

Word Count 3904

Genre Short Story

**On Board**

She sat back in her seat with growing apprehension turning slowly into fear. It was the same man, there was no doubt about it. He had an unusually large nose, and a mole on his cheek. But now he was wearing the uniform of one of the cabin crew on this flight. He wasn't working the first class section, where she was sitting, but he was in the next section back. She had seen him when she stood to stretch her legs, having turned and taken a curious look back through the curtain.

She had first noticed him on the way to the airport. He was in the lobby of the hotel and made and held unusually long eye contact with her. This was bound to happen, as she was a celebrity of sorts. Not the kind that warranted a small cadre of paparazzi outside the hotel, but well enough known that people would frequently approach her for autographs. She was ok with this, and was more than happy to sign and pose for pictures. In fact she welcomed it, knowing that her celebrity status was never going to be permanent and would one day fade away. She was very mindful of every trapping of her success, and her attitude towards those who admired her was one of gratitude.

His prolonged glance turned awkwardly into a stare. She thought he must have recognized her and was working up the courage to approach her. Except he didn't. He just remained locked in place, next to the oversize decorative pillar in the lobby. She broke away from his very uncomfortable gaze and continued to follow the bellman and her cart of luggage out to the waiting van. She was following the cart when someone suddenly came up and thrust a picture of herself in front of her.

"Would you mind signing this for me?" A slightly overweight, middle-aged man in a very loud Hawaiian shirt handed it to her, with a black sharpie. She should have been used to this but it still caused her a slight surprise every time one of her fans suddenly appeared out of thin air.

As she reached the side of the van she looked back, out of expectation to find him running up with a picture or item to sign. Instead she found his gaze again, unmoved from beside the pillar inside the lobby. She turned away and got into the van as her luggage was loaded into the back.

The drive to the airport through downtown traffic and onto the connecting freeways was uneventful and she soon forgot about him. She looked through messages on her phone and was planning her next day's events in the next city when the van pulled up outside the airport. She waited as the driver hailed a person with a cart to unload her bags, and then headed into the airline counter with her things close behind. She was checking into first class, so was in the short line and pulled her phone out again when she looked up and found herself directly behind him in the lineup. He only had one carry on and a suit bag. She wondered if he would turn around and see her again. Would he ask her something? Would he speak? She stood quietly, as to not be noticed, and he soon went up to the counter. She watched as he made small talk and laughed with the counter agent, and quickly went on through to security.

She went to the agent, checked her luggage and went to the security line, sure that he would be just in front of her. But he was nowhere to be seen. She felt a slight sense of relief, and admonished herself for feeling silly. He was just another person going somewhere to do something.

She made her way from the airline lounge to the plane and found her window seat at the front. It was a nice, first class seat, which reclined into a bed, with all the accompanying amenities. She tucked her carry on above her, pulled on a sleep mask and let her mind drift away.

She awoke with a start, the plane finding some small pocket of turbulence, jostling her from her sleep. She always fell asleep at takeoff. She didn't know why, but she took full advantage of it. Now awake, she stood to get her headphones out of her bag. Then she turned to look back and that's when she saw him.

She tried to reason away her initial sense of panic by telling herself that he was flight crew and that must have been the hotel the crew stayed at. But her logic quickly eroded when she realized that no airline would put their crew up at a hotel of that cost and so far away from the airport. That made no sense. As she sat, the forward flight crew brought around drinks and snacks, and she took a glass of wine, unconsciously hoping this would calm her. The hostess asked her if there was anything more she could bring to her. She worked up the courage to ask a question.

"Thanks, no this great for now. How is your day going?"

The hostess, a little taken back by the question but in professional demeanor answered "My day is going great, thanks for asking."

"Awesome. You must be tired, after the long drive from your hotel and then having to get the plane ready before we even get on board. "

"Oh no, we stay right by the airport, so it's only a couple of minutes on the shuttle. And getting the flight ready doesn't take that much time, I've really only been here as long as you have been in the airport likely."

"Well that's good to hear, I appreciate how much work this must be." With that last statement, the crew member continued on her rounds of the first-class cabin. She sipped her wine and sat back. Thoughts of other women in her profession being stalked and harassed filled her mind. She had been lucky, she certainly had her share of obsessed fans online and autograph seekers, but so far none had crossed that line. That frightening line between an overly dedicated fan and admirer and that of obsession.

She swallowed the rest of the wine in one drink, set the glass down, and picked up her phone, to flip through messages. Her manager had a thousand questions for her every day. How was the tour going? Has the calendar changed? Can I book you for some more media interviews? On and on. If he only knew the stress these constantly changing travel plans caused. She could deal with the media and public speaking well enough. She had been in front of them for many years now. But not knowing where you would be from week to week, or when you could plan on some personal time, or even being at home for more than a week, it all left her with a small, but constant, sense of anxiety.

He walked by. She first noticed a person in a flight crew uniform moving beside her, and was about to order another glass of wine when she noticed it was him. She quickly sat back as hard as she could into her seat, hoping she would go unnoticed. He walked right by, up to the front of the cabin, and into the front service area with the other crew. She kept looking, to see if he would look out, but he didn't. She could hear conversation in the front area, and relaxed slightly. Catching her breath, she realized that he would likely walk back this way and she would be forced to face him. She looked around her and remembered the bathrooms in between first class and coach. She quickly unbuckled her seatbelt, stood, and headed without looking back to the middle bathrooms. She reached one, only to find it occupied. Looking around she saw the second one on the other side of the cabin, cut through the middle service area and, finding it vacant, quickly went in and locked the door.

She sat on the closed lid of the toilet, feeling more anxious than victorious. Her anxiety was growing. She stood, pulled a paper towel from the dispenser and ran some water on it. She sat back down and held it to her forehead, as if cooling her brain to calm herself. She took a few deep breaths and sat there, until the sound of someone trying the lock brought her back. Her heart raced slightly until she could hear the sounds of a mother speaking to her child.

"I'm sure they will be right out sweetie, just hold on another minute.

She stood, put the paper towel in the garbage, and opened the door. She could see the sense of relief on the mothers' face as she worked her way around them. Quickly scanning around the cabin, she headed back to her seat as directly as she could. He was nowhere to be seen. She sat back down, the empty wine glass gone but everything else looked the same. She could see the first-class hostess coming towards her and waved her down.

"Hi. What can I get for you?"

"Another glass of wine please. Oh, and can you tell me how much longer the flight is?"

"I'd be happy too. And the flight will be approximately another two and a half hours. I'll be right back" With that she walked away. Two and a half hours. She worked on calming herself by reasoning things out. She was on a crowded plane with lots of people. There was no way anything could happen to her here. It was just too crowded.

She was taking some deep breaths when the hostess returned with her wine.

"Here you go. Let me know if there is anything else I can get for you. "

She sipped her wine this time, sat back and tried to clear her mind. She took one of the airline magazines and started to flip through it. In between ads for new luggage and restaurant reviews from places she actually knew about, she saw the routes that this airline flew and started to think about a vacation later in the year. In a few moments her mind had drifted away from the panic she had been building. The last part of the flight went by quickly as she got into the magazines, planning her schedule and getting back to business.

The flight landed and as she stood to get her bag she looked around and there it was. There he was. Standing at the very back of the plane, half hidden inside the crew area but unmistakably staring at her.

She quickly got her bag and hurried to the line-up for the door. Everyone was standing now, closely in each other's space, bags pushing into each other's bags, the air growing stale as they waited for the door to open. Her heart was starting to beat hard again. She could feel his stare on her but she dared not turn around to look.

Finally, the crew opened the door, and the first-class passengers walked off first. She walked fast up the jetway, passing the others until she was the first one to the terminal. She headed quickly to the exit into the baggage and arrivals area, and quickly saw a man holding a sign with her last name on it. She went right to him.

"Are you here for me?" She was very short and direct with her question.

"Yes ma'am, I would recognize you anywhere. Shall we get your luggage?"

"Listen, would you mind getting it for me? I would love to just head for the van if that's ok."

"I'd be happy too ma'am, but it would be very helpful if you could help me identify the bags. I would feel terrible if I missed one."

She hadn't thought of that, but it certainly made sense. "Yes, of course," She replied.

The driver grabbed a luggage cart and they headed over to the luggage carousel. She purposely had them wait right at the point where the bags came down, with their backs to those arriving. If she couldn't see him, maybe he wouldn't see her.

She couldn't help herself, and after a few minutes of waiting she looked over her shoulder at the growing mass of passengers. He was nowhere to be seen. The luggage started to arrive, and she pointed out her large collection of bags to the driver. She was not accustomed to travelling on her own, but was more than capable of getting everything taken care of. Her trainer who normally went everywhere with her had to leave the last city for a family issue back home, so she was forced to travel this time on her own.

The bags gathered, they headed out to the waiting van. As he loaded them into the back, she climbed into the middle seat. She never sat in the front with the driver, not that she was rude but she hated the forced conversations she felt obliged to join in. She belted herself in and pulled out her phone to see what she had missed. The driver got into the front, and they pulled out into the line of traffic, a long, slow, seething mass, all converging into two lanes that headed into the city. She was sure he knew where he was going but thought it prudent to check anyway.

"To the Plaza hotel?" She raised her voice slightly at the end, to make it sound more like a question than a command.

"Yes ma'am."

She sat back and spent the hour in traffic working on emails, updating her social media feeds and, where she had questions, sending photo to her PR person to decide whether to post or not. She had completely forgotten the creepy man. She wasn't ready at that point to concede that he was a stalker, that SHE had a stalker. He was just creepy. No lines had been crossed so she wasn't on board with that notion.

They arrived at the Plaza, pulling up at the covered main entrance, the driver getting out and opening her door, then going to the back to get the luggage unloaded onto the waiting bellman's cart. She stepped out and was immediately met by three fans, and she jumped back, terrified. There had been, briefly, a look of terror on her face, but she quickly regained her composure, apologized to them, and signed some picture for them.

She stepped up the curb, towards the front door, then looked back to check on her luggage. A cab passing by the van, caught her eye and that's where she saw him, in full profile, as he rode past her in the back seat. He made no eye contact, and the cab quickly passed.

She watched as it drove on, down two or three blocks, then turning a corner and disappearing. There was no damn way that was a coincidence, no damn way. This was a city of millions of people and hundreds and hundreds of hotels. There was no way in hell that he was just passing by. She was getting

beyond terrified and becoming angry. Fans were a part of her world and she was generally grateful for them. At times they could be tiring, but she still put her heart into being a positive role model. She had her share of internet trolls, constantly posting garbage and taunting her, but she found it easy to ignore them. Just post something and never, ever, read the comments. Easy. But this guy, this was something new.

She headed inside and to the reception desk.

"Good afternoon, are you checking in?"

"Yes, I am," she replied politely, handing over her credit card and giving her name.

The receptionist recognized her of course, but was very professional in checking her in. She entered the information and handed her the room keys.

"I have kind of a weird question, or request I guess."

"Yes of course, what can I help you with?"

"Can I request extra security, like, more than I would normally have. I think there might be a person following me around."

"Yes of course. We handle your visits always with the utmost discretion and security in mind. And you are on a secure floor, with card access only. If you can think of anything else let us know. You can call us at any time."

"Thank you, I appreciate that." She took the keys and headed to the elevator. Her luggage would follow shortly, but she just wanted to get safely into her room, and stay there until her event began the next day. She reached her room and walked around, inspecting each part of it, something she normally did anyway, but this time it was with greater urgency. Satisfied that she was alone, she sat on the edge of the bed and took a breath. A loud knock at the door caused her to jerk in apprehension.

"Your luggage," called a voice on the other side of the door.

Peering through the peephole she verified that it was the cart with her bags. She opened the door and, directing him to the closet, watched as he unloaded each piece.

"Do you require help unpacking or with anything else?"

"No that's fine, thank you." She answered quite abruptly, by her standards, and held the door open for him, as an invitation to leave. He did so, and she locked it tightly behind him, the 'Do Not Disturb' sign hung on the outside handle.

She didn't even bother to unpack, as she normally did to feel more at home in whatever city she was in. This time she went to the window, pulling the curtains shut, then peering through just enough to see down to the street. She scanned up and down the busy avenue, full of cars, vans, cabs, large trucks and lots of people, walking every which way. There was no way she would be able to pick out any one individual down there. She watched for at least thirty minutes before finally pulling them closed and sitting down on the couch.

She grabbed the tv remote and switched it on, finding a sports channel and started watching a football game, with the sound off. She flipped through the room service menu and decided upon a meal. She called down and placed her order. She hung up and sat back to watch the game, turning the volume up.

She was, of course, startled by the loud knock at the door. She stood and headed to the door and opened it, wide, with the expectation of a food trolley to enter. What she did not expect to see was the woman from the front reception standing there with him.

"What the hell!" She even startled herself with how loud she was, not being a person to swear very much.

"I'm so sorry, but this gentleman has something of yours that he was hoping to return to you. I normally would have had him just leave it with us, but it is very valuable and he wanted to make sure it got to you."

"I asked for extra security from you and this is what you do? You bring someone right to my room?" She was furious now, combined with a slight sense of fear.

"Again, I'm so sorry, but this gentleman has found a very expensive watch, worth many thousands of dollars, that he says belongs to you and he was scared of it being stolen or misplaced. I agreed with him that it should come right to you and I thought you might want to thank him."

The receptionist handed her a ladies Rolex date-just. She took it in disbelief, first checking her own wrist to find nothing there and then trying to remember when she saw it last. The past few days flashed through her mind as she retraced her steps in her mind. She couldn't remember wearing it in her trip here yesterday. In fact, she couldn't remember wearing it at all over the last couple of days. Her panic was turning into confusion, as her mind raced for logical explanations to the situation.

"The gentleman says you left it behind at a hotel yesterday, and as he was travelling here today as well, thought he would bring it to you. "

"How did he even know I was here? At this hotel!" She directed all her questions to the woman, avoiding any contact with him at all.

"He says he contacted your management team, and they directed him here. Again, I'm so sorry."

Looking at the watch, then the floor, she was trying to make sense of this. It sounded logical, but why wouldn't he have given it to her at the last city, or on the plane. It made sense and it didn't make sense.

Her anger, fully turned to pure confusion and now a touch of remorse, made her look up, first to the receptionist, then to the man.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what to say," she started. "I didn't even realize it was missing. Where did you find it?" She addressed him for the first time.

He finally spoke. "I found it at the reception desk yesterday morning at the other hotel. I was at the check-out desk just after you and found it there. I knew right away it must be yours. I'm sorry for not coming forward sooner, I was just...a little nervous I guess. "

"Were you staying there as well?", she asked him, still a little unconvinced.

"No," he replied. "My mother stays there when she is in town and I was helping her check out before I went to work."

It all made sense. Everything was falling into place and her fear was melting away. Perhaps it was just all a misunderstanding. It was her watch after all.

"Again, I'm so sorry for the intrusion. I can assure you something like this will never happen again."

She nodded in acknowledgement. She looked down at the watch again, putting all the pieces together in her mind. She turned her back to them, still looking down lost in thought. She couldn't remember where she saw the watch last.

The sound of the elevator doors opening caught her attention and she turned back around and looked out into the hallway, to see the receptionists back disappear into the elevator, followed by the closing doors.

She closed and locked the door and looked down at the watch again. It was her watch. She flipped it over and was surprised to see an inscription on it. It was an inscription that she had put onto the watch that she gave to her sister last year. She had been given two of them from a sponsor and made a gift out of one of them too her. But how could this be her sisters watch, when her sister lived in another country on another continent.

The lights and tv went off all at once and her suite was pitch black.

All at once, it all made sense.

She was fully onboard with the fact that she now had her first stalker.

