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## *O'Hare Airport, Chicago*

**S**tephanie Harker was just about old enough to remember when air travel had been exciting. She glanced down at the five-year-old fiddling with the tape stretched between the movable pillars that marked out the snaking line waiting to go through security. Jimmy would never know that feeling. He'd grow up to associate flying with tedium and the mounting irritation that came from dealing with people who were variously bored, dismissive or just plain rude. Jimmy seemed to sense her eyes on him and he looked up, his expression tentative and wary. 'Can we go in the pool tonight?' he asked, his voice tinged with the expectation of refusal.

'Course we can,' Stephanie said.

'Even if the plane's late?' There was no sign that her words had allayed his anxiety.

'Even if the plane's late. The house has its own pool. Right outside the living room. It doesn't matter how late we get in, you can have a swim.'

He frowned, weighing her response, then nodded. 'OK.'



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They shuffled forward a few more feet. Changing planes in America infuriated Stephanie. When you arrived by plane, you'd already been through security at least once. Sometimes twice. In most other countries, when you transferred to an onward flight, you didn't have to go through a second screening. You were already airside. You'd been declared secure, the authorities figured. No need to go through the whole rigma-role yet another time.

But America was different. America was always different. In America, she suspected, they didn't trust any other country on the planet to have proper airport security. So when you arrived in the US for a connecting flight, you had to emerge from airside to landside then, whoop-de-doo, you got to stand in a queue all over again to go through the same process you'd already endured to get on the first bloody plane. Sometimes even losing that bargain bottle of mandarin vodka you'd picked up on special offer at the duty free on the way out because you'd forgotten you'd have a second security examination where they'd be imposing the rule about liquids. Even liquids you'd bought in a bloody airport. Bastards.

As if that wasn't irritating enough, the latest American version of the security pat-down nudged the outer limits of what Stephanie considered sexual assault. She'd become a connoisseur of the thoroughness of security personnel, thanks to the screws and plate that had held her left leg together for the past ten years. There was no consistency in the actions of the women who moved in to check her over after the metal detector had beeped and flashed. At one extreme, in Madrid she'd been neither patted down nor wanded. Rome was perfunctory, Berlin efficient. But in America, the thoroughness bordered on offensiveness, the backs of hands bumping breasts and butting against her like a clumsy teenage boy. It was uncomfortable and humiliating.

Another few feet. But now the line ahead was moving

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steadily. Slowly, but steadily. Jimmy swung under the tape at the point where the queue rounded the mark and bounced in front of her. 'I beat you,' he said.

'So you did.' Stephanie disengaged a hand from the carry-on bags to rumple his thick black hair. At least the frustrations of the journey were a distraction from worrying about holidaying with her son. Her nostrils flared as the unfamiliar phrase stuttered in her head. Holidaying with her son. How long would it be before that stopped sounding freakish, outlandish, impossible? In California, they'd be surrounded by normal families. Jimmy and her, they were anything but a normal family. And this was a trip she never expected to be making. *Please, let it not go wrong.*

'Can I sit beside the window again?' Jimmy tugged at her elbow. 'Can I, Steph?'

'As long as you promise not to open it in mid-flight.'

He gave her a suspicious look then grinned. 'Would I get sucked out into space if I did?'

'Yup. You'd be the boy in the moon.' She waved him onward. They'd picked up speed and were almost at the point where they'd have to load their bags and the contents of their pockets into a plastic tray to pass through the X-ray scanner. Stephanie caught sight of a large Perspex enclosure beyond the metal detector and pursed her lips. 'Remember what I told you, Jimmy,' she said firmly. 'You know I'll set off the alarms and then I'll have to stay inside that clear box until somebody checks me over. You're not allowed in with me.'

He pouted. 'Why not?'

'It's the rules. Don't worry,' she added, seeing the troubled look in his eyes. 'Nothing bad's going to happen to me. You wait by the luggage belt, OK? Don't go anywhere, just wait till I come out on the other side. Do you understand?'

Now he was avoiding her eye. Maybe he felt she was talking

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down to him. It was so hard to pitch things at the right level. 'I'll guard the bags,' he said. 'So nobody can steal them.'

'Great.'

The man ahead of them in the queue shrugged out of his suit jacket and folded it into a tray. Off with his shoes, then his belt. He opened his laptop bag and removed the computer, laying it in a second tray. He nodded towards them, indicating he was done. 'No dignity in travel these days,' he said with a grim smile.

'You ready, Jimmy?' Stephanie stepped forward and grabbed a plastic tray. 'That's an important job you've got, the guarding bit.' She loaded their stuff, checked Jimmy's pockets then shoed him through the metal detector ahead of her. He turned to watch as the machine beeped, the red lights lit up and the beefy Transport Security Agency operative indicated the Perspex pen.



'Female officer,' he called out, chins and belly wobbling. 'Wait inside the box, ma'am.' He pointed to the enclosure, a couple of metres long by a metre wide. The outlines of two feet were painted on the floor. A plastic chair sat against one wall. A wooden plinth contained a hand-held metal detector. Jimmy's eyes widened as Stephanie walked in. She waved him towards the conveyor belt where their possessions were slowly emerging from the scanner.



'Wait for me,' she mouthed, giving him a thumbs-up.

Jimmy turned away and moved to the end of the conveyor belt, staking out their plastic trays. Stephanie looked around impatiently. There were three or four female TSA officers in sight, but none of them seemed eager to deal with her. Thank goodness she and Jimmy weren't rushing to make a connection. Knowing what US transfers were like these days, she'd deliberately left plenty of time between their flights.

She looked back at Jimmy. One of the TSA agents appeared to be talking to him. A tall man in black uniform trousers and

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blue shirt. But something was off-kilter. Stephanie frowned. He was wearing a cap, that was what it was. None of the other TSA people wore anything on their heads. As she watched, the man reached for Jimmy's hand.

For a split second, Stephanie couldn't believe what she was seeing. The man was leading a compliant Jimmy away from the security area towards the concourse where dozens of people were milling back and forth. Not a backward glance from either of them.

'Jimmy,' she shouted. 'Jimmy, come back here.' Her voice rose in pitch, but it was deadened by the Perspex enclosure. Neither the man nor the child broke step. Worried now, Stephanie banged on the side of the box, gesturing towards the concourse. 'My kid,' she shouted. 'Somebody's taken my kid.'

Her words seemed to have no impact but her actions did. Two agents moved towards the box, not towards Jimmy. They were oblivious to what was happening behind them. Frantic, Stephanie thrust aside the voice in her head telling her she was crazy and made a run for it.

She'd barely made it out of the Perspex box when one of the agents grabbed her arm, saying something that didn't register. His grip slowed her but it didn't stop her. The prospect of losing Jimmy pushed her over her normal limits. The officer snatched at her with his other hand and without thinking, Stephanie whirled round and smashed her fist into his face. 'They're kidnapping my kid,' she yelled.

Blood flowed from the guard's nose, but he held on tight. Now Stephanie could only see the man's hat. Jimmy was lost in the crowd. Panic gave her strength and she dragged the guard behind her. Dimly, she was aware of other officers drawing weapons and shouting at her, but her focus was total. 'Jimmy,' she screamed.

By now, another guard had grabbed her waist, trying to



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wrestle her to the ground. 'Get down on the floor,' he yelled. 'On the floor, now.' She kicked out, raking her heel down his shin.

The raised voices blurred into a meaningless noise as a third TSA officer joined battle, throwing himself on her back. Stephanie felt her knees buckle as she crumpled to the floor. 'My boy,' she mumbled, reaching for the pocket where she'd put their boarding passes. Suddenly the bodies restraining her melted away and she was free. Confused but relieved they were finally paying attention, Stephanie pushed herself one-handed to her knees.

That was when they tasered her.

