Terminal

“Vincent speaking.”

“Have you landed in Chicago yet?”

Vincent took the cigarette from his mouth. “Yeah, One lady had trouble with her bags though. They had me take it all the way to her car.”

“You?” Kate questioned. “You’re just a steward. Don’t they have people for that?”

“Snowed in.”

“Didn’t you tell them you had to-”

“Smoke first?” Vincent mumbled inaudibly.

“Call me first?”

“No. The lady was bordering senile. Thought it would be rude.” Vincent fingered the Marlboro Red pack in his pocket. “I really wanted to though.”

“I understand. I’m just glad you can call me now. And that you’re safe. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Kate.” Click.

Vincent put his phone in his pocket and put out his cigarette, adding the 20th burn mark to his dedicated Chicago wall. He would smoke to celebrate, but he hated Chicago. The only thing higher than the snow on the ground was the skyline. It was a less smoke-friendly version of New York.

For once, Vincent was eager to get back on the plane. DC would be cold, but it was clumsy fingers temperature rather than chilled bone weather. The plane was cold, too, but it was a sanitary cold; Vincent often imagined he was an ice cube in a pristine lab, with ethically ambiguous scientists trying to deduce his melting point. They were getting dangerously close.

The passengers began streaming in, and Vincent began to play his favorite game: how many girls would he see that reminded him of Kate? The number ranged anywhere from three to ten, and the similarities could range from same hair color to some drunk deity poorly photoshopping Kate onto the flight. As the last of the passengers trickled onto the plane, Vincent shoved a toothpick into his mouth. Four. Most would not have reminded any pure minds of Kate, but the fourth had an uncanny resemblance. Vincent made a mental note of where she sat so he knew which side to look at when he walked by.

Luckily, Karen was in charge of doing the safety exercises today, giving Vincent enough time to sneak a reply to Kate’s last three text messages. She had a surprise waiting for him in bed when he got home, but he already knew what that was. They knew each other too well; there were no surprises between them anymore. For his last birthday, he had forgotten to put his wish list up on their refrigerator, but it turned out to be nothing more than a formality—she had simply logged into his Amazon account and ordered the John Wayne collection already in the cart. They spent the week watching the whole thing, but Kate was decidedly less interested in the intricacies of noonday showdowns of good and evil than his father had been.

Vincent’s dad might as well have been a cowboy. At the tender age of eighteen, he swooped in and rescued Vincent’s mom from marrying a man she did not love. Even punched her would-be-groom, but that part tended to be left out of the mythos at family gatherings. Vincent’s mom had been raised on fairy tales, much different than the westerns his dad had come out of, but neither genre had prepared them for the miracle of childbirth. And so, the little princess had to grow up and become a queen, and the cowboy had to put down his six shooter and pick up his plow. Though he may have been biased, Vincent would not have changed anything about his parents’ relationship. Surely it was a flawless recipe for love.

The call light flickered on, guiding Vincent down from the clouds of his remembrance to land back in the real world. He hadn’t even realized they had taken off, and was surprised how far they had gotten into the flight without someone ringing for help. But there would always be a call, and this one came from aisle 18. “Kate”’s row. He noticed Stuart, the unfortunately named steward, reluctantly stir in his seat, no doubt mentally preparing himself to deal with any possible annoyances.

“I got this one,” Vincent assured him.

A puzzled look formed on the older man’s face, with the resulting wrinkles dividing the region around his eyes into jigsaw pieces. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, no problem. I got a good feeling about this one.” While peculiar, it was not entirely unorthodox to volunteer to answer a passenger’s call, if only to remark that you “got the last one” when it was next time to roll the dice. It was a gamble; you were betting that whatever evil you opted into would be better than the one you avoided. Sometimes, it paid off. Other times…

Vincent strolled up to “Kate,” not trying to seem noticeably enthusiastic about their unrequited bond. When he arrived, he noticed the differences between this familiar stranger and the woman he loved. Her hair was devoid of the delicious coffee streaks that were hidden behind Kate’s golden locks. This girl, however, had the most curious emerald eyes, maybe even a slight improvement over the sapphires in Kate’s skull. These jewels sat on top of a wider nose, and while her ears were obscured by her hair, Vincent was sure their mouths were almost identical.

“What seems to be troubling you today?”

“Actually, it was me who rang for you.” Vincent needed to keep reminding himself that “Kate” was not Kate; that would never be a problem with the girl who sat beside her. Her raven hair hung in loose curls around her head, and while her eyes were a somewhat delightful chestnut, there would never be a precious gem to compare them to. Her nose was too long, her ears too wide, and her lips too thin. She was not Vincent’s type at all, and she looked nothing like Kate.

“Oh, excuse me, ma’am. What do you want?”

“Nothing too troubling, I hope. I was wondering if there was a chance you could help me retrieve something from my luggage.”

“Not likely, ma’am. Policy is that these doors stay closed.” Vincent patted the overhead compartment. “Besides, just what item do you want right now?”

“Just a small crucifix. I don’t fly much, you see. And this turbulence is starting to trouble me a little too much.”

Vincent hadn’t even noticed the slight turbulence they were experiencing. The “fasten seatbelts” light was lit, but nowadays that was just something they threw on to prevent lawsuits. Still, Vincent had earned his air legs long ago, and could imagine the discomfort that a more rookie flyer might have felt. But that didn’t mean he was about to break policy for her.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. But there is nothing to worry about, you are perfectly safe. It would actually be more dangerous for me to open the overhead bin right now.”

“I understand that. But I also have really bad asthma and I’m afraid that all of this stress might negatively affect my ability to breathe. And unfortunately my inhaler is also packed up snug and tight in my luggage.”

“If you knew you had bad asthma, why would you pack away your inhaler? We advise you to keep all things you might need on your person or in your personal item.”

“That may be, but we can’t change the past, we can only hope to control the future. And we might have radically different ones depending on whether or not I get that inhaler. Now, if you would be so kind.”

She had him. Her threat was so thinly veiled that the venom had soaked through the curtain and was pooling on the floor. Frustrated, Vincent had no choice but to bring down her luggage, a black metal suitcase with various stickers indicating a like of everything from pancakes to podcasts. He held the luggage hostage over her before letting it flippantly flop down onto her lap. He had a brief thought that he should be more careful of the passengers sitting on either side of her, but this woman had absorbed his full attention. She opened up her carry-on and immediately dug into it to uncover her rosary, which she politely handed to Vincent while she searched fruitlessly for the inhaler.

“Shoot. I’m in big trouble if I didn’t pack it.”

“Let me look,” Vincent insisted. He got irritable on long flights, with neither cigarettes nor Kate to chip away at the mounting stress. “If you don’t mind,” he added quickly.

“Go for it.”

Vincent tried not to move too much around, but he didn’t need to. Everything, even her plain white undergarments, had been neatly categorized in such a way that it was evident that no inhaler inhabited the space. Just as he was about to reach the end of his rope, the woman’s voice interrupted his cursory excavation.

“Here it is,” she announced. “It was in my purse all along. Maybe you can change the past.”

Vincent was notably miffed.

“Don’t worry though, she told him. “I definitely appreciate the help.” Vincent put her closed luggage back in the overhead compartment. “I owe you one,” she continued. “Really. If you ever need a favor, don’t hesitate to ask.” And with that she took a big, smug, pull from her inhaler, all of her troubles evaporating away.

\* \* \*

“Fuckin’ A. Not here, too.”

“What’s wrong, babe?”

Vincent flicked his cigarette into an ocean as white as the cloud it came from. “Snow.” He pulled out another cigarette, as if the heat from lighting it would melt the snow. Kate called these sessions his “therapy.” She was the doctor with the otherwise useless psychology degree, and his cigarette was the couch that allowed him to open up. He did tend to feel better after each “session,” but sometimes Kate was just too much. It’s hard to be a cowboy when your love interest is constantly riding up to where you are and asking you to recount your adventures. It was small wonder that lead actresses got so little screentime in Westerns. Vincent took a long drag from his cigarette.

“You’ve always hated snow,” Kate chimed in.

“Yeah, I know.” The curtness of his reply was apparent even to him. The drag had helped but it was hard to stay calm in this situation. “Kate, I’m snowed in.”

The pilot had announced how lucky they had been to land over the plane’s P.A. system once they pulled into the terminal. The slight turbulence they had experienced had grown to be full on plane-rocking, even flight attendants need seatbelts turbulence, and a swarm of white flakes awaited the curious lot who looked out the window. They had been in a race against snow and time, and they had narrowly won. If Washington, D.C. was your final destination, then U.S. Airways thanked you for flying with them and wished you safe travels on your way home—you were the lucky ones. If you had to catch a connecting flight it was most likely indefinitely delayed, if not cancelled altogether.

Of course Vincent didn’t hear any of this while day dreaming of his next therapy session.

“What are you going to do, Vincent? Are you going to miss our weekend together?” The concern was evident in Kate’s voice. Every other weekend the couple dedicated to bonding. They had missed only one: the time Kate’s mom had still been recovering from surgery the next time couple’s week rolled around. To Kate’s surprised, her mom had told her that the doctors had just permitted her to leave after Kate spent the night with her. Kate’s presence must have been more healing then she anticipated.

They were both worried, but a more relaxed Kate would mean a more relaxed Vincent, so he tried his best to placate her. “Don’t worry, babe, they have a special lounge for us flight attendants. I might have to sleep on a couch, but at least it’s not a floor. Worse things have happened.” Vincent knew this would placate her; he’d had a lot of practice.

“Ok, honey. I’ll give you some time to figure this out. Love, you. Bye.” Click.

In truth, the lounge was nothing more than a small break room, and the fictional couch was comprised of two chairs that were so uncomfortable you could feel the scoliosis developing when you sat in them. The coffee machine was perpetually broken, and the radio looked outdated when it was bought in 1995. The floor was the only bright spot in the break room. It glistened due to the nightly cleanings, and the damage to your back was less noticeable until you got up the next morning.

“Wow, do you guys really get all of that?” The girl from the plane had found Vincent, intending to repay her favor from before. She had been politely waiting for him to finish his phone call without interrupting him, but she was not polite enough to prevent herself from eavesdropping.

While Vincent certainly wasn’t expecting it, he could not have said he was surprised she had found him. Her persistence in annoying him would have been impressive if it wasn’t so unwanted. Still, something about her intrigued him, and Vincent had always been a fan of the persistent types.

“Yeah,” Vincent poorly lied. “Well some of it,” he found himself admitting.

“Some?”

“No couch.”

“Ouch. Chairs?”

“Painful.”

“Floor?”

“I guess.” Vincent remembered he should be suspicious. “What’s it to you?”

“Just curious.” A pause. And then, “I’m stranded here, same as you. Pilot assured us we had made it in time for us to get back home, but I’m afraid I just traded in a plane for an airport.”

“You can’t just make it back home? The storm’s not predicted to start back up for at least another two hours. I know there’s gonna be traffic, but if you really put the pedal to the metal you could beat-“

“Mother Nature? Some things you can’t force. You’re not from around here, are you?” Vincent shook his head. “It’s ok, neither was our pilot. The weathermen here always underestimate the storm. It turns way worse than they think it will, and way sooner than they think it will, too.”

“You’d think they would catch on and adjust their predictions.”

“You’d think so. But I think they’re just afraid of change. They think ‘What if this time, I’ll be right?’ Besides, people have gotten pretty used to it. Sometimes things are just stupid like that.”

“You’ve obviously put a more thought into this than I have,” Vincent conceded.

“Someone needs to. Lord knows they don’t.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. So what’s your plan?”

“For the weathermen?”

“For the night.” Vincent clarified. “Since you think you can’t drive in this weather.”

“I can’t,” she clarified, picking up on Vincent’s attempt at a jab. “So I won’t. I’m just going to sleep in my car. I have blankets and snacks in there and everything.” Her eyes widened. “You’re welcome to sleep there, too.”

“No thanks,” he protested. “As much as I don’t want to sleep on the floor, I also don’t want to freeze to death.”

“I have *a lot* of blankets,” she countered. “C’mon, I’m in your debt. At least give me a chance to pay it off. I’d even allow you to take the back row. All to yourself.”

“All to myself?” She nodded enthusiastically. It was a tempting offer. But he could never tell Kate he slept in some strange woman’s car. “I have some work I should be doing.”

“How long? I can wait,” she offered.

Vincent’s phone started to ring, and he noticed her face screw up in displeasures as if she too already knew who was on the other side of the line. He had told Kate he would call her back once he had things sorted. And he was far from knowing his plans for tonight. “Not long,” he finally responded.

“Good.” She didn’t like being in debt for long, even if all she owed were favors. “I’ll be waiting over there, by Terminal 23.”

“Ok. Be back soon.” Vincent’s phone finally stopped ringing. Kate would chew him out if he ever declined her call without a text, but if it went to voicemail, who could say? His hand instinctively went to his cigarettes, like a hunter notches his arrow. He quickly drew it back. If he couldn’t call Kate because he was busy getting his shit together, then he couldn’t smoke, either. Those were the rules he was going to work with.

\* \* \*

“You ready?” Vincent approached the bench where she said she would be waiting. Instead, he found a pile of various coats from God knows where. But he assumed she was inside.

“Not yet, silly.” She poked her head out.

“Still playing games?” Vincent asked.

“No, I’m ready when you are. But I think you’re the one who’s been under a coat fort for an hour if you think you’re ready to leave now. Look outside.”

Vincent took a peek through the window and noticed an avalanche of snow pouring down. There would be no walking in this. “So what are you going to do?”

She took his hand and flipped it until his palm was facing upwards. “Snowfall is like the tide,” she explained, balancing the tips of her left fingertips with ballet delicacy on his. “It ebbs—“ she traced riverbeds along his hand, her fingers water receding to their source near the thumbside of his palms. “—and flows.” And suddenly life was restored to the valley. On the burn marks the trickle was slow, but she said nothing aloud. Her frown was visible, though, but if anything it made her face more b—

“It should be letting up soon,” she said hurriedly, withdrawing her hand back into her coat fortress. “So what do you like to do?”

“Well me and Kate, my girlfriend, normally—“

“I didn’t ask for what you and your girlfriend *normally* do, I asked what *you* like to do.” “I don’t know, I do what everyone else does. Go to work, exercise once a week but say I go more. Go out to eat, smoke… you know, normal people stuff.”

“No hobbies?”

“Not really, you?”

“A lot, but lately I’ve become a bit of a kleptomaniac.” Vincent gave her a weird look. “Someone who steals things.”

“I know what it is. Why?”

“I took up acting since my… well, for a little while now. The role I got cast in, she’s a kleptomaniac, so I thought I’d try some method acting. Never anything big, and I return everything with a note. So it’s really more of just borrowing.”

“So those coats?”

“Lost and Found. I’ll put them back when I’m done.”

“That should probably be now, the storm’s starting to let up.” It had been, for a while now, with the storm merely flecking your hair with dandruff that would melt away seconds later. But Vincent had been enjoying the conversation in a way he rarely did. At least not with strangers, he told himself. “Let’s get to the car.”

“Ok.”

Vincent helped her put all of the coats back, and then followed her to her car, an old beat up Nissan Maxima with a Jesus Fish next to the license plate. Relatively bare compared to the suitcase they put in the trunk. Vincent hopped in the back, and she lingered there for a bit, sizing him up before finally shutting the door and climbing into the passenger seat.

“I’m surprised your psycho girlfriend hasn’t called you yet.”

“Kate!” Vincent’s hands plunged eagerly into his pockets, retrieving his phone and his pack of cigarettes. He had put his phone in airplane mode to prevent Kate’s calls from numbing his leg. He opened up his settings as he put a cigarette in his mouth and reached back into his pockets for a lighter.

“You can’t do that in here!”

“Call Kate?”

“Smoke!”

“Why not?”

“I have asthma, asshole! Remember?”

He did. Vincent put both things back into his pockets. Now it was her turn to be confused.

“You’re not going to call her?”

“Oh. I guess not. No point.”

“What do you mean? Knowing her she’s probably worried sick about you!”

“You don’t know her! And it’s just that normally I smoke while I call Kate.”

“Does she know about this?”

“It was her idea. She noticed how much of a grumpy gus I could become after talking to her, so she—“

“Grumpy gus?”

“You know, someone that’s—“

“Grumpy, yea, I get it. She actually said that?”

“Yeah.” The two shared a mutual look of exasperation, realizing that the phrase had probably burrowed its way into Vincent’s vocabulary as well. “But anyways, she thought it would be a sort of stress reliever and would help our relationship.”

“She got you to start smoking just to save your relationship?”

“No, I already smoked before. I just smoke more now.” The look of disgust on her face did not go away.

“You don’t see the problem with that?”

“Look, I get it. Kate is far from perfect. Our relationship, too. She calls me too much, I smoke to cope, it’s bad. But that’s the thing: I’ve learned how to cope. This rock we live on? It sucks. We smoke, we sleep, we dream, we watch movies. Anything to escape the suffering. When that doesn’t work, we find others. Not to join in our misery, but to see that it’s possible. You can delude others into thinking you’re happy. So you do the same. And maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll delude yourself into believing you’re happy, too.”

“But you’re not.” She wiped away the hot tears streaming down Vincent’s face.

And for a while they just sat there, neither daring to move for fear of dying and becoming a zombie again. So eternities passed while they gazed into each other’s eyes. And in some they kissed, and Vincent left Kate and quit smoking and they got married and had kids and grew old together. In others they stayed together, but he was unable to quit smoking and died of lung cancer before he could attend even one of his kid’s graduations. In some they had never even met, both going on diverging paths, missing the one moment where fate would have allowed them to meet. But in this one, where the two sat absorbing in each other’s souls through their windows, where she would consider what Vincent had said and go back into her unhappy relationship, where Vincent would pick up the phone next time Kate called—not because he wanted to, but because he knew what would happen, they eventually said a hurried good night, and neither ever talked about the lives they had experienced and went on with the same ones they had had when they had gotten into the car, without ever even learning each other’s names.