

AVIOPHOBIA

“Flight Q723 will now begin boarding.” Aliena cringed as she heard the announcement. “Please make your way to Gate 15 and have your boarding passes ready.”

Aliena looked through the gap in her legs, down at the ugly brown carpet. Her foot was bouncing up and down. She had to concentrate to make it stop. She grabbed her carry-on bag—a dorky, navy-blue backpack—and made her way to the trailing line, boarding pass in hand.

Aliena was flying to Perth, to visit her Aunt and Uncle. She’d flown many times before, but her last flight had been bad. The turbulence, emergency stop-over and (pretty much) crash landing had made her nervous as hell about air travel. But there was no way she was driving from Brisbane to Perth, so she sucked it up and kept repeating that she was more likely to die from sneezing or being kicked in the head by a donkey than from the sixty tonne steel oblong that somehow floated forty thousand feet in the air.

“Hello there,” the flight attendant said as Aliena reached the front of the line. She prised open her fist, handing the lady her boarding pass. “Wonderful, enjoy your flight,” she said—with a smile that looked painful—to everyone.

Aliena trudged down the winding corridor that led to the plane. Her stomach squeezed when she felt the change from the permanent structure underfoot to flimsy-piece-of-engineering-that-connects-end-of-corridor-to-aeroplane-entrance-and-wobbles-as-everybody-walks-on-it.

“I’m totally fine,” Aliena whispered to herself.

She reached the entrance and another perky flight attendant read her boarding pass and directed her to the closest aisle through the plane. She was seat 17A, a window one, thank god. That way she could look outside and determine if the turbulence was caused from displacement, wind gusts, or engine malfunction.

She was the first person who had arrived at her three seat section, so had no difficulty sliding into her place. She put her backpack under the seat in front, extracting her earphones first. She then buckled up, navigated through her phone to the playlist she'd made for the flight, inserted her earphones and pressed play. Glass Animals' alternative sounds filled her head, clouding her fear. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths; in and out.

"Argh!" she yelled, clutching the right side of her face.

"Oh my god, I am SO sorry," someone said, although it was hard to discern through the music. Aliena ripped out her earphones. She wasn't angry, just shocked. "Are you okay?" the same person asked, placing his hand on her shoulder in an apologetic gesture.

"Yeah, I'm alright," Aliena replied, somewhat dazed—and not by the face-hit. "I just had my eyes closed, so I didn't see you."

"I climbed over the guy on the aisle seat"—he rolled his eyes and looked over his shoulder at the boulder-sized man seated on the end of their row—"cause I didn't really want to make him move, and my bag fell off my shoulder and, uh, hit you in the face."

Aliena smiled. "Understandable," she said, nodding to the man occupying the aisle seat. And part of the middle seat, too.

The guy smiled back and removed his hand from her shoulder. Aliena absently adjusted her jacket, he'd pulled it down a little, but it hadn't bothered her. She watched as he sat and placed his bag under the seat in front of him. It was a much cooler backpack than hers.

"I really like Glass Animals too," the guy said. Aliena looked down at her lap, where the earphones were quietly, but noticeably, still playing her music. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yep," Aliena replied. Her fear was creeping back after the bag/face distraction.

"You seem tense," he noted, his hazel eyes looked her up and down.

"I'm not a great flyer," Aliena admitted.

"Oh wonderful, so I'm stuck between someone who's terrified of flying and, well..." he said, smiling and gesturing to the man next to him.

"Sorry," Aliena laughed. This guy was good at taking her mind off impending death.

“I’m Tai.” He held out his hand.

“Aliena.” She shook his hand—he had a firm grip. That pleased her. She hated it when guys deliberately softened their grip so they wouldn’t ‘hurt’ the girl with whom they were shaking hands. It was such a turn off.

“That’s an interesting name?” he said, his intonation rising to form a question.

“I could say the same for you,” Aliena replied.

He smiled. It was a lovely smile. Warm, inviting... like hot chocolate fudge over ice-cream.

“What can I say? My parents like Thai food.”

Aliena stifled a laugh. The seatbelt sign lit up and *dinged*. The plane started to reverse and the flight attendants demanded everyone’s attention for the in-flight safety guide of what to do in case the plane starts plummeting. She gripped the arm rests.

“So, Aliena, what’s the deal with your name?” Tai asked.

“Um.” She was finding it a little hard to concentrate. She usually listened to every word the flight attendants said—a small superstition—but Tai was looking at her expectantly. “My parents love to read and one of their favourite books is *The Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett. One of the main character’s names is Aliena.”

“It rolls off the tongue nicely,” he said, winking at her. “Aliena.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled, turning and looking out the window. They’d reached the runway and were idling, waiting to be given the go ahead to roll forward, swivel, accelerate and take off. She readjusted her seatbelt and went to put her earphones back in but Tai asked her a question, stopping her midway.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.” She pressed stop on her phone, switching the music off, not wanting to seem rude. “You?”

“Same.” He grinned.

“Cool,” she said, feeling her cheeks heat up.

“Cool,” he agreed. The plane moved and began rolling onto the runway. It swivelled around. “Take off time.”

“Urgh,” Aliena groaned. She felt sick. Take off and turbulence were the worst.

“Hey, it’ll be alright,” Tai assured.

The plane lurched forward, accelerating quickly. Aliena gripped the arm rests harder. She wished she had her music to distract her. She laid her head back on the head rest and looked out the window.

“Don’t you love the sucking feeling?” Tai said.

“What?” Aliena answered, her voice breathless from stress.

“The feeling of being sucked back into your seat, like we are now, from the speed.”

“Not really.”

“You need to embrace it then,” he said. He placed his hand on top of hers as the wheels left the ground. Aliena immediately turned her head to face him. Their eyes met. “Sorry,” he said, removing his hand from hers after a protracted moment. “Just looked like you needed a distraction.”

“It helped,” Aliena admitted.

“Well I suppose I could provide you with some in-flight entertainment to help take your mind off dying.” She laughed at him. He was easy to be with. And to look at. “Tell me something about yourself—something interesting, that people wouldn’t assume.”

“Uh, sure,” Aliena replied. She’d been expecting something more usual, like ‘why are you flying to Perth?’ Regardless, it was a good question. It’s funny how questions themselves give away so much about a person. “I don’t think I look cool at all, and I don’t think I look that nerdy either. But I’m in the chess club at school. I kick arse at it too.”

Now it was Tai’s turn to laugh. “I did not figure you for a chess girl, I am pleasantly surprised. But, on the contrary, Aliena, cool is in the eye of the beholder, and I think you look *sub zero*.”

“*Mortal Kombat*?” Aliena inferred.

“You. Did. Not,” Tai said, literally turning his whole body towards her.

“My brother and I play it—he’s really into computers and stuff,” Aliena provided.

“I cannot believe you picked up on my *Mortal Kombat* implication. Your turn.”

“For a question?” Aliena asked.

“Yep. And I want a good one,” he said, relaxing back into his seat.

Aliena thought. She couldn’t ask him anything mundane. She wanted to reveal something about herself with her question, the way he had with his.

“You’re awfully friendly, and considering I’m a complete stranger and know nothing about you, I think I’d like to know how you would kill someone, if given the choice?”

He looked at her, his face blank. “What?”

“I’ve read a lot of books, and the friendly ones are always the serial killers.”

He burst out into restrained laughter—restrained because they were on a plane—he obviously found the question very amusing.

“So just in case I’m a whacko, you’d like to be prepared by knowing how I’d off you?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Aliena said. “But also, because I’d like to know if you’re an emotional or logical thinker.”

“How can you tell by that question?”

“Answer and I’ll tell you.”

“Hmmm,” he pondered. His jaw jutted forward, it was very defined. Aliena looked over his face from the profile position he’d provided. His nose was straight and in proportion with the rest of his features. His hair was dark brown. It was straight, but the type of haircut made it look thicker than it probably was, shorter on the sides than in the middle. Aliena had seen all the boys at school adopt this new style. It suited some better than others. It suited Tai very well. He suddenly turned back to her, the whites of his eyes were bright.

“I think that I would like to stay out of gaol for as long as possible, so, hypothetically, if I were a serial killer and had a choice of how I would end my victims’ lives, I would knock them unconscious—with a cricket bat—and then euthanise them with some sodium pentobarbital that I stole from the vet I currently work at after school. Then I’d get a massive plastic bucket, put the body in it and pour hydrochloric acid all over it so that the body dissolves. I’d burn the cricket bat.” He raised an angular eyebrow at her. “That was a weird question. I’m starting to think you might be the serial killer here.”

Aliena went red. She knew as soon as she’d said it that it was the worst question ever. And she’d asked it to the best looking guy she’d ever seen. Urgh.

“I’m sorry, it was stupid, I’ll shut up now,” she mumbled.

“Hey, I was only kidding,” Tai said, his tone soft.

“It was weird,” Aliena said. “Very bad first impression.”

“You did say that it was to test my response, though?”

“Yeah, I’m reading a book at the moment—a crime fiction, it’s my favourite genre—and the detective just explained to his side kick that if a person kills by say, stabbing, asphyxiation or bashing to death, that represents an emotional kill. That could be linked to the situation, like a person finding out their partner is cheating on them, or it can be due to the person’s underlying characteristics, whether or not they are an emotional person. It’s the same with logic. Poison and shooting, they’re quick forms of killing. They’re methodical and leave the least amount of evidence. You chose poison, and you thought about it in a logical sense of what would keep you out of gaol. You didn’t revert to emotions and think about someone you hate, and wonder how you would like to kill them. So that tells me you’re fairly rational and don’t let your emotions control you.”

“You know what?” Tai asked.

“What?”

“You are a very interesting person. And I do not believe you are a serial killer anymore.”

“Oh, well, that’s good, thanks.”

“So I’ve learnt that we are the same age, you and your parents like to read, you have ah-maze-ing taste in music, play the coolest video games ever, hate flying and like learning about how and why people kill each other. Quite productive questions I think.”

Aliena giggled. “Yep, and I’ve learnt that you’re very good at in-flight entertainment and are a logical person who works with animals.”

“Yeah, animals, man, they’re my passion.” He tilted his head toward her, their proximity dwindling to a mere thirty centimetres. “Plus, working with puppies and kittens makes me about ten points hotter.” He winked and then laughed, making it clear he wasn’t being serious. Although Aliena begged to differ. “So, crime, hey?”

“Yeah, I find it fascinating. It’s what I want to do.”

“What exactly? Like, tag and test serial killers?”

“No!” she blurted out, laughing. “I want to”—turbulence—“I, ah. Sorry.”

“Look at me,” Tai instructed. She did. “Now, that grip you’ve got on the arm rest is very impressive, but the chair really hasn’t done anything to you, has it?” he asked, but before Aliena could shake her head, he answered for her, “No, it hasn’t. So I’m sure it’d appreciate it if you loosened your choke hold.”

He was doing an excellent job of making her smile. Even though her breathing was still double speed and her heart was pounding, she listened to him and loosened her grip. She didn’t let go, but the blood flowed back into her white knuckles.

“I don’t like it,” she said under her breath.

“Turbulence?” he asked. She nodded. “Just think of it as a ride on a magic carpet through the clouds, Princess Jasmine, that’s all it is.” Aliena raised her eyebrows, not in an incredulous manner though. “You’re like an Aussie Princess Jasmine,” Tai reiterated. “Long, dark hair, chocolate eyes, tanned. You’re even wearing a blue top.”

“Um, thank you,” Aliena said, feeling very flattered. The turbulence had stopped. She hadn’t even noticed. Tai was good.

“So, you were saying?” he reminded.

“I can’t even remember what I was talking about.”

“It was what you want to do, with crime as a career.”

“Oh yeah, good memory,” she commended. He looked pleased at the compliment. “I haven’t looked into it too much but maybe a forensic scientist.”

“Science and chess, you are an undercover nerd, aren’t you?” Tai teased.

“Yep,” Aliena grimaced.

“Believe me, I am finding you fascinating.” His lips pulled up into an innocent grin. “What is your favourite sound?” he asked. “Not song or music, just *sound*.”

“I like to swim, I’m not fantastic, but I train regularly. I love the sound of the pool water rushing over the grates.”

“Damn, I had my money on the sound of you knocking someone’s chess piece off the board when you win. A nice wooden *clink* symbolising you owning their arse.”

“That is a good sound too.” Aliena shook her head at him in amusement. She figured it was her turn and had already thought of another question. One that was less homicidal.

“Say you had the ability to pick your age for one week. How old would you choose to be?”

He answered faster than she had anticipated. “I’d be ten for sure.”

“How come?”

“I believe it is my turn now,” he said, smirking at her, but his eyes held a trace of sadness. She didn’t push for information. She wanted him to keep talking. She could see the flight attendants making their way down the aisles with dinner. The smell had wafted towards them. “Your ultimate pizza.”

“Hungry?” Aliena asked, inclining her head to their approaching dinner.

“How’d you guess?”

“Well, the pizzas an easy answer,” Aliena said. “Crust have this awesome vegetarian supreme.”

“So no meat?”

“No, I’m not vegetarian, but this is so good.”

“Tell me about this vegetarian pizza blasphemy.”

“It’s packed with toppings and has heaps of cheese and sauce and this amazing basil aioli,” Aliena explained.

“Barbecued chicken all the way,” he rebutted.

“Such a cliché choice,”

“Chicken, cheese and barbecue sauce equals ambrosia.”

The flight attendants had arrived and asked which meal they would each prefer. Aliena chose the mushroom risotto.

“Do you think we’re in the matrix?” she asked after the flight attendants had moved on.

“No. But either way, we wouldn’t know. If this was the matrix I’d be worried about their programming of how aeroplane food tastes. It would be overly generous of me to say this chicken tikka masala is mediocre.”

“Mine isn’t much better either.”

At the same time, they looked over at the large man beside Tai.

“Wouldn’t pick it from that one, hey?” Tai said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder at the man hoeing into his food.

Aliena cracked up. Unfortunately she was chewing her risotto and a piece of rice flew and lodged in the part of her nose that joins up with the throat. She started coughing. Her eyes began to water. “Ah, it hurts,” Aliena said, crying and laughing at her predicament.

“The most unfortunate thing about this situation,” Tai started saying, “is that you’re trapped in this seat and cannot go to the bathroom to dislodge the risotto.” His voice quavered as he spoke, holding back his laughter.

After the flight attendants had returned and collected the rubbish and left-overs Aliena proved Tai wrong. She stood and politely asked the man on the aisle seat if he might move so that she could use the bathroom. He was nice enough about it. Tai followed her to the back of the plane.

“May as well use it while I have the chance,” he offered as explanation.

Aliena managed to cough up the piece of rice, which was gross, but vastly preferable to having it stuck there for the next hour. She returned to her row, Tai and the other man standing and waiting for her to take her seat. She pulled her bag out and grabbed some gum, offering some to Tai, who accepted.

“You should probably mentally prepare yourself for this next question, it’s kind of heavy,” Tai warned.

“Duly noted,” Aliena replied.

“Would you prefer to be a dragon or a unicorn?” he asked.

“And you said I was weird.” Aliena smiled. “A dragon. Unicorns are great, but no one messes with a dragon.”

“I would be a black dragon, I think,” Tai considered.

“You would make a good dragon,” Aliena praised.

“I know.” Tai nodded to himself. “How are you going to top that one?”

“Okay, forgive my ignorance, but seeing as you work with animals, what’s the difference between a llama and an alpaca?”

“Oh, Aliena, do I have some enlightening Camelid facts for you.”

“Camelid?”

“The alpaca and llama belong to the Camelidae family i.e.”—he actually said i.e.—“camels. They differ from ruminants, think sheep and cows, but are still similar. Basically, llamas are bigger, they don’t produce as much fleece ‘cause they were originally bred to be pack-carrying animals, whereas the alpaca was bred purely for its fleece.”

“Mr. David Attenborough over here,” Aliena said.

Tai brushed off his shoulders. “Yeah, I’m a biology freak.”

“You’re really interesting,” Aliena admitted, looking away from him. The seatbelt sign lit up again and at the *ding* Aliena quickly buckled up. She could feel their descent beginning. Again, her hands latched onto the arm rests.

They were quiet for a while, but it was a restful silence. As they neared the earth, the turbulence returned. It wasn’t awful, but it still made Aliena very nervous.

“Look,” Tai began. Aliena turned to face him. “I was just wondering, say... if you had one shot? Or perhaps, one opportunity, might sound better, to seize everything you ever wanted in, like, one moment, would you want to capture it? Or maybe you’d just let it slip?”

Aliena knew this wasn’t a question. She grinned. “Yo,” she said and then continued with the first verse.

“Hell yeah!” Tai said, his voice exultant. He joined in.

Aliena knew he was doing it to take her mind off the turbulence and landing. But she loved this song and knew every word. She couldn’t wipe the smile off her face and didn’t notice her grip loosen on the arm rests as they continued rapping Eminem’s *Lose Yourself*.

“BLAOW!” they said in unison. As they did, the plane touched down. Aliena giggled and they both laid their heads back on the head rests. Aliena felt relieved. But also upset that her time with Tai was now at an end.

“Thanks, Tai,” she said.

“No worries. Eminem’s the man.”

They taxied back to the airport and once the plane had been attached to the flimsy portable corridor the passengers were allowed to stand and leave. Aliena and Tai walked to the baggage carousel in silence.

“Now we have the hardest question of all,” Tai said as they waited for their bags to careen by.

“What’s that?”

“Are you visiting or going home?”

“Visiting. I’m from Brisbane.”

“Alas, ‘twas only meant for one four hour flight, I am afraid. I’m from Perth.” Aliena was surprised at how upset this made her. “Do you believe in fate?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Serendipity? Kismet? Destiny? No, scrap that last one, destiny is not a nice sounding word.”

“No, I don’t believe in any of it.”

“A scientist through and through, I see,” he said, an impish grin curling his lips.

“Logic, Tai, just logic,” Aliena countered, smiling playfully back at him.

She spotted her bag and walked forward to grab it. She liked that he didn’t offer to help. It wasn’t rude, it was a silent statement of fact that he believed she was strong enough to handle her bag on her own. Not long after his arrived.

“Well I believe in something, whether it’s any of those words I’m not sure, but I reckon I was supposed to meet you,” he said as they made their way out of the airport, both heading in the direction of the public pick-up area.

“Why can’t we have just met because of coincidence? We both happened to book a flight on the same day to the same place and were randomly allocated seats next to each other?”

“Okay, so I might be a little biased, ‘cause I was sitting next to a morbidly obese dude whose sweaty arm I could not help but touch for the entire trip,” he began. “Given that, it might have made me think you’re even more attractive than what you actually are—but I don’t think so. You’re super smart and funny and play *Mortal Kombat* for god’s sake.” They’d reached the pick-up area and he casually dropped his bag and backpack to the ground. Aliena did the same. He then turned towards her and rested his hands on her shoulders. He was so familiar, so confident. “And, Aliena, you can’t tell me you don’t feel *this*, can you?”

Aliena could not deny that she felt the proverbial *this*. There was a current of electricity between them. Something that could only be felt by mutual consent.

“Yeah, I feel it,” she said.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing that I just checked out the pad that my mum and I are moving into in Brisbane in a month.”

“Huh?”

“My mum got a job in Brisbane—she grew up there but moved to Perth for my dad, who, for want of a better word, is a dick. Anyway, they split a while ago and mum’s wanted to move back to her hometown but was having trouble getting a job as awesome as the one she has here.”

“So, you’re going to move to Brisbane in a month?” Aliena asked, delight evident in her tone.

“Sure am.”

“Can I say that makes me happy without sounding weird?”

“I think we crossed that bridge back at the ‘if you were going to kill me, how would you do it?’ question.”

“Yeah, most probably.”

“Still believe it was just a coincidence?”

“Maybe.”

“Aha! I have made you doubt yourself. That’s the first step to a girl’s heart right there.”

“Oh, definitely,” she joked.

“Just one last question, I promise.”

“Shoot.”

“May I have your number?”

“Of course.” She put it into his phone.

“Well, Aliena, it’s been real.”

“It’s been real?” she repeated, the phrase seemed at odds with his personality.

“Yeah, I tried to sound nonchalant about everything but it kind of backfired.” She laughed at him as he ran his fingers through his hair, for the first time actually looking nervous. “I’ll stop being a ‘guy’ and tell it true then. I’m not a great flyer either. But I wanted to take your mind off being scared, because I know how it feels. My heart was hammering in my chest the whole time, from the take off, the turbulence, from you. I feel so bad about hitting you in the face, but I’m kind of glad I did, or I probably wouldn’t have had the courage to talk to you.” Tai’s phone vibrated and he checked the message. “My mum’s here,” he said, glancing around. He waved to a car that had just entered. There weren’t any parking spots, so his mum drove around the back, out of sight. “I’ve got to go, but I’ll call you, okay?”

“Sure thing, I’d like that,” Aliena said. “Thank you, Tai, you made that flight more than bearable.”

He smiled—that hot chocolate fudge over ice-cream grin again. He leant down and kissed her cheek. Aliena froze. His skin was smooth and he smelt amazing. He drew back after a beat, bent to pick up his bags, but stopped.

“Oh, screw it,” he said. He took her face between his hands and kissed her. He tasted even better than he smelt. Aliena felt nervous all over again, but it had nothing to do with planes. They broke apart, both wearing shy smiles. Tai picked up his bags this time and walked away.

Aliena was left waiting for her Aunt to pick her up. Did that really happen? A few minutes passed and she felt her phone vibrate. She went to her messages, expecting one from her Aunt saying she’d arrived. Instead, it was from an unsaved number.

To answer one of your questions, I was ten years old the last time my parents were happy together. On a lighter note, I know I promised no more questions, but I think you’ll forgive me for this one. Would you like to go out for dinner with me tomorrow night?

Aliena decided that she didn’t mind flying that much after all.