

CHAPTER ONE

Funerals and planes. Neither was a place I wanted to be but here I was flying away after the burial and everything that reminded me of home. It was the second Monday in October and the year had already lasted a decade.

I never could sleep on planes. I don't know why I thought the red-eye would be different. I was tired beyond tired, but also . . . something else. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Was it unfamiliar hope, trying to fight its way up from the darkness? Was it possible things were going to be okay after all? I exhaled and shook my head.

The seat thrust me forward as the young boy kicked once more. I glanced at the worn-out mother sitting behind me, struggling to pull him back and buckle him up for safety. *His, or mine?*

I gripped my laptop and stared at the solitaire game I wasn't playing. It was a larger plane with assigned seats, not one of those smaller, sit-where-you-want types. The luckier people in the dark rows ahead of me were either asleep or reading with a dim light.

“I’m so sorry,” the mother said. It was the same apology she’d offered at the boarding gate an hour ago as several of us walked past her, the crying baby and screaming toddler. More than one said a not-so-silent prayer to be seated away from the commotion.

I’d drawn the short straw and bit my lip as I pushed my backpack into the overhead. Sitting directly in front of them, I overheard the mom’s near-constant begging for her son to settle down.

“Can I get you anything, ma’am?” the polite attendant whispered to me. She smiled an exhausted, do-I-have-to-be-here smile.

Ugh! I should have closed my eyes so she’d think I was asleep.

“I’m fine.” I should have asked for earplugs. Or Benadryl for the brat.

Looking out the window, I continued to clench and relax my toes, a trick I’d learned from my cat when I was seven, but this time, like all the recent times, it didn’t work. I knew better than to really try to sleep. I’d not slept well for months, maybe even years. The last three months were unbearable after Uncle Roger died. The first few weeks were a blur of funeral and lawyers and reading the will and keys and after that, loneliness and confusion.

His leaving me his house and a small inheritance did little to make things better. He’d told me often he wanted me to have my own place to come home to, but I couldn’t abandon him the way Jamie abandoned me. No. Roger needed someone to take care of him, and I needed someone to take care of.

Living in his house, alone, was unbearable. Jamie never liked that house.

When Roger was sick, I’d wished for his suffering to end. When it had, I wished with everything I had for him to be here again. I felt guilty for always wanting things to be different.

I felt like I let him down. I'd neglected my personal life to care for him, and now both were gone. I wished I believed more in ghosts.

At what point does that house stop feeling like *his* and start feeling like *mine*?

I'd needed to get away from all the concerns that hung on me like an old, worn sweatshirt. As ugly as they were to someone else, it was familiar comfort to me. I needed a change. So I left. I threw some things in my finally-I-have-a-reason-to-use-it suitcase and found myself on an airplane in the middle of the night, flying out of the west coast and away from a place I did not want to call home.

I bit my nail as another kick to the back of my seat jolted me from my memories. This consistent interruption had finally worn me past patience and I glared between the seatbacks. I wanted to whisper obscenities at the young boy but decided against it when I caught a glimpse of how frazzled the mother looked, how beat down by life. I understood. She was bouncing her sleeping baby with one arm and pulling her son back with the other. He caught my gaze and stuck his tongue out. I returned the gesture with a tired smile before turning back around.

I took a deep breath and looked out the window.

One. I began my mantra. I refused to spend mental energy counting sheep. Instead, I let my brain focus on one. Only, one. *One.* I let it draw out. *Ooonnnne.* Like a chant.

Inhale. *Ooonnnne.* Look into the dark.

Exhale. *Ooonnnne.* Look at nothing.

Inhale. *Ooonnnne.* Look at the star. Stars. Look at all the stars.

Great. Now I'm counting stars.

The world outside the window was distracting. The baby was now screaming in a rhythm that matched a revving motorcycle.

“WaaAAAHHHHaaaa!” its angry voice announced. I know it’s rude to consider a baby an ‘it’ but since I didn’t know if it was a boy or girl, and I had no intention of finding out, ‘it’ it was.

I looked for an empty seat I could move to. I’d always hated changing seats on a plane. What if we fell out of the sky and my body couldn’t be identified because it wasn’t where it was supposed to be? I decided the gain outweighed the risk and moved up a row and across the aisle, trying not to disturb the elderly man who was obviously deaf enough to sleep through the commotion.

It was a middle seat, away from the aisle and away from the window. Away from the distractions which was, inconveniently, a distraction in itself.

Oh, how I envied that baby. Being able to cry and scream and kick and fuss at the unfairness of the world! Being young enough to be held and told everything’s going to be all right.

I was too old to cry and scream and kick and fuss. I wasn’t being held or told everything was going to be all right.

Caring for Roger had been my priority. Jamie couldn’t understand that, and in the end, it was just me and Roger. Now both were gone, and I was alone.

I needed to live my life, with or without someone else in it. Too much of me was buried in Roger’s grave, and gone with Jamie’s absence. To be honest, much was gone before he left. I couldn’t give any more of me without losing myself completely.

My thoughts turned to Jamie, our unfulfilled dreams, and the plans we never made. He’d wanted more of me than I could give him at the time, but I was free now. *Does it matter? Do I care?*

I absent-mindedly twisted the diamond ring on my right hand. I should have done the polite thing and returned it to him when I called it off, but I just didn't want to. Wearing it on the "wrong" hand seemed a bit poetic, a bit justified. It reminded me of what I gave up, and what I wanted back.

I wondered if he was thinking of me tonight. I wondered if he ever thought of me like I still think of him. Sometimes I couldn't remember the real reasons we broke up. I wondered if it was him, or just not being alone, that I really missed.

I leaned forward to look past my sleeping seatmate into the dark sky, wondering what storms were brewing in the distance. The summer news had been full of inclement weather, and the mid-Atlantic was already up to Tropical Storm Nolan. Leave it to me to fly toward the storm instead of away from it.