

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.