearly impossible to see. I pinch the silicone in my fingers, sit up, and swing my arm over the headrest, handing it to the mother behind me. I don't need to look back to know she's grateful. She cleans it, and a moment later, there's silence.

Two seats over, Margaret Evans drapes her jacket over her lap, covering her exposed knees. Her large floral purse sits in the empty seat between us.

I close my eyes and exhale. Sometimes I'm anxious as hell, overcome with the pressing need to stop the upcoming events from happening and somehow break this damn loop, but other times a strange calm settles over me. I suppose off-the-charts anxiety is impossible to sustain, even when time is broken.

When I open my eyes, they fall to the red backpack at my feet. It sags in the middle, only half full, and slumps slightly to the side. A chill runs up my spine. Although it's closed, I know what's hidden under the zipper.

And I can't bear it.

I launch myself from my seat to find one of the three flight

attendants, Heather, standing in the single aisle. She's nearly six feet tall, but even taller in her platform heels. Her long blond hair is tied back in a neat bun. "Miss, the seat belt sign is on," she says, her soft features rearranging into a stellar bitch face.

But I can't wait. I don't need a watch to tell me that three minutes have passed, and there are only twenty-five left. I know every minute, each ticking second, like the freckles on my arms. Memorized and mapped out in great detail, like they're a part of who I am.

Despite the bitch face, Heather's a sweetheart. If I didn't hop up at that exact moment, she would've handed me a bag of pretzels, winked, and slipped me another. I've followed her to the back of the plane a bunch of times, where we chatted for a few minutes, cramped in the tiny galley. She'd tell me tidbits about her life, like how she had a fling in Kauai with some hot surfer, how she has a mountain of credit card debt, how she's using this job to see the world. Other times she'd share wild stories from her first year working as a flight attendant, like when a famous actor propositioned her to join the Mile High Club or when a toddler locked himself inside a bathroom and flushed his shoes down the toilet. She's only four years older than me—she just turned twenty-two—and talking with her is how I imagine it'd feel to have a big sister.

It was one of the rare times where, for a few short moments, I actually forgot I was stuck on this cursed flight. But Heather, of course, doesn't remember any of that since I'm living in a one-person endless time loop of epically shitty proportions.

"You *need* to be seated." Heather's voice is still professional but I can hear the simmering anger. I debate what to say. I've

said so many things in this exact moment. In the last loop, I told her I had killer cramps and was halfway down the aisle before she could respond. The time before that, I screamed that there was a demon on the wing of the plane, which caused *quite* a commotion. Trust me, I won't do that again.

But this time, I try something new.

I tilt my head toward my backpack. "My father's ashes are sealed inside a plastic bag under my feet, and I need some space."

It's the truth. Or at least, most of the truth. While I can't pass airport security with an unopened bottle of drinking water, it's somehow totally acceptable to pass with the incinerated remains of my father.

I don't wait to see Heather's reaction as I shimmy past her. "It's okay, I'll survive the turbulence," I call behind me, not bothering to mention that none of us are likely to survive the part that comes after that. "Plus, I'm late for therapy!"

That's true, too. I have to be on time, since the sessions are only four minutes long.

I race down the aisle as turbulence rocks the cabin of this Aloha Airlines Flight 1333 coasting over the Pacific Ocean. It's an economy aircraft with a total passenger capacity of 143, even though it's only around a third full. There's no first-class or business seating, just a single cabin of thirty-two rows.

Aloha Airlines. On many occasions, it's made me stop and wonder. *Aloha* means hello *and* goodbye. It's a little like a time loop stuck inside a single word.

The entire row of 21 is a part of a youth trip. The six of them—Gabby, Brayden, Niko, Meghan, Maddy, and Kylie—are recent high school graduates, most of them my age, who took part in a Global Leadership Adventure, with an em-

phasis on protecting the environment. They didn't know one another at the start of their trip but are now bonded after a week of zip lines, ecology projects, and collecting biodiversity data.

I pass Wyatt Greene in 22F. He's drunk and slumped against the window. He went to Hawaii on his honeymoon, but it didn't go well. His new wife took a separate flight home.

As I approach row 23, the shaking causes fifty-one-year-old Sibyl Erly to jerk her knee. It hits the tray in front of her, sending her vodka tonic all over her blouse. She mutters loudly, which is a consistent feature of the second notable event that happens.

During each twenty-eight-minute loop, four distinct things occur:

1. The pilot announces that the internet has gone out and warns of upcoming turbulence.
2. A little later, the plane begins to shake, during which the red fasten seat belt light remains on.
3. Everything's calm for eleven minutes until Janelle Fiori, in the last row, collapses.
4. Then without warning, the tip of the plane tilts forward and begins to nose-dive.

As we fall, my vision flashes white for a split second, and next thing I know I'm back in my seat with the soon-to-be wailing baby behind me.

These four things don't change no matter what I do. In these 265 loops, I've tried everything I can think of, but it hasn't amounted to much. I mean, I've been restrained by passengers for reckless behavior at least a dozen times and have

met almost everyone on this flight, but I can't say I'm any closer to figuring out what the hell is happening, why it's happening, or how to stop it.

I often find myself thinking about Sisyphus from Greek mythology, who cheated death. *Twice*. He captured Thanatos, the personification of death, and chained him up so humans couldn't die anymore. Which is pretty badass, in my opinion. But Zeus didn't agree and punished him by forcing him to spend eternity pushing a giant boulder up a hill.

His suffering is similar to mine. Which makes me wonder: *Is this loop some sort of punishment? Is this somehow all my fault?*

Edward Pickens III in 25D pulls off his socks and crosses his leg, sticking his sweaty foot in the aisle. I grimace, twisting my body around his hairy toes.

It's a toss-up who has it worse. Sisyphus or me.



I'm seated in 25C beside my therapist. Okay, officially, she's not my therapist. But unofficially, she kind of is.

The plane continues to bounce as Dr. Sheryl Blick listens to me. Curls cascade down the sides of her face, her hair a shade lighter than her dark skin. She steadies her thin-rimmed glasses against her nose as she watches me.

"I spent my whole life trying to get my father's approval, but then he died before I could ever get it." My voice grows soft as I press the silver button on the side of the seat and recline. "I wanted him to see me—to really *see me*, you know? I wanted him to be proud of me."

It took me many failed attempts to figure out how to start these sessions. Then I learned about one of Dr. Sheryl's clients who moved to Florida and continued to meet with her over

the phone, until they eventually stopped years ago. It's been so long, Dr. Sheryl doesn't remember her well. So I pretend to be her, some girl named Chrissy. It's entirely unethical but it's my fastest way in, which is critical since these free therapy sessions last only four minutes.

Sometimes Dr. Sheryl isn't open to chatting, even if I start with the exact words that worked other times. It's a strange alchemy I'll never understand. Some combo of precise timing, the sincerity of my facial expressions, the warmth in my tone. And something else, something imperceptible. If these loops have taught me anything, it's that the smallest moments can spin life in countless directions.

But this time, Dr. Sheryl is game to play.

"That's certainly hard, Chrissy." Her brows crease together. "I'm so sorry to hear that he passed."

I swallow, thinking of the red backpack lying under my seat. Then I remember the last conversation I had with my father, and regret stings my eyes.

"Unfortunately, sometimes people aren't always able to give us what we need from them, no matter how much we want them to," Dr. Sheryl says, tilting her head thoughtfully. "Sometimes they're not capable, other times they're not willing. So we have to find that assurance, that confidence, inside ourselves."

I'm still as her words hang in the chilled air, the white noise swirling around us.

These are the moments I love. When Dr. Sheryl drops a truth bomb. Something I can think about for loops to come.

I've always shied away from therapy, even when my mom suggested it. There was something so intimidating about letting a stranger into the darkest crevices of my life. But when

that person won't remember a single thing I tell them, it makes the whole process a lot more appealing.

We're almost out of the turbulence and then Dr. Sheryl will want to resume her sudoku, so I press on. "What do I do now?" My question comes out as a whisper. "What do I do with all the leftover regret? All the lingering resentment?"

Dr. Sheryl smiles softly. "You do what we all must do. Feel it, experience it. Make it yours. Wear it like a shawl. And then, when you're ready—and you'll know when you're ready—put it away. Hold on to the good, and let yourself move on from the rest."

I take a deep breath, allowing her words to soak in.

She nods knowingly. "It's okay if you're not ready. These things take time."

Time. Ironically, it's the only thing I have.

Today's session is maybe the best we've ever had and I'm about to tell her that when she reaches into her bag, hands me her business card, and tells me to call her office if I'd like to set up an appointment. Then she reaches for her sudoku, my cue that I've overstayed my welcome.

"Thanks, Dr. Sheryl. I'll see you in about twenty-four minutes," I say as I pop up from the seat, but she's already tuned me out.

EVELYN

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LOOP 287

As the sun sets yet again, I wander aimlessly down the dark aisle. My last conversation with my father circles in my mind. A loop within a loop.

It was late on a Tuesday night when he finally reached me by phone. My emotions were frazzled, my anger potent. I said a lot of things I can't remember, and some things I unfortunately can. "You're so damn *selfish!*" I yelled. Then I told him that I didn't want him in my life anymore, and that I wouldn't be there to pick up the pieces when everything fell apart.

Now he's no longer in my life.

And here I am, picking up all the pieces.

I get to my row and glance at the red backpack. I can't bear being near it right now, so I keep walking until I reach the fifth row.

I stop and peer at the boy sleeping in the window seat.

His head is tilted back against the headrest, his jaw slack and his lips faintly parted. The muscles of his face are relaxed, and

I can't stop staring at him. He looks so . . . peaceful. Perfectly, beautifully peaceful, like he's lost somewhere in the middle of the most magnificent dream.

Careful not to disturb him, I slip into the seat next to him. He's been asleep the entirety of every loop. At some point, maybe after he got on the plane, he must have put his earbuds in, blasted music, and fallen asleep. It's now become an eternal sleep, in my world.

I open the front pocket of his backpack. There are a couple of pens hanging from fabric loops, a note from a friend, his wallet, and a chocolate bar. I don't bother unzipping the main pocket, which I know holds a deflated neck pillow, a laptop, some medication, and a book. His entire backpack is tidy and organized. Nothing's out of place.

Unlike me. My whole life is out of place.

I pull out the long Toblerone bar. It's the kind with small chunks of toffee embedded in the chocolate. I've helped myself to this bar many times. To be honest, I've eaten almost every item each passenger carried on, except for the Tupperware-sealed meat in 22C that has a questionable smell and the packaged sushi in 12C. Although I love sushi, the thought of eating raw fish thirty-five thousand feet in the sky creeps me out.

I lean back and slowly unwrap the chocolate bar as I watch the boy. He's wearing a plain white T-shirt along with torn jeans that look soft from years of wear, and tan flip-flops. He smells like a mixture of coconut sunscreen and the ocean.

His eyelids flutter but remain shut, and I find myself thinking back to the first time I saw the shock of his blue eyes.



I was waiting at the gate of the outdoor airport in Kalaoa. The plane was the last departure of the day, an afternoon flight that wouldn't get into Los Angeles until midnight, but it was already running late. The plane hadn't even arrived at the gate yet. A man behind the counter had mentioned that storms on the West Coast were throwing everything off schedule.

I was fine with the delay. *It could last all night*, I thought. After all, the sooner I got on that plane, the sooner it would land. Then I'd be back to my life and forced to deal with everything.

The warm island wind swept over me. It was the kind of breeze that used to make me think of sunny days at the beach, floating in the rolling waves. Speckles of sand stuck between each toe. Sun-kissed cheeks and sunburned shoulders.

But now it only made me think of death.

I wasted time on my phone, checking my email and reading news articles, avoiding my camera roll. I'd always thought that a trip to Hawaii would give me plenty of beachy bikini selfies or portraits of daiquiri mocktails garnished with bright yellow pineapple hanging off the edge. But I hadn't taken a single picture here.

Then I saw him.

A boy, somewhere around my age, entered the other side of the boarding area. He was tall and thin, strong but somehow burdened by the weight of his bag. He pulled it off his shoulders and collapsed in a chair, rubbing his forehead with his hands. He looked tired. No, *exhausted*.

He glanced up, and I noticed his eyes were a piercing bright blue, yet dark circles hung under them like he had been sucker punched. But not by a fist.

By life.

It was a look I understood.

He turned his head in my direction and his eyes locked on mine. Embarrassed to have been caught staring, I diverted my gaze to a couple of small yellow birds hopping along the walkway, scanning for crumbs.

A chime sounded overhead, followed by a disembodied voice that rang through the humid air. "Aloha Airways Flight 1333 with direct service to Los Angeles has been further delayed. We apologize for the inconvenience and will advise you when we have updated information on the departure time. Mahalo."

When I looked back, the boy was gone.

After a few minutes, I grew restless. I stood and lifted my backpack, careful not to jostle its contents, and wandered down the terminal. I wasted time in some of the small shops, meandering through aisles of various island keepsakes, and then stopped to admire an art installation depicting an underwater landscape made of tiny glass pieces.

As I walked farther, I spotted the boy staring out at the runway. I approached him and stood to his side, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Does it ever freak you out that they can get *that* in the air?" I pointed at a stationary plane lined up next to others, like a car in a parking lot. "And not just airborne or hovering a bit, but *thirty-five thousand feet* in the sky. Like that thing must be, I don't know . . . How many pounds do you think that is?"

He side-eyed me, not bothering to turn his head.

I held up my phone and asked, "How much does a plane weigh?"

The automated phone voice replied, "The weight of a plane varies, but commercial airplanes generally weigh between 100,000 and 500,000 pounds."

"*What?!*" I recoiled. "I mean, I knew it was heavy but I didn't know it was *that* heavy."

"I don't mean to be rude," the boy said then, his voice deep and low, "but can you doom spiral somewhere else?"

My lips flattened. "Sorry about that." I motioned to my phone. "I shouldn't have asked that question. It's information I don't want to know, but knowing I could know it got the best of me. And now I can't unknow it."

"Neither can I," he remarked dryly.

"Doesn't it freak you out, though?" I pressed. "Like, even a little?"

"It didn't before, but now it does," he replied. "So thanks for that."

I clenched my teeth. "My bad. *Again*. It's just that sometimes it all feels overwhelming. Like there's too much information right in the palm of my hand and I want to know *all the things*, including the things I don't want to know. Or maybe *especially* the things I don't want to know. You know?"

He turned toward me. His nose was long and straight, his chin curved but defined, and a hint of cheekbones framed his face. Then there were those eyes. They were even more striking up close. They were so blue, it was like I'd never seen the color before.

"This is one of those things," he said.

"One of what things?"

He stared at me, his gaze traveling over my face, as if he was looking for an answer he couldn't find.

"One of those things everyone thinks, but no one says. It's

an unspoken rule,” he explained. “Like you don’t talk about bombs in the security line, or earthquakes when going over a bridge, or sharks when swimming in the ocean. It’s common knowledge, like a social contract we all sign that allows us to live together on the same unpredictable planet.”

“I didn’t sign anything,” I said.

“Clearly,” he replied, but his tone was light. Maybe even playful.

I shrugged. “I’ve never been good with social etiquette. I just say what’s on my mind. It’s freeing.”

“For you, maybe.”

A laugh bubbled up as I watched a plane tilt up into the great expanse of sky. “Even if I did sign a social contract—which I didn’t—I can’t help it. I say things before I realize I’m saying them. I’ll just blurt it out and then the words are out there, and I’m like, *Shit, why did I say that?* My mom says it’s a quirk, which I think she means as a compliment, and my dad—”

The word swelled in size, lodging in my throat, and for a second I couldn’t breathe.

I inhaled deeply, and watched a plane approach its gate. “I don’t even know why I’m feeling anxious. I’m not a bad flier. At all. It must be all this waiting around. I’m being forced to stand here and think about things I shouldn’t think about, while looking at these huge hunks of metal that will soon just be pinpricks up there, somewhere.”

He glanced into the sky, his gaze pensive. “Yeah,” he said. “I get it. It’s a lack of control, that feeling like it’s all out of your hands.” His face grew somber at the thought, and I wasn’t sure if we were still talking about planes.

“Sorry,” I said again. “It’s just, I felt like I should come up

to you and say hi, or say something, since I felt awkward that you caught me checking you out.”

His gaze sharpened. “You were checking me ou—?”

“Looking your way,” I corrected.

“Which was it? Were you looking my way or checking me out?”

My lips twisted. “Does it matter?”

His eyes were steady, his expression unreadable. “Yes.”

My head tilted in thought as I studied him. A faint scar marked his forehead, and a small cowlick swirled the front of his dark hair unevenly to the side. “Which would you prefer?”

“What?” he asked.

“You heard me.”

It was like I’d unintentionally started a game of chicken. And now I couldn’t blink or look away.

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Then it was as if he decided something. “I’d prefer if you were checking me out.”

I hadn’t flirted with anyone in a long time, and it felt nice. *Fun*. The playful back-and-forth, the zing of energy that pulsed through me. Despite the fact that this had been the worst, shittiest week of my entire life, this moment felt separate. An island unto itself.

“Well, that’s too bad,” I said. “Because I was just looking your way.”

He laughed. I watched as it transformed his face, erasing what looked like years of worry.

Ding. The shrill chime sounded again, followed by an attendant’s voice crackling through the overhead speakers. “I’m happy to announce that soon we’re going to start boarding Aloha Airlines Flight 1333 with direct service to Los Angeles.

All ticketed passengers please approach Gate 12, and we will begin the boarding process. Mahalo.”

“That’s us,” he said. “I should go . . .” He held up his water bottle and motioned toward the filling station.

I nodded. “It was nice meeting you?” I said, realizing it sounded more like a question than a statement.

“You, too?” he asked back.

I held out my hand. He eyed it curiously.

“This is what people do when they meet,” I said. “They shake hands.”

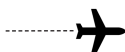
“Very formal.” He stepped forward and extended his arm. His warm fingers wrapped around mine. I felt a sudden charge of energy, as if something hummed in the small space between our palms.

“Maybe . . .” I began.

“Maybe what?” he replied.

The vibration increased, like a ball of energy was trapped in our hands.

When I spoke, it came out in a whisper. “Maybe I was checking you out.”



Now here I am, toward the end of my 287th loop, staring at the boy in the fifth row sleeping in the window seat. It’s the boy from the airport, but since rifling through his bag a hundred or so loops ago, I know his name. Orion, like the constellation. The fearless hunter protecting the night sky.

Orion James. But according to a handwritten note in his bag, his friends call him Rion.

His lips pucker open and his long lashes flutter, just

slightly, against his tan skin. Gentle brown curls fall over his forehead, while his earbuds remain wedged firmly in his ears.

In a few minutes Janelle Fiori will wake, take a couple of steps toward the bathroom, and collapse. On some loops I've convinced myself that if I could stop her from falling, the plane wouldn't nose-dive. That they're related or somehow connected.

It's another theory I can't prove.

The truth is, I've tried everything I can think of to try to stop the nosedive. I've even tried to break into the cockpit a few times. I can never make it in—it's like an iron fortress—and I always end up prostrate on the filthy floor, pinned down by two large men: Liam Cooke, who sits in 24B, and Mason Kahn in 28E. They knock the breath straight out of me as they shove their knees into my back and twist my arms, sometimes wrapping my wrists in duct tape or zip ties. It sucks *so royally* that I hope it never happens again, although I know it will. In one way or another. Desperation to do something to prevent the seemingly unpreventable will eventually nip at my heels again.

But Rion, this tired boy from the airport, hasn't woken to *any* of that. He's slept through everything—the baby's ear-splitting wails and the commotion of a passenger collapsing, not to mention all the other shit I've pulled. My list of bad behavior is shockingly long. Assault, trying to divert the plane by faking medical emergencies, tampering with the smoke detector in the lavatory. That last one I did for no particular reason. I mean, I knew it wouldn't save the flight. It just felt like a good thing to check off the everlasting plane-time-loop bucket list.

Rion has even slept through the beginning of every

nosedive, which makes me wonder what it would take to *actually* wake him.

I sometimes have an urge to reach out and touch his long fingers or move a strand of wavy hair off his forehead. But I wouldn't dare.

Instead, I remind myself of the four reasons I won't wake him:

1. Sleep is sacred. I live by that cardinal rule.
2. It's become a mini mission of mine over these hundreds of loops, a weird little side quest, to prevent Rion from waking. I made a deal with myself that if I could spare him the bone-chilling terror of living through the start of the nosedive even once, then at least I know I've done something meaningful.
3. Rion's become my anchor point. A moral compass, of sorts. I've done some pretty awful things on this flight and since there are no lasting consequences, I'm afraid of what I could do if given enough time. But this sleeping boy is the one thing that reminds me I can't slip too far. If I can make sure he stays asleep—see reason two—then I feel like I've held on to something important. A piece of who I am.
4. When I'm in a really bad place, I like to watch him sleep. I know it's creepy, and probably needs at least fifty four-minute sessions with Dr. Sheryl to unpack, but he looks so . . . *peaceful*. I like that no version of him, in any timeline, knows of the horror taking place on this plane. That knowledge,

plus the serenity on his face, helps me find a sliver of peace inside myself, which has been a hard commodity to come by lately.

I hear commotion at the back of the plane. Janelle has collapsed. But right now I'm not interested in any of that. Not Janelle or the nosedive. Not even the loop itself.

All I want is to be exactly where I am, in the quiet company of this sleeping boy.

I inhale, smelling the coconut sunscreen still on his arms, and take another bite of chocolate. For a few short moments, I feel content. Like everything is going to be okay.

And then the plane tilts forward.