

Prologue

November 2003

I stared down Hudson as far as I could see until the street narrowed into a definable point. In the distance, a yellow blur moved closer. It was Saturday morning, only seven o'clock. The streets were quiet, littered with debris from the previous night's festivities: a white paper-plate stained with pizza grease, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, a black plastic hair comb with a gap of missing teeth. Each item attached itself to my thoughts as I wondered how these things had wound up here on the street.

The yellow blur grew larger, forming, growing metal edges and smooth, shiny curves. I raised my arm to beckon it and watched as the tires veered toward me, creating a wake through the scattered trash.

"JFK, please." The words sounded strange and robotic, as if they were someone else's. In the rear-view mirror, the cab driver looked at me through large-framed gold glasses. I tried not to make eye contact with him, fearing it would only inspire further conversation. Instead, I turned toward the window, watching the passing cement landscape. Right now, all I wanted was to be left alone, to reconcile this moment with where I had been and where I was going. Everything had happened so quickly. When I was eighteen, a year seemed like an endless amount of time. But now, at thirty, a year was nothing. A year ago might as well have been last week.

"Business or pleasure?" The words, laced with a Russian accent, came out of nowhere. Turning away from the slipping scenery, I looked into the dark brown eyes reflected in the rearview mirror.

"Huh?" I asked, not understanding his question. *How was I supposed to categorize this trip?*

Securing his glasses on the bridge of his nose, he stared more intently. "Are you traveling for business or pleasure?"

I continued to ponder the question. "Neither."

"Neither?" He sounded shocked, as if this wasn't an option. To him, apparently, all things in life were either business or pleasure. Everything else was fiction.

As if realizing this conversation wasn't worth pursuing, the driver redirected his attention toward the street. I returned my gaze to the world zooming by, different shades of gray with occasional spots of color. It felt as if I was still and everything else was moving.

I got out of the cab at the British Airways Terminal and heard a rumbling echo above me. I looked up to see a plane moving higher and higher. It climbed into the clouds, dissipating into a mass of grayness.

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I passed through two automatic doors into a lobby packed with people. Voices blended together like greedy bees swarming a hive. I felt small, a miniature action-figure placed in an unfamiliar world. As I looked around, trying to figure out which way to go, a sheen of sweat blanketed my skin, making me feel tingly and heavy. I wished I was already on the plane where things would be out of my control, responsibility relinquished.

Christmas carols echoed from a speaker somewhere. What day was it? November. November fifteenth. Too early for Christmas carols? Behind the ticket counter, a woman stood on a stepladder hanging a garland over a door frame, her ass threatening to burst through her polyester pants. Wavering on the uncertain step, she stretched out her arms, trying to secure the decoration.

“Where are you going?” a voice asked. I turned to see a woman with brittle blond hair and a powdery complexion.

“...London.”

I sent my luggage through the conveyor belt and continued through the terminal in a fog. I checked my watch. There was still more than an hour and a half before my flight. I put down my bag, lowering myself into the uncomfortable plastic seat. I took a deep breath, feeling my constricted muscles loosen. *I've made it this far.*

My stomach felt queasy as the plane lifted off the ground, velocity and gravity engaged in a fierce battle. I looked out the window, watching the runway move further and further away. The airport became a sprawling mass of industrial buildings, and the world beneath me slipped away.

I reached into my bag and pulled out my MP3 player. I had downloaded all of *his* albums before I left. From the first to the last, they were all here. I put my headphones on, letting the music filter through them. Leaning against the window, my body surrendered to the pressure bearing down on me. Below me, the world continued to diminish. Streets, roads, highways: the design of an elaborate infrastructure became blatantly obvious. And the water. The ocean. *Who knew it was so close to me all this time?*

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL