

Thursday, December 25  
3:30 p.m

Lucias Maddox Moore licked his thin lips and sighed. Meagan Winston was special. Extraordinary, really. She had to be tired from this last eleven-hour flight to Atlanta, as he was, but still she smiled at disembarking passengers near her and even helped an elderly woman with her bags before reaching for her own. Within the next twenty-four hours, her hair would be blond again. She always dyed it back after she returned from India. Lucias knew these things. He knew Meagan better than anyone. Perhaps better than she even knew herself.

"Need help?" Lucias edged around a woman holding a fussy baby, and with his free hand grasped the small red carry-on Meagan had used every trip for the past three years. He pulled it down from the overhead compartment and placed it into her outstretched hands.

"Thanks." Her eyes met his for a brief moment and she smiled.

The baby near him cried, and Meagan turned from him to pick up the pacifier the kid had thrown to the floor. She wiped it clean with her bright red scarf and handed it to the frazzled mother.

*Look at me, Meagan. Smile at me again.* Lucias clenched his briefcase, hating it when she gave her smile, the smile he lived for, to the baby instead. She cooed at the kid then pulled her carry-on down the narrow aisle toward the exit door of the plane. He watched from behind as he had all six trips, dreading their parting, scrambling for a way to delay it.

This last trip had been the most successful, his largest sale yet. He'd brought back something special this time, something that would be worth a lot to his connection. All because of Meagan. He had to find a way to thank her, to tell her how much she meant to him.

Lucias quickened his pace the moment he stepped from the tunneled jet bridge onto the carpeted airport terminal floor, but other passengers merged between them. The woman with the baby stopped right in front of him to dig a ratty stuffed animal out of her diaper bag. He moved to the side and ran to catch up. He almost called out Meagan's name.

Instead he came to a sudden halt in the center of the concourse passageway and watched her walk away. Again. Now was not the time, or the place. It had to be when no one else was around. He looked at the crowd rushing around him and felt his breathing quicken. Claustrophobia slid up his spine and clamped tight around his throat. Lucias counted his steps toward the shuttle that would lead him out of the world's busiest airport. There were too many people, too many strangers, all of them probably judgmental hypocrites like his old co-workers, so quick to claim he had an anger problem.

His co-workers didn't know him at all. He hadn't been angry when he did it, just hurt. Claudia had rejected his love, had been cruel, had laughed at him. The police had never found any evidence, they never even found a body, but he still lost his job. His co-workers were afraid of him, afraid he'd done it, but they didn't need to be. He was good to people as long as they treated him fair.

The shuttle doors closed him in. He tried to calm his heart rate and ignore the heavy, fish-tinged breaths puffing out of the pot-bellied businessman to his right. The shuttle shot to twenty miles an hour within seconds, and fish-breath man grabbed the metal pole with the hand he had just used to wipe sweat from his neck. Lucias positioned his feet in a stabilizing position, both hands clamped around his briefcase handle, safe from the billions of bacteria thriving unseen across the surface of the pole, the walls, the people. "Arriving at B Gates," the robotic voice announced above his head. He liked it better when they called them concourses. The doors opened, people exited, and he inhaled a lungful of clean air before a new batch of bodies crammed in around him. No, even if he caught up to Meagan, the six-million-square-foot Atlanta airport was not the place to tell her his feelings.

"Arriving at A Gates." He jostled his way through the open doors and headed for the escalator that led to baggage claim. If he hurried she might still be there, collecting her two charcoal grey suitcases that he knew bulged with jewelry.

He stepped off the escalator and strained for a glimpse of the baggage area. His foot caught on the wheel of a passing child stroller, and his briefcase flew as he tumbled to the ground.

The woman pushing the stroller halted. "Are you okay?"

He scrambled to his hands and knees. "Where is it?" He grabbed the edge of the stroller and pushed it out of the way. "Where is it?" he shouted.

The woman saw the briefcase just as he did. She picked it up but he rose to his feet and snatched it from her hands. "It's mine!" He backed a step away and clutched it to his chest. People around them stopped, looked. Some pointed fingers. He forced himself to hold the briefcase in one hand and drop it to his side. *Turn. Walk calmly. Act natural. Think about something pleasant.*

When Meagan was frustrated, she would find a place to sit down, then close her eyes and bow her head. He followed her example and chose a bench far from the staring people near the stroller. He dropped his chin and tried to think. This was not the day to bare his heart. January eighth was a possibility. Meagan's twenty-sixth birthday was circled in red on his pocket calendar, her name in bold. But to wait two weeks would be hard. He'd rather create the perfect moment before then, something special they could both remember forever.

He clenched the briefcase and battled inner fears. What if she laughed at him? Rejected him? He could not bear it.

He lifted his face and gazed across the baggage claim area. Just beyond the fourth carousel, she materialized into view, so beautiful, like a touchable ray of sunshine. She headed for one of the seven possible exit doors, pulling the two grey suitcases, her red carry-on slung over one shoulder. He watched until the crowd hid her from his vision, like clouds blocking the light.

His heart stilled. Meagan wasn't anything like Claudia. If he did everything just right, Meagan would care for him. She had to.