CHAPTER FOUR

HARRY & MR. WIGGINS

Excess Baggage

The airplane smelled of corn chips, burnt coffee, and the perspiration of passengers exhausted from their travels. The overhead speaker blared out: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking."

From his window seat, 1A, Mr. Wiggins peered over the edge of his Dallas Morning News. Only his caterpillar-like, grey eyebrows and the very top of his black eyes were visible to others still settling into their first-class seats. The plane's speakers surrounded every word the Captain said with a muffling of white noise, making him quite difficult to hear. His message came across sounding more like this: "—dies –n –gentl— —is your Capt——ing."

"Here with us, again, Mr. Wiggins. Something to drink?" asked the flight attendant.

Mr. Wiggins raised his hand like a stop sign with his palm facing outward to silence the interfering conversation. "Shh…I'm trying to listen," he said, rudely shooing the man away.

Harry sat in aisle seat 1C, just to the right of Mr. Wiggins. Apologetically, Harry gave the flight attendant a conciliatory gesture and

an almost embarrassed grin. While he was tempted, he stopped short of asking for something to drink himself, despite being parched. He knew better than to ignore his boss's cues.

"On beh— of the —tire crew, —wa— to welco— you to Fli— 1— bound for Chicago. —flight time —day *should* be 1—— –n– 48 min——, –n– we— be fly— — — av—age alt—— of 30,—— feet."

"What did he say? What about 'should'?" Mr. Wiggins now turned, searching for the flight attendant he had just dismissed. "Such incompetence. You know, Harry, how much I pride myself on punctuality and performance, there's nothing more important. Other than profit, of course."

Harry stared straight ahead and nodded once, not in agreement, but out of habit.

As a low grumble of frustration grew among the passengers, with a couple of voices shouting out, "Can't hear," and "Repeat, please," the loudspeaker went silent.

Mr. Wiggins rolled his eyes, irritated. "Where is that stewardess? I still can't get used to men as order takers in planes."

Harry cringed in response.

Just a moment later, the Captain was back on. "Sorry about that, folks. I think we're good now. Just wanted you to know that there is a chance of up to an inch of accumulation on the ground from what the weather computers are now telling us. So, this may just end up being a white Christmas after all. We'll keep you updated throughout our flight. For now, just sit back, relax, and if there's anything our inflight crew can do to make you more comfortable, let us know."

Mr. Wiggins turned to his direct report, Harry, and more loudly than was necessary, offered what would be another of his many critiques: "Such inefficiency, eh, Harry?"

Harry nodded without really agreeing. He looked at his phone. A picture of his wife, Emily, was smiling back at him. Emily was the one who grounded him. Whenever he looked at her pixie-cut blonde hair, her soulful hazel eyes, and those dimples, he could forget all about his worries. He'd known from the day he met her in high school that they were meant to be together. He promised he'd always take care of her, in sickness and health.

The flight attendant circled back and stopped in the aisle next to Harry. His golden name badge read *Corey*. "Sir, we need you to turn off all electronic devices for takeoff. Thank you."

Harry lightly kissed his fingertips, pressed them to her picture, and then powered down.

The flight attendant turned his attention to Mr. Wiggins. "Ready for that drink now?" he asked. "What can I get you?"

Mr. Wiggins ignored him, turning his gaze out the window. The attendant, sighing quietly under his breath, turned to Harry.

"Can I get you anything?"

"A water, please?" Harry replied. "Do I have time to go to the restroom?"

"Yes, but hurry. And I'll have the water for you by the time you come back."

Harry unbuckled his seat belt, rose to his feet, and in barely a few steps, found himself in front of the bathroom door at the very head of the plane. He entered the tiny silo and secured the door behind him. The lights overhead blinked a few times until they stabilized, but they didn't afford much light at all. Harry stood, staring at himself in the mirror. He barely recognized his own face. He peered into his bloodshot eyes. They actually weren't as bad as he thought they'd be, so he supposed that he must be getting used to these 16-hour workdays. His wife was right, though. His face was looking "gaunt"—her word not his.

He slapped his own cheeks and pinched them. He had seen someone in a movie do it once to regain some color. It wasn't working. He tried to smile. He had heard that it took fewer muscles in the body to smile than it did to frown. It should have been easy, but he couldn't make the corners of his mouth stay up. He even tried to use his pointer fingers to manually push his lips into position, but he couldn't stay smiling. How had he gotten here? And now he was going to be responsible for another human life? He wasn't old enough to be a dad. He wasn't ready. Not yet.

The flight attendant knocked on the outside of the door. "Sir, we really need you to take your seat."

Harry jumped at the interruption into his thoughts. "Yes, right away," he called back. *Oh, man,* he thought. He could just imagine what Old

Malcom Wiggins would say the second he returned to his seat. He was absolutely sure he was in for some rude lecture about time and delays and waste. Harry washed his hands and exited the bathroom. He shut the door behind him and noticed all of the passengers in first class glaring at him.

"Apologies everyone. Nature calls and all that…"

Mr. Wiggins shook his head in disappointment. Harry was used to his boss's constant disapproval.

Harry slid back into his seat and buckled himself in.

Mr. Wiggins managed to glare at him without even turning his head to look in Harry's direction. "You couldn't wait? You thought it best to make the rest of us wait on you?"

"No, sir."

Harry didn't bother to look him in the eye. He feared the old man would be able to detect how he really felt about him. It definitely wasn't favorable. When he took this job, Harry never intended to work for Mr. Wiggins longer than a couple of years.

After graduating from the Illinois Institute of Technology with a degree in Civil Engineering, Harry dreamed of designing and building skyscrapers. He loved construction and found great satisfaction in working with his hands to create something out of nothing. He thought he'd be able to grow in his passion and pursue a career in construction as a member of Malcom Wiggins's Property Investors Group, but he thought wrong. Now, nearly a decade later, he basically was Malcom Wiggins's official baggage carrier, both literally and figuratively, doing little more than project managing, budgeting, shuffling contracts, and spearheading wrecking crews. Lately, almost every project he touched related to destroying somebody else's property that, he was sure, they had worked so hard to build. He now knew that Malcolm Wiggins's operation had the reputation of demolishing good things and turning them into nothing.

Harry hated that they were on a plane—again—to ruin thousands of more lives by shutting down the largest shopping mall in the Wiggins's playbook. Right before Christmas. It was more lucrative to close it than to keep it up and running. At least that's what Wiggins insisted.

"When we land, I expect the car will be waiting to take us directly to Maplefield Mall," Malcom said out loud to no one in particular. He was used to speaking and having someone listen, whether they wanted to or not.

"Actually, Mr. Wiggins, I planned to meet you there, remember? My wife is so close to her due date, and I've been gone for so long. I'd like to see her as soon as I'm in her same zip code, if that's possible."

"Your wife's having a baby?" Mr. Wiggins applauded in mock celebration and with maximum sarcasm. "Wow, such anticipation. I'm surprised anybody is still working. I know—we should just stop everything until the baby's born, and you and your little family are all safe at home together."

"No, sir, I didn't think—" Harry gritted his teeth.

"That's right. You didn't," snapped Mr. Wiggins. "As planned, we'll go together directly to the mall without any stops along the way. When our work is done, then you'll be dismissed."

Harry feared that word "dismissed." He couldn't afford to be without a job, especially not now with Emily about to deliver their first baby. Mr. Wiggins always seemed to use that word "dismissed" as some sort of veiled threat or, at best, a not-so-subtle reminder that Wiggins held such power over his fate. For some inexplicable reason, it always worked, like an anchor dragging him further underwater. Harry needed the paycheck. Too many people depended on him and, if he were really honest, he no longer had faith that he could cut it doing anything else.

Harry was supposed to have been home with Emily nearly a week ago. However, as he was told time and again by the old man, Malcom expected Harry to be at his beck and call. As a result, Emily had been pretty much on her own throughout this entire pregnancy. In a weird way, it almost felt as if Mr. Wiggins didn't want Harry to have any interactions with his pregnant wife at all. Harry couldn't quite figure it all out—or even if there was something to figure out—but Harry stopped trying to understand the man or his motives years ago. He just didn't care.

The loudspeaker interrupted again with another announcement. "Folks, this is your Captain speaking again. We're getting some reports of rough weather ahead. It would appear that our 'snow flurries' are quickly

turning into something more. We'll keep you updated as we continue on our way."

Mr. Wiggins reached out his arm and it hovered over Harry's lap, grabbing the flight attendant's pant leg as he passed by. "I have an important meeting to get to. It's unacceptable to be delayed."

The flight attendant looked down at Mr. Wiggins's hand that entrapped his leg. Then with his best poker face in position, he looked first at Mr. Wiggins and then, bemused, over at Harry.

Harry bravely reached over and, with a little effort, unhinged his boss's offending hand.

"I'm so sorry," Harry half-whispered, his tired eyes looking upward, pleading. "We just want to land."

"Nothing for *you* to apologize for." The flight attendant gave Harry a nod, having read the power dynamic between the two businessmen.

"Now see here—" Mr. Wiggins huffed and puffed. "I…"

"Thanks for all your help," Harry interjected, cutting his boss off before anything might escalate. "My wife's about to have our first baby. I just really want to get home."

The flight attendant softened, taking pity on Harry and what was clearly his "excess baggage." He then directed his attention squarely on Mr. Wiggins, and in an overly playful manner chided him. "Sir, I do hope you know how lucky you are to have someone like this young man at your side." He looked at Harry again, "What's your name?"

"Harry."

The flight attendant grinned. "Well, Harry, soon to be Papa Harry, it is good to meet you. I'm Corey. And congratulations. I'll send over something to help you celebrate as soon as we're cruising." Corey then spun on his heel and disappeared.

Mr. Wiggins huffed in annoyance, turning his attention back to the newspaper.

Harry shut his eyes, exhaling. Emily and the baby: If he just stayed focused on what mattered most to him, he could weather yet another of his boss's frigid storms.