

he noticed it made the men in ties uncomfortable, so he switched to something more neutral. James took his responsibility as captain very seriously.

It was late in the afternoon. He had a few hours to kill before his next flight, a quick jog over to Martha's Vineyard to pick up a payload of six. For this flight he'd pilot an OSPRY 700SL. He hadn't flown the particular model before, but he wasn't worried. OSPRY made a very capable airplane. Still, as he sat in the crew lounge waiting, he read up on the specs. The plane was just under seventy feet in overall length, with a wingspan of sixty-three feet, ten inches. It'd do Mach .083, though he'd never push it that hard with paying passengers aboard. It'd fly coast-to-coast on a full tank at a top speed of 554 mph. The specs said it topped out at forty-five thousand feet, but he knew from experience that that was a cautious number. He could take it up to fifty thousand feet without incident, though he couldn't imagine needing to on this flight.

August 9, 1974, that was the day the world was supposed to end. At The Restoration they spent months preparing. God told Noah it would be the fire next time, so that's what they prepared for. They learned to drop and roll, in case the rapture missed them. Jay L. spent more and more time in the wooded channeling the Angel Gabriel. As if by unspoken agreement, everyone in the group gorged themselves for ten days and then ate only matzo. Outside the temperature rose and dropped in significant measure.

In the crew lounge, James checked the prevailing weather conditions. Weather-wise they were looking at poor visibility around the Vineyard, with a low cloud base (two hundred to four hundred feet) and heavy coastal fog. Winds were out of the northeast at fifteen to twenty miles per hour. As James knew from basic meteorology, fog is just a cloud near or in contact with the earth's surface—either land or sea. In simple terms, minute water droplets hang suspended in the air. The water droplets are so tiny that gravity has almost no effect, leaving them suspended. At its highest, fog may only consist of wisps

a few feet thick. At its worst, it might have a vertical depth of several hundred feet.

Marine fog tends to be thick and long lasting. It can rise and fall over time, without fully dissipating. At altitude it becomes a low stratus cloud deck. In middle and higher latitudes (like New England), marine fog is primarily a summer occurrence. Low visibility isn't the worst problem a pilot faces—the inboard HGS system can land the plane with zero visibility if it knows the runway GPS. The HGS converts signals from an airport's Instrument Landing System into a virtual image of the runway displayed on the monitor. But if the wind shifts abruptly on manual approach, a pilot can be caught off guard.

"Come ye out from among them and be ye separate." This was what the Bible said, the words that convinced Jay L. Baker to gather his flock and flee to the woods outside Eureka, California. There was an old abandoned summer camp there, without heat or electricity. They bathed themselves in the lake and ate berries from the trees. Jay L. began to filibuster, sermonizing for hours, sometimes days at a time. The signs were everywhere, he told them. Revelations. In order to be saved they had to renounce all sin, to cast venal wickedness from their hearts. Sometimes this involved inflicting pain on their genital areas and the genital areas of others. Sometimes it required visiting "the confessional," a wooden outhouse that could reach interior temperatures of 105 degrees in the summer sun. His mother once stayed in there for three days, ranting that the devil had come to claim her soul. She was a fornicator and (possibly) a witch, having been caught in bald flagrante with Gale Hickey, a former dentist from Ojai. At night James would try to sneak her water, moving furtively from bush to bush, pushing his canteen through a hole in the pitch, but his mother always refused. She had brought this on herself and would endure the full purge.

James made a note to check the HGS system before takeoff. If he could he would talk to flight crews coming off inbound flights to get

an anecdotal sense of conditions in the air, though things can change quickly at altitude, and pockets of turbulence move around.

He sipped a cup of Irish breakfast tea as he waited—he carried foil packets in his carry-on. Lifting the cup to his lips, he saw a drop of blood break the surface, creating ripples. Then another. His lip felt wet. "Shit."

James hurried to the men's room, napkin to his face, head tilted back. He'd been getting nosebleeds recently, maybe twice a week. The doctor he saw told him it was the altitude. Dry capillaries plus pressure. He'd ruined more than one uniform in the last few months. At first, he'd been worried, but when no other symptoms arrived Melody chalked it up to age. He'd be fifty-one next March. Halfway there, he thought.

In the bathroom, he put pressure on his nose until the bleeding stopped, then cleaned himself up. He was lucky this time. There was no blood on his shirt or jacket, and James was back in the lounge drinking a fresh cup of tea before his seat was cold.

At five thirty p.m. he gathered his things and walked out to meet the plane.

The fact was, nothing ended on August 9, 1974, except the presidency of Richard M. Nixon.

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He started his pre-flight check in the cockpit, running through the systems one by one. He checked the paperwork first—he'd always been a stickler for precision of detail. He checked the movement of the yoke, listening for any unusual sounds, eyes closed, feeling for any catches or chinks. The starboard motion felt a little sticky, so he contacted maintenance to take a look. Then he switched on the master and checked fuel levels, setting full flaps.

"Just, uh, give me a minute," he said and went out again.

Instrument check complete, James climbed down the gangway

steps and walked the perimeter of the plane, doing a visual inspection. Though it was a warm summer night, he checked for any ice that might have accumulated on the exterior. He looked for missing antennae, for dents, loose bolts, missing rivets, making sure the plane's lights were all fully functional. He found some bird droppings on the wing, removed them by hand, then assessed the way the plane sat on its wheels—a leftward lean would mean the air in the rear port tire was low—inspecting the trailing edges of the wings and eyeballing the engines. He used both his rational left brain, running down a mental checklist, and his instinctual right brain, open to the sense that something felt off about the plane. But nothing did.

Back in the cabin, he conferred with the mechanic, who told him the altitude system checked out. He chatted with the flight attendant, Emma Lightner, with whom he hadn't worked before. As seemed to be the case on these private flights, she was prettier than was reasonable for such a basic and menial job, but he knew it paid well and the girls got to see the world. He helped her stow some heavier bags. She smiled at him in a way he recognized as friendly, but not flirtatious. And yet her beauty in and of itself felt like gravity—as if nature had designed this woman to pull men to her, and so that's what she did, whether she wanted to or not.

"Just a quick one tonight," he told her. "Should have you back in the city by eleven. Where are you based?"

"New York," she said. "I've got a place in the Village with two other girls. I think they're gone now, though—South Africa, maybe."

"Well, straight to bed for me," said James. "I was in LA this morning. Asia yesterday."

"They sure move us around, don't they?"

He smiled. She couldn't be more than twenty-five. For a moment he thought of the kind of men she must date. Quarterbacks and rock musicians—was that still a thing? Rock music? He himself was mostly celibate. It wasn't that he didn't like the company of women. It was more that he couldn't stand the complications of it, the immediate

sense of obligation, the expectation of complete intermingling. He was a man who lived out of a suitcase at fifty. He liked things the way he liked them. His tea, his books. He liked going to the movies in foreign lands, watching modern American films with subtitles in baroque old-world theaters. He liked walking cobblestone streets, listening to people argue in tongues. He loved the hot rush of desert air when one walked the gangway down onto Muslim soil. Yemen, the UAE. He had flown over the Alps at sunset, had battled thunderstorms over the Balkans. In James's mind he was a satellite, graceful and self-sufficient, orbiting the earth, fulfilling its designated purpose without question.

"We were supposed to have Gaston on the other stick," said James.

"You know Peter?"

"Yes, he's lovely."

"Too bad."

She smiled, showing teeth, and it was enough. To make a beautiful woman smile, to feel the warmth of her attention. He went into the cockpit and ran through the systems again, checking maintenance's work.

"Ten minutes," he called out.

As he rechecked the systems he felt the plane shift. *That will be my copilot coming back*, he thought. According to the roster, his wingman today was Peter Gaston, an idiosyncratic Belgian who liked to talk philosophy on long flights. James always enjoyed their conversations, especially when they delved into areas between science and ideology. He waited for him to enter the cockpit. But instead of coming forward, James heard whispering from the main cabin, and then something that sounded like a slap. He stood at the sound, frowning, and was almost to the cockpit door when a different man came in holding his left cheek.

"Sorry," he said, "I got held up in the office."

Melody recognized him—a glassy-eyed kid perhaps in his twenties, his tie askew—Charlie something. He'd flown with him once before and though technically the kid performed well, James frowned.

"What happened to Gaston?" he said.
"You got me," said Charlie. "Stomach thing, I think. All I know is I got a call."

James was annoyed, but he wasn't about to show it, so he shrugged. It was the front office's problem.

"Well, you're late. I called maintenance about some stickiness in the yoke."

The kid shrugged, rubbed his cheek.

James could see Emma behind him. She'd retreated into the main cabin and was smoothing the linens on the headrests.

"Everything okay out here?" James asked, more to her than the kid. She smiled at him in a far-off way, keeping her eyes down. He looked at Charlie.

"All good, Captain," said Charlie. "Just singing a song I shouldn't have been singing."

"Well, I don't know what that means, but I don't tolerate funny business on my bird. Do I need to call the front office, get another man?"

"No, sir. No funny business. Just here to get the job done. Nothing else."

James studied him. The kid held his eyes. A rogue of sorts, he decided. Not dangerous, just used to getting his way. He was handsome in a crooked sort of fashion, with a Texas twang. Loose. That's how James would describe him. Not a planner. More of a *go with the flow* sort. And James was okay with that, in principle. He could be flexible when it came to staff. As long as they did what they were told. The kid needed discipline was all, and James would give it to him.

"Okay then, take your seat and get on with control. I want to be wheels-up in five. We've got a schedule to keep."

"Yessir," said Charlie with an unreadable grin, and got to work. And then the first passengers came aboard, the client and his family—plane shifting as they climbed the gangway—and James made himself available for conversation. He always liked to meet the souls

he flew, to shake hands and put faces to names. It made the work more meaningful, especially when there were children. He was captain of this ship, after all, responsible for all lives. It didn't feel like servitude. It felt like a privilege. Only in the modern world did people believe that they should be the ones receiving. But James was a giver. He didn't know what to do when people tried to pamper him. If he caught a seat on a commercial flight, he always found himself getting up to help the flight attendants stow baggage or grabbing blankets for pregnant passengers. Someone had once said to him, *It's hard to be sad when you're being useful*. And he liked that idea. That service to others brought happiness. It was self-involvement that led to depression, to spiraling questions about the meaning of things. This had always been his mother's problem. She thought too much of herself, and not enough of others.

James had built himself to be the opposite. Often he considered what his mother would do in any situation—what the *wrong* decision was—and it clarified for him what he should do instead. In this way he used her as the North Star on a journey where you always want to go south. It was helpful, aligning himself in this way. It gave him something to tune to, like a violin to a piano.

They were in the air five minutes later, taking off to the west and banking back toward the coast. The yoke still felt a little sticky when he moved it starboard, but he put it down to an idiosyncrasy of the plane.

THE BLACKS

THE FIRST NIGHT, Scott sleeps on a pullout sofa in the sewing room. He hadn't planned on staying, but in the aftermath of the day's news he felt Eleanor might need the support, especially since her husband seemed to have disappeared.

He turns off his phone when he's working, said Eleanor, though the way she said it seemed to indicate that the word *working* really meant *drinking*.

Now, on the verge of a dream, Scott hears Doug come home around one, the sound of tires on the driveway waking him with a jolt of adrenaline. There is that animal surge of primitive nerves, eyes opening in an unfamiliar room, unsure for a long moment of where he is. A sewing table sits under the window, the machine a strange, looming predator in the shadows. Downstairs, the front door closes. Scott hears feet on the stairs. He listens as they approach, then stop outside his door. Silence again, like a breath held. Scott lies coiled, tense, an unwanted guest in another man's house. Outside he becomes aware of Doug breathing, a bearded man in overalls, drunk on artisanal bourbon and microbrews. Outside the window the cicadas are cutting a bloody racket in the yard. Scott thinks of the ocean, filled with invisible predators. You hold your breath and dive into the closing darkness, like sliding down a giant's throat, no longer even human in your mind. Prey.

A floorboard pops in the hall as Doug shifts his weight. Scott sits up and stares at the doorknob, a dim copper ball in the darkness. What will he do if it turns? If Doug enters drunk, ready for a fight?

Breathe. Again.

Somewhere the air conditioner's compressor kicks on, and the low duct thrust of forced air breaks the spell. The house is just a house again. Scott listens as Doug walks down the hall to the bedroom.

He exhales slowly, realizing he's been holding his breath.

In the morning, he takes the boy out looking for rocks to skip. They scour the grounds of the riverbank, looking for flat, smooth stones—Scott in his city shoes and the boy in little pants and a little shirt, each shoe smaller than Scott's hand. He shows the boy how to stand, cockeyed to the water, and sidarm projectiles across the surface. For a long time the boy can't do it. He furrows his brow and tries over and over, clearly frustrated, but refusing to give up. He chews his tongue inside his closed mouth and makes a working sound, half song, half drone, selecting his stones carefully. The first time he gets a two-hopper, he jumps in the air and claps his hands.

"Nice, buddy," Scott tells him.

Energized, the boy runs off to collect more stones. They are on a thin strip of brambly bank on the edge of the woods at a wide bend in the Hudson. The morning sun is behind them, blocked by trees, on the rise, its first rays cresting the far shore. Scott sits on his heels and puts his hand in the moving water. It is cool and clear, and for a moment he wonders if he will ever go swimming again, ever fly on another plane. He can smell silt in the air and somewhere a tinge of cut grass. He is aware of his body as a body; muscles engaged, blood flowing. Around him, unseen birds call to each other without urgency, just a steady interchange of heckle and whoop.

The boy throws another stone, laughing.

Is this how healing starts?

Last night Eleanor came into the living room to tell him he had a call. Scott was on his knees, playing trucks with the boy.

Who would be calling me here?

"She said her name was Layla," Eleanor said.

Scott got to his feet, went into the kitchen.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked.

"Sweetie," she said, "what else is money for?"

Her voice dropped, moving to a more intimate octave.

"Tell me you're coming back soon," she said. "I'm spending, like, all my time on the third floor sitting inside your painting. It's so good. Did I tell you I've been to that farmers market? When I was a kid. My dad had a place on the Vineyard. I grew up eating ice cream in that courtyard. It's eerie. The first time I ever handled cash was to go buy peaches from Mr. Coselli. I was six."

"I'm with the boy now," Scott told her. "He needs me—I think I don't know. Kids. Psychology. Maybe I'm just in the way."

Through the phone, Scott heard Layla take a sip of something.

"Well," she said, "I've got buyers lined up for every painting you make in the next ten years. I'm talking to the Tate later about mounting a solo show this winter. Your rep sent me the slides. They're breathtaking."

These words, once so coveted, were Chinese to him now.

"I have to go," he told her.

"Hold on," she said, purring, "don't just run. I miss you."

"What's going on?" he asked. "In your mind. With us."

"Let's go to Greece," she told him. "There's a little house on a cliff I own through, like, six shell companies. Nobody knows a thing. Complete mystery. We could lie in the sun and eat oysters. Dance after dark. Wait till the dust clears. I know I should be coy with you, but I've never met anyone whose attention is harder to get. Even when we're together it's like we're in the same place, but different years."

After he hung up, Scott found JJ had moved to the desk in the living room. He was using Eleanor's computer, playing an educational game, moving letter tiles.

"Hey, buddy."

The boy didn't look up. Scott pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. He watched the boy drag the letter B onto a matching square. Above it a cartoon bug sat on a leaf. The boy dragged the U, then the G.

"Do you mind if I—" said Scott. "Could I—"

He reached for the mouse, moved the cursor. He didn't own a computer himself, but he had spent enough time watching people on laptops in coffee shops to understand what to do, he thought.

"How do I—" he asked, after a moment, more to himself than the boy, "—search for something?"

The boy took the mouse. Concentrating, chewing his tongue, he opened a browser window, went to Google, then gave the mouse back to Scott.

"Great," said Scott. "Thanks."

He typed *Duo*—then stopped, not knowing the spelling. He erased the word, then typed, *Red Sox, video, longest at bat*, hit ENTER. The page loaded. Scott clicked on a video link. The boy showed him how to maximize the window. He felt like a caveman staring into the sun.

"You can—it's okay to watch I think," he told the boy, then hit play. Onscreen the video began. The quality was pixilated, the colors saturated, as if—rather than record the game the normal way—the poster had filmed their own television screen. Scott imagined that a man sitting in his living room filming a baseball game on TV, creating a game within a game, the image of an image.

"Dworkin—struck out and singled to center field," the announcer said. Behind him the roar of the crowd was loud, filtered through TV speakers and compressed further by the viewer's camera. The batter stepped into the box. He was a tall Hoosier with a Mennonite beard, no mustache. He took a few practice swings. In the control room they cut to the pitcher, Wakefield, bobbling the rosin. Behind him, towers of floodlights flared the corners of the screen. A night game in summer, eighty-six degrees with winds out of the southwest.

From Gus, Scott knew that Dworkin's at bat started as the wheels

of their plane left the tarmac. He thought about that now, the speed of the plane, the flight attendant in her jump seat, and how much more quickly the private jet left the ground than a commercial flight did. He watched Dworkin take a pitch low and outside. Ball one.

The camera moved to the crowd, men in sweatshirts, kids with hats and gloves, waving at the lens. The pitcher wound up, Dworkin readied himself, bat hovering above his right shoulder. The ball was released. Scott clicked the mouse, pausing the image. The pitcher froze, back leg raised, left arm extended. Sixty feet away, Dworkin readied himself. From the news Scott knew that twenty-two more pitches were coming. Twenty-two pitches thrown over a span of eighteen minutes, pitch after pitch fouled into the stands, or back into the net. The slow drawl of baseball time, a game of lazy Sundays and dugout chatter. Wind up and pitch.

But right now the game was paused, frozen, the ball floating in midair. Twenty-two pitches, the game already nearly three weeks old, but for a first-time viewer it was as if the events onscreen were happening for the first time. As if the whole earth had rewound. Who knew what would happen next? Dworkin could strike out or homer into deep left field, high above the green monster. Sitting there with the boy, Scott couldn't help but think, *What if everything else reset with the game?* If the whole world cycled back to ten p.m. on the night of August 23, 2015, then stopped. He imagined the cities of the planet frozen, red-light traffic pressed in perfect unison. He pictured smoke hovering motionless above suburban chimneys. Cheetahs caught in mid-stride on the open plains. Onscreen the ball was just a white dot trapped between a point of departure and its destination.

If it was true. If somehow the world had wound itself back, then somewhere he was on an airplane. They were all on an airplane. A family of four, the banker and his wife. A beautiful flight attendant. Children. They were alive. Paused. The girl listening to music. The men jawing, watching the game. Maggie in her seat, smiling into the face of her sleeping son.

As long as he didn't restart the game they would live. As long as he never clicked the mouse. The ball in midair was the plane in midair, its destiny unmet. He stared at it and was surprised to find his eyes watering, the pixels onscreen blurring, the man at the plate just a smudge, the ball a random snowflake, out of season.

At the river, Scott lowers his hand into the water, lets the current pull at his wrist. He remembers looking out the window this morning and watching Doug pack his pickup truck with bags. He was yelling words that Scott couldn't make out, and then he slammed the cab door and pulled out of the driveway, spraying gravel.

What happened? Is he gone for good?

A noise rises on the periphery. It starts as an industrial hum—a distant chain saw maybe, trucks on the interstate (except there is no interstate nearby)—and Scott pays it no attention as he watches the boy dig into the muddy shore and pull out coins of shale and quartz. He begins at a far point and works his way back, searching the mud first with his eyes, then his fingers.

The chain saw gets louder, taking on a low bass rumble. Something is coming. Scott stands, becoming aware of wind, the westward lean of trees, leaves shimmering, mimicking the sound of applause. In the distance the boy stops what he's doing and looks up. In that moment a Jurassic roar overtakes them as the helicopter comes in low over the trees behind them. Scott ducks his head reflexively. The boy starts to run.

The helicopter swoops through bright sun, like a bird of prey, then slows as it reaches the far bank and begins to circle back. It is black and shiny, like a pincered beetle. It approaches at a full run, a look of fear on his face. Scott picks him up without thinking and moves into the trees. He runs in his city shoes through low brush, snaking between poplars and elms, poison ivy brushing his cuffs. Once again he is a muscle of survival, an engine of rescue. The boy's arms are wrapped around his neck, legs around his waist. He faces backward, his eyes wide, chin on Scott's shoulder. His knees dig into Scott's sides.

When they get back to the house, Scott sees the helicopter settle in the backyard. Eleanor has come out onto the front porch and has a hand on her head, trying to keep her hair from blowing into her face. The pilot shuts off the engine, rotors slowing.

Scott hands the boy to Eleanor.

"What's going on?" she says.

"You should take him inside," Scott tells her, then turns to see Gus Franklin and Agent O'Brien climb out of the whirlybird. They approach, O'Brien ducked low, hand on his head, Gus walking upright—confident that he is shorter than the blades.

The engine whirl slows and quiets. Gus sticks out his hand.

"Sorry for the drama," he says. "But given all the leaks I thought we should reach you before the news got out."

Scott shakes his hand.

"You remember Agent O'Brien," says Gus.

O'Brien spits into the grass.

"Yeah," he says. "He remembers."

"Wasn't he off the case?" says Scott.

Gus squints into the sun.

"Let's just say some new facts are moving the FBI to the front of the investigation."

Scott looks puzzled. O'Brien pats his arm.

"Let's go inside."

They sit in the kitchen. Eleanor puts on an episode of *Cat in the Hat* to distract the boy (*too much TV*, she thinks. *I'm giving him too much TV*), then sits on the edge of her seat, jumping up every time he stirs.

"Okay," says O'Brien. "This is me taking off the gloves."

Scott looks at Gus, who shrugs. There's nothing he can do. The divers recovered the cockpit door this morning, lasering the hinges and floating it to the surface. Tests showed the holes were indeed bullet holes. This triggered a shift in procedural authority. Phone calls were made from government offices and Gus was told in no uncertain terms that he should give the FBI as much operational leeway

as they required. Oh, and by the way, he was getting O'Brien back. Apparently, the brass was convinced that O'Brien wasn't their leak. Plus, it turned out, he was being *groomed for big things*—Gus's liaison explained—so they were putting him back on the case.

Ten minutes later, O'Brien walked into the hangar with a team of twelve men and asked for a "sit rep." Gus saw no point in fighting—he was a pragmatist by nature, as much as he disliked the man personally. He told O'Brien that they'd recovered all remaining bodies except for Gil Baruch, the Batemans' body man. It looked as if he had either been thrown clear of the others or had floated out of the fuselage in the days after the crash. If they were lucky his body would wash up somewhere, as Emma's and Sarah's had. Or, quite possibly, it was simply gone.

The questions as Gus saw them were as follows.

1. Who fired the shots? The obvious suspect was the security man, Gil Baruch, the only passenger known to be armed, but since none of the passengers or crew had gone through a security screening before boarding the plane, they were all potential shooters.
2. Why had the shots been fired? Was the shooter attempting to force his way into the cockpit in order to hijack the plane? Or simply to crash it? Or was the shooter attempting to get inside the cockpit to avert the crash? Villain, or a hero? That was the question.
3. Why was the captain in the main cabin and not the cockpit? If it was a possible hijack scenario, was he a hostage? Had he come out to defuse the situation? But if that was the case...
4. Why was there no mayday from the copilot?

Speaking of the copilot, divers had found Charles Busch strapped into his seat in the cockpit, hands still gripping the yoke. One of the bullets had buried itself in the floor behind him, but there was no ev-

idence that anyone had made it inside the cockpit before the plane hit the water. Gus told the agent that autopsy results on Busch would be back that afternoon. None of them knew what they were hoping for. The *best-case scenario*, in Gus's mind, was that the young man had suffered a stroke or heart attack. The worst case, well, the worst case was this was a calculated act of mass murder.

All loose debris had been tagged and bagged and was here now, being cataloged. The good news was that the black box and data recorders had been recovered. The bad news was that it appeared one or both may have been damaged in the crash. Techs would work around the clock to recover every last trace of data. By the end of the day, Gus told him—barring an unexpected turn of weather—the fuselage should be up and on its way to the hangar.

O'Brien listened to everything Gus said, then called in the helicopter.

Now, in the kitchen, Agent O'Brien makes a show of taking a small notebook out of his pocket. He removes a pen, unscrews the cap, lays it next to the pad. Gus can feel Scott's eyes on him, questioning, but he keeps his focus on O'Brien, as if to signal to Scott—*this is where you should be looking now*.

They have agreed not to discuss the case on the phone, not to put anything in writing until they find out how O'Brien's memo was leaked. From now on, all conversations will take place in person. It is the paradox of modern technology: The tools we use can be used against us.

"As you know," says O'Brien, "we found the plane. And Mrs. Dunleavy, I'm afraid I have to tell you that, yes, we have officially recovered the bodies of your sister, her husband, and your niece."

Eleanor nods. She feels like a bone that has been left to bleach in the sun. She thinks about the boy, in the living room watching TV. Her boy. And what she will say to him, or should say to him. She thinks about Doug's last words this morning.

This isn't over.

"Mr. Burroughs," says O'Brien, turning to Scott, "you need to tell me everything you remember about the flight."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to."

"Scott," says Gus.

"No," O'Brien snaps. "We're done holding this guy's hand."

He turns to Scott.

"Why was the pilot outside the cockpit during the flight?"

Scott shakes his head.

"I don't remember that."

"You said you heard banging before the plane crashed. We asked if you thought it was mechanical. You said you didn't think so. What do you think it was?"

Scott looks at him, thinking.

"I don't know. The plane pitched. I hit my head. It's—they're not memories really."

O'Brien studies him.

"There are six bullet holes in the cockpit door."

"What?" says Eleanor, her face draining of blood.

The words push Scott back in his chair. *Bullet holes?* What are they saying?

"Did you ever see a gun?" O'Brien asks Scott.

"No."

"Do you remember the Batemans' body man? Gil Baruch?"

"The big guy by the door. He didn't—I don't—"

Scott loses his words, mind racing.

"You never saw him pull a gun?" O'Brien asks.

Scott racks his brain. *Somebody shot up the cockpit door.* He tries to make sense of that. The plane pitched. People screamed and somebody shot up the door. The plane was going down. The captain was outside the cockpit. Somebody shot up the door trying to get in.

Or was the gun pulled first and the pilot—no, the copilot—put

the plane into a dive to—what? Throw him off balance? Either way, they're saying this wasn't mechanical error, or human error. It was something worse.

There is a visceral twist of nausea in Scott's guts, as if it's only hitting him now how close he came to death. And then a wave of light-headedness as the next thought strikes him. If this wasn't an accident, then it means *someone tried to kill him*. That instead of an act of fate, he and the boy were victims of an attack.

"I got on the plane," he says, "and took a seat. She brought me some wine. Emma. I don't—I said, *No, thank you*, asked for some waiter. Sarah—the banker's wife—was talking in my ear about taking her daughter to the Whitney Biennial. The game was on TV. Baseball. And the men—David and the banker—they were watching, cheering. My bag was in my lap. She wanted to take it—the flight attendant—but I held on to it, and as we taxied I started—I started going through it. I don't know why. Something to do. Nerves."

"What made you nervous?" asks O'Brien.

Scott thinks about it.

"It was a big trip for me. And the plane—having to run for the plane—I was discombobulated—a little. It all seems meaningless now, how much it mattered. Meetings with art reps, gallery visits. I had all the slides in my bag, and—after the run—I wanted to make sure I still had them. For no reason."

He looks at his hands.

"I was in the window seat, looking out at the wing. Everything was foggy, and then suddenly the fog cleared. Or we rose above it, I guess is what happened. And it was just night. And I looked over at Maggie, and she smiled. Rachel was in the seat behind her, listening to music, and the boy was asleep with a blanket over him. And I don't know why, but I thought she might like a drawing, Maggie, so I took out my pad and started sketching the girl. Nine years old, headphones on, looking out the window."

He remembers the look on the girl's face, a child lost in thought,

but something in her eyes—a sadness—hinting at the woman she would one day become, and how she had come to the barn that day with her mother to look at Scott's work, a growing girl all legs and hair.

"We hit a couple of bumps going up," he says. "Enough to shake the glasses, but it was pretty smooth, otherwise, and nobody seemed worried. The security man sat in the front with the flight attendant for takeoff on the—what do you—jump seat, but he was up as soon as the seat belt sign was off."

"Doing?"

"Nothing, standing."

"No drama?"

"No drama."

"And you were drawing."

"Yes."

"And then?"

Scott shakes his head. He remembers chasing his pencil across the floor, but not what happened before. The lie of an airplane is that the floor is always level, the straight angles of the plane tricking your mind into thinking you're sitting or standing at a ninety-degree angle to the world, even when the plane is on its side. But then you look out the window, and find yourself staring at the ground.

The plane banked. The pencil fell. He unbuckled his seat belt to chase it, and it rolled across the floor, like a ball going downhill. And then he was sliding, and his head hit something.

Scott looks at Gus.

"I don't know."

Gus looks at O'Brien.

"I have a question," Gus says. "Not about the crash. About your work."

"Okay."

"Who's the woman?"

Scott looks at him.

"The woman?"

"In all the paintings—I noticed—there's always a woman, and it's always—from what I can see—the same woman. Who is she?"

Scott exhales. He looks at Eleanor. She is watching him. What must she think? Days ago her life was a straight line. Now all she has are burdens.

"I had a sister," says Scott. "She drowned when I was—she was sixteen. Night swimming in Lake Michigan with some—kids, just—dumb kids."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

Scott wishes there was something profound he could say about it, but there isn't.

...

Later, after the boy is asleep, Scott calls Gus from the kitchen.

"Was that okay today?" he asks.

"It was helpful, thank you."

"Helpful how?" Scott wants to know.

"Details. Who sat where. What people were doing."

Scott sits at the table. There was a moment, after the helicopter departed and Eleanor and Scott were left alone, when both of them seemed to realize that they were strangers, that the illusion of the last twenty-four hours—the idea that the house was a bubble they could hide in—had dissolved. She was a married woman, and he was—what? The man who rescued her nephew. What did they really know about each other? How long was he staying? Did she even want him to? Did he?

An awkwardness arose between them then, and when Eleanor started cooking, Scott told her he wasn't hungry. He needed a walk to clear his head.

He stayed out until after dark, wandering back to the river and

watching the water turn from blue to black as the sun set, and the moon came out.

He was farther than he'd ever been from the man he thought he was.

"Well," Gus tells him over the phone, "nobody knows this yet, but the flight recorder's damaged. Not destroyed, but it's gonna take work to get to the data. I've got a team of six guys in there working now, and the governors of two states are calling every five minutes for updates."

"I can't help you with that. I can barely open a tube of paint."

"No. I'm just—I'm telling you because you deserve to know."

Everybody else can go to hell."

"I'll tell Eleanor."

"How's the boy?"

"He's not—talking, really, but he seems to like that I'm here. So maybe that's therapeutic. Eleanor's really—strong."

"And the husband?"

"He left this morning with luggage."

A long pause.

"I don't have to tell you how that's going to look," says Gus.

Scott nods.

"Since when does how a thing looks matter more than what it is?" he asks.

"Two thousand twelve, I think," says Gus. "Especially after—your blackout in the city. How that made the news. The heiress, which—I said *find something to hide*, not *shack up in a railroad story*."

Scott rubs his eyes.

"Nothing happened. I mean, yeah, she took off her clothes and climbed into bed with me, but I didn't—"

"We're not talking about what did or didn't happen," says Gus. "We're talking about what it looks like."

In the morning, Scott hears Eleanor down in the kitchen. He finds her at the stove making breakfast. The boy's on the floor, playing be-

tween rooms. Wordlessly, Scott sits on the floor next to him and picks up a cement truck. They play for a moment, rolling rubber wheels on the wooden floors. Then, the boy offers Scott a gummy bear from a bag and he takes it.

Outside, the world continues to spin. Inside, they go through the motions of daily life, pretending that everything is normal.

EMMA LIGHTNER

JULY 11, 1990–AUGUST 23, 2015

IT WAS ABOUT setting boundaries and sticking to them. You smiled at the client, served them drinks. You laughed at their jokes and made small talk. You flirted. You were a fantasy to them, just like the plane. The beautiful girl with the million-dollar smile making men feel like kings as they sat on a luxury jet, talking on three cell phones at once. Under no circumstances did you give out your phone number. You certainly did not kiss an Internet millionaire in the galley or have sex with a basketball star in a private bedroom. And you never went with a billionaire to a second location, even if that second location was a castle in Monaco. You were a flight attendant, a service professional, not a prostitute. You had to have rules, boundaries, because in the land of the rich it was easy to lose your way.

At twenty-five, Emma Lightner had traveled to all seven continents. Working for GullWing, she had met movie stars and sheiks. She had flown with Mick Jagger and Kobe Bryant. One night after a cross-country flight—LAX to JFK—Kanye West chased her onto the tarmac and tried to give her a diamond bracelet. She didn't take it, of course. Emma had long since stopped being flattered by the attention. Men old enough to be her grandfather routinely suggested she could have anything she wanted if she joined them for dinner in Nice or Gstaad or Rome. It was the altitude, she sometimes thought, the

possibility of death by falling. But what it really was was the arrogance of money, and the need of the wealthy to possess everything they saw. The truth was, Emma was nothing more to her clients than a Bentley or a condo or a pack of gum.

To female passengers, wives of clients or clients themselves, Emma was both a threat and a cautionary tale. She represented the old paradigm, where beautiful women in conical bras catered to the secret needs of powerful men in smoky clubs. A geisha, a Playboy Bunny. She was a stealer of husbands, or, worse, a reflection in the mirror, a reconstruction of their own paths to moneyed wifery. A reminder. Emma felt their eyes on her as she moved through the cabin. She endured the steely-tongued jabs of women in oversize sunglasses who sent back their drinks and told her to be more careful next time. She could fold a napkin into the shape of a swan and mix a perfect gimlet. She knew which wines to pair with oxtail stew or venison paella, could perform CPR, and had been trained to do an emergency tracheotomy. She had skills, not just looks, but that never mattered to these women.

On the bigger jets there would be three to five girls working. On the smaller plane it was just Emma, in a short blue skirt suit, handing out drinks and demonstrating the safety features of the Cessna Citation Bravo or Hawker 900XP.

The exits are here. The seat belts work just so. Oxygen masks. Your seat may be used as a flotation device.

She lived her life in turnaround time, the hours and days spent between flights. The travel company kept apartments in most major international cities. It was cheaper than buying hotel rooms for the crew. Anonymously modern with parquet floors and Swedish cabinetry, each apartment was designed to resemble the other—the same furniture, the same fixtures—in the words of the company handbook, "in order to lessen the effects of jet lag." But to Emma, the uniformity of the space had the opposite effect, increasing her feeling of displacement. It was easy to wake in the middle of the night and not know

which city you were in, which country. Occupancy of any company safe house usually hovered around ten people. This meant that at any one time there might be a German pilot and six South Africans sleeping two to a room. They were like modeling agency apartments, filled with beautiful girls, except in one room there'd be a couple of forty-six-year-old pilots farting in their sleep.

Emma had been twenty-one when she started, the daughter of an air force pilot and a stay-at-home mom. She had studied finance in college, but after six months working for a big New York investment bank had decided she wanted to travel instead. The luxury economy was exploding, and jet companies and yacht companies and private resorts were desperate for attractive, competent, bilingually discreet people who could start right away.

The truth was, she loved planes. One of her first (and best) memories was of riding in the cockpit of a Cessna with her dad. Emma couldn't have been more than five or six. She remembers the clouds through the tiny oval windows, towering white shapes her mind transformed into puppies and bears. So much so that when they got home Emma told her mother that her dad had taken her to see the zoo in the sky.

She remembers her father from that day, seen from a low angle, strong-jawed and immortal, his close cropped hair and aviator sunglasses. Michael Aaron Lightner, twenty-six years old, a fighter jet pilot, with arms like knotted ropes. No one in her life would ever be a man the way her father was a man, sharp-toothed and steely-eyed, with a dry Midwestern wit. A man of few words who could cut a cord of firewood in ten minutes and never wore a seat belt. She had seen him once knock a man out with a single punch, a lightning strike that was over before it began, the knockout a foregone conclusion, her father already walking away as the other man crumpled to the ground.

This was at a gas station outside San Diego. Later, Emma would learn that the man had said something lewd to her mother as she went to the restroom. Her father, pumping gas, saw the exchange and

approached the man. Words were had. Emma doesn't remember her father raising his voice. There was no heated argument, no macho chest bump or warning shove. Her father said something. The man said something back. And then the punch, a whip crack to the jaw that started at the hip, and then her father was walking back to the car, the man tipping backward and toppling, like a tree. Her dad lifted the nozzle from the gas tank and set it back on its arm, screwing the gas cap in place.

Emma, her face pressed to the window, watched her mother return from the restroom, saw her glance at the unconscious stranger and slow, her face confused. Her father called to her and then held the door for his wife before climbing into the driver's seat.

Emma knelt in the backseat and stared out the back window, waiting for the police. Her father was something else now, not just a dad. He was her knight, her protector, and when they taxied down private runways, Emma would close her eyes and picture that moment, the words exchanged, the man falling. She would fly high into the troposphere, into the dark recesses of space, slipping weightless inside a single perfect memory.

Then the captain would turn off the FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign and Emma would snap back to reality. She was a twenty-five-year-old woman with a job to do. So she'd stand and smooth the wrinkles of her skirt, already smiling her collusive yet professional smile, ready to play her part in the ongoing seduction of wealth. It wasn't hard. There was a checklist you went through as you prepared for takeoff and another one as you started your final descent. Jackets were distributed, cocktails refreshed. Sometimes, if the flight was short and the meal comprised more than four courses, the plane would sit on the runway for an hour while dessert and coffee were served. When it came to high-end private travel, the journey *was* the destination. And then, after your guests had disembarked, there were dishes to be cleared and stowed. But the real dirty work was left for the locals, Emma and the others descending the gangway and sliding into their own sleek transport.

Emma Lightner lived her life in turnaround time, but it was the turnaround she found the most depressing. It wasn't just the luxury of her work surroundings that made it difficult to return to a normal life, wasn't just the town car that took you to and from work, or the Swiss-watch precision and opulence of the plane. It wasn't simply that you spent your days and nights surrounded by millionaires and billionaires, men and women who, even as they reminded you that you were their servant, also (if you were beautiful like Emma) made you feel like part of the club—because in today's economy beauty is the great equalizer, a backstage pass.

For Emma, what made it so hard to return to the tiny apartment in the West Village she shared with two other girls was the sudden realization that for all those weeks of traveling she had been a stow-away in someone else's life, an actor on a stage playing a part. She was the royal escort, the chaste concubine, immersed in servitude for weeks at a time, until the rules and boundaries she set to navigate her professional life became the backbone of her personal life as well. She found herself growing increasingly lonely, an object to be looked at, but never touched.

On Friday, August 21, she flew from Frankfurt to London on a Learjet 60XR. It was her and Chelsea Norquist, a gap-toothed blonde from Finland, in the main cabin. The clients were German oil company executives, meticulously dressed and unfailingly polite. They landed at six p.m. GMT at Farnborough Airport, bypassing all the drag and bureaucracy of Heathrow or Gatwick. The executives, overcoated with mobile phones glued to their ears, descended the external stairway to a limousine waiting on the tarmac. Parked behind the limo was a black SUV waiting to take the flight crew into the city. Here in London, the company apartment was in South Kensington, a short walk from Hyde Park. Emma had stayed there at least a dozen times. She knew which bed she wanted, which nearby bars and restaurants she could escape to, the ones where she could order a glass of wine or a cup of coffee, open a book, and recharge.

The pilot on the Frankfurt flight, Stanford Smith, was a former British air force lieutenant in his early fifties. The first officer, Peter Gaston, was a thirty-six-year-old chain smoker from Belgium who hit on all the girls with a tenacity and good humor that ironically made him seem toothless. He had a reputation among GullWing crews as the guy to see if you needed ecstasy or coke, the man to call in a pinch if you last-minute had to find clean piss for a company drug screen.

Traffic on the A4 was bumper-to-bumper. Sitting next to Emma in the middle row of the Cadillac, Chelsea worked her iPhone, setting and revising the social agenda for the night. She was twenty-seven, a party girl with a weakness for musicians.

"No, you stop it," she said, giggling.

"I'm telling you," Stanford announced from the back row, "you roll a pair of pants. You don't fold them."

"Mende," said Peter. "You want flat surfaces for stacking."

Like all people who travel for a living, Stanford and Peter believed they were experts at the art of packing. The subject was a constant source of disagreement among crews all over the world. Sometimes the differences were cultural—Germans believed that shoes had to be stored in sleeves; the Dutch were strangely fond of garment bags. Veterans tested rookies randomly, usually after a few drinks, grilling them on the proper strategy in packing for an SAT of possible trips—a midwinter overnighter from Bermuda to Moscow. A two-day layover in Hong Kong in August. What size and brand of suitcase? A single heavy coat or layers? The order in which items went into a suitcase was critical. Emma had little interest in the subject. She felt what she put inside her suitcase was a private matter. To derail the subject, she would smile demurely and announce that she slept naked and never wore panties—which was a lie. The girl wore flannel pajamas to bed, which she rolled separately and vacuum-sealed in reusable plastic bags when traveling—but the ploy usually worked in changing the subject from packing to nudity, at which point Emma would make an ex-

cuse and walk away, letting the others carry the thread to its natural conclusion—which was a discussion of sex.

But tonight Emma was tired. She had just finished back-to-back flights—Los Angeles to Berlin with a big-name director and famous female movie star for a film premiere, after which the crew immediately refueled and flew to Frankfurt to pick up the oil company executives. She had slept a few hours on the first leg, but now, with the change in time zones, and the knowledge that she needed to stay awake for at least four more hours, Emma found herself stifling a yawn.

"Oh no," Chelsea said, catching her. "We're going out tonight. Farhad has it all lined up."

Farhad was Chelsea's London boy, a fashion designer who wore unlaced high-tops with slim-fit suits. Emma liked him well enough, except the last time she was in London he had tried to set her up with a Manchester ragamuffin artist who couldn't keep his hands to himself.

Emma nodded and drank from her water bottle. At this time tomorrow, she would be on a charter to New York, then a quick trip to Martha's Vineyard and home to Jane Street for a weeklong vacation. In the city, she planned to sleep for forty-eight hours, then sit down and figure out what the hell she was doing with her life. Her mother was planning to come to the city for three nights, and Emma was excited to see her. It had been too long, and Emma felt the need for a giant mom hug and a hot pot of mac and cheese. She had planned to spend her last birthday in San Diego, but a charter had come up at double her normal rate and she had taken it, spending her twenty-fifth birthday freezing her ass off in St. Petersburg.

From now on, she thought, she would put her own needs first, family, love. She couldn't afford to end up one of these lifer-widows with too much makeup and a boob job. She was old enough already. Time was running out.

They pulled up in front of the corporate town house just after

seven, the dusky London sky a rich midnight blue. Rain was forecast for tomorrow, but right now it was perfect summer weather.

"Looks like there's only one other crew tonight," Stanford said, pocketing their itinerary as they climbed from the car. "Chicago-based."

Emma felt a twinge of something—worry? dread?—but it vanished almost as quickly when Chelsea gave her arm a squeeze.

"A quick bath and a vodka and we're off," she said.

Inside, they found Carver Ellis, the copilot for the Chicago flight, and two flight attendants dancing to French pop songs from the 1960s. Carver was a muscular black man in his thirties. He wore chinos and a white tank top, and smiled when he saw her. Emma had flown with Carver a couple of times and liked him. He was lighthearted and always treated her professionally. Seeing him, Chelsea made a purring sound. She had a thing for black guys. The flight attendants were new to Emma. A blond American and a pretty Spaniard. The Spaniard was in a towel.

"Now it's a party," Carver said as the Frankfurt crew rolled in.

Hugs and handshakes were exchanged. There was a bottle of Chopin vodka on the kitchen counter and a crate of fresh-squeezed orange juice. From the living room windows you could see the tree-tops of Hyde Park. The song on the stereo was a drum and bass loop, sultry and infectious.

Carver took Emma's hand and she let herself be twirled. Chelsea kicked off her heels and jutted a hip, her hands lifted toward the ceiling. For a moment they danced, letting the energy of the music and the thrum of their libidos rule them. The groove had a pocket you felt in your loins. How amazing to be young and alive in a modern European city.

Emma took the first shower, standing under scalding water with her eyes closed. As always there was that feeling in her bones that she was still moving, still hurtling through space at four hundred miles per hour. Without realizing, she began to hum in the steamy glass stall.

*People of the Earth can you hear me?
Came a voice from the sky on that magical night.*

She towel-dried, her toiletry kit hanging from a hook by the sink. It was a testament to MAC's efficiency, organized by region—hair, teeth, skin, nails. Standing naked, she brushed her hair with long, even strokes, then put on deodorant. She moisturized, first her feet, then her legs and arms. It was a way to ground herself, to remind herself she was real, not just an object hovering in midair.

There was a quick knock at the door, and Chelsea slipped into the bathroom with glass tumbler in hand.

"Bitch," she said to Emma, "I hate that you're so thin."

She handed the glass to Emma and used both hands to squeeze the imaginary fat around her own middle. The glass was half full of vodka over ice with a floating slice of lime. Emma took one sip, then another. She felt the vodka moving through her, warning her from the inside.

Chelsea pulled a glassine envelope from her skirt pocket and cut a line of coke on the marble countertop, working with professional efficiency.

"Ladies first," she said, handing Emma a rolled dollar bill.

Emma wasn't a huge fan of cocaine—she preferred pills—but if she was going to make it out the door tonight she needed the pick-me-up. She bent and put the roll to her nose.

"Not all of it, you saucy cunt," said Chelsea, slapping Emma's naked ass.

Emma straightened, wiping at her nose. As always, there was a physical click in her head as the drug hit her bloodstream, the sensation of something in her brain being turned on.

Chelsea racked the line and rubbed the remaining powder into her gums. She took Emma's brush and started in on her hair.

"It's gonna get wild tonight," she said. "Trust me."

Emma wrapped herself in a towel, feeling every thread on her skin. "I can't promise I'll stay out too late," she said.

"Go home early and I'll smother you in your sleep," said Chelsea. "Or worse."

Emma zipped her toiletry kit. She knocked back what was left of the vodka. She pictured her father in a dirty white tee, frozen forever at twenty-six. He walked toward her in slow motion. Behind him a bigger man fell to the ground.

"Just try it, bitch," she told Chelsea. "I sleep with a blade."

Chelsea smiled.

"That's my girl," she said. "Now let's go out there and get proper fucked."

Coming out of the bathroom Emma heard a man's voice. Later she would remember the way her stomach lurched and time seemed to slow down.

"I took the knife away from him," said the man. "What did you think I'd do. Broke his arm in three places, too. Fucking Jamaica."

Panicking, Emma turned to duck back into the bathroom, but Chelsea was behind her. They knocked heads.

"Ow, shit," said Chelsea, loudly.

In the living room everyone looked up. They saw Chelsea and Emma (in a white towel) doing a strange dance, as Emma made one last attempt to disappear. And then Charlie Busch was on his feet, coming toward her, his arms wide.

"Hey, beautiful," he said. "Surprise."

Cornered, Emma turned. The coke had turned on her, making the world jittery and uneven.

"Charlie, Charlie," she said, trying to sound upbeat. He gave her a kiss on both cheeks, his hands holding her by the shoulders.

"Put on a few, huh?" he said. "Too many desserts."

Her stomach lurched. He grinned.

"Just kidding," he said. "You look fantastic. Doesn't she look great?" "She's in a towel," said Carver, sensing Emma's discomfort. "Of course she looks great."

"What do you say, babe?" said Charlie. "Wanna run on in and put on something sexy? I hear we got big plans tonight. Big plans."

Emma forced a smile and stumbled to her room. The vodka made her legs feel like they were made out of paper. She closed the door and put her back to it, standing for a long moment with her heart pounding in her chest.

Fuck, she thought. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

It was six months since she had last seen Charlie. Six months of phone calls and texts. He was like a bloodhound after a scent. Emma had changed her phone number, had blocked his emails and unfriended him on Facebook. She ignored the texts, ignored the gossip from co-workers, how he was talking trash about her behind her back, how he called other girls by her name in bed. Her friends had told her to file a complaint with the company, but Emma was afraid. Charlie was somebody's nephew, she seemed to remember. Besides, she knew it was the squeaky wheel that got let go.

She had done so well, she thought. She had made rules and stuck by them. She was the girl with her head on straight. Charlie was her one mistake. It wasn't his fault really. He couldn't help who found him attractive. He was tall and handsome with a rogue's scruff. A charmer with green eyes that had reminded Emma of her father. Which, of course, was what it was. Charlie was a man who occupied the same space as her father, embodied the same archetype, the strong, silent loner, the Good Man, but it was a mirage. The truth was, Charlie was nothing like her father. With him, the good-guy thing was just an act. Where her father was confident, Charlie was arrogant. Where her father was chivalrous, Charlie was patronizing and smug. He had wooed her, seduced her with empathy and warmth, and then, out of nowhere, he turned into Mr. Hyde, berating her in public, telling her she was stupid, she was fat, she was a slut.

At first she treated this change as if it were her fault. Clearly, he was reacting to something. Maybe she had put on a few pounds. Maybe she had been flirting with that Saudi prince. But then, as his behavior

intensified—culminating in a terrifying bedroom choking—she realized that Charlie was crazy. All of his jealousy and viciousness was the bad side of his bipolar heart. He wasn't a good man. He was a natural disaster, and so Emma did what any sane person does in the face of a natural disaster. She ran.

Now she dresses quickly, pulling on her least flattering outfit. She wipes the makeup from her cheeks with a towel, takes out her contact lenses, putting on the cat's-eye glasses she bought in Brooklyn. Her first instinct is to say she feels sick and stay home, but she knows what Charlie will do. He'll offer to stay and take care of her, and the last thing Emma can handle is being alone with him.

Someone bangs on the bedroom door, making Emma jump.

"Come on, whore," yells Chelsea. "Farhad's waiting."

Emma grabs her coat. She will stay close to the others, sticking to Chelsea and Carver, latching on to the pretty Spaniard. She will stick to them like glue, and then, when the time is right, she will slip away. She will come back to the apartment, grab her things, and check into a hotel under an assumed name, and if he tries anything, she will call the company tomorrow and file a formal complaint.

"Coming," she yells, hurriedly packing. She will put her suitcase by the door and be gone before anyone's the wiser. Ten seconds, in and out. She can do this. She wanted to change her life anyway. This is her chance. And as she opens the door, she finds that her pulse has almost returned to normal. And then she sees Charlie standing by the front door, smiling with his X-ray eyes.

"Okay," says Emma. "I'm ready."

"Doug, hi," she says, smiling like a hostage negotiator who's been taught not to break eye contact. "Krista Brewer. We spoke on the phone."

"Where's Bill?" Doug asks nervously, having second thoughts. He had a vision of how this would go in his head, and this isn't it. She smiles.

"Upstairs. He can't wait to see you."

Doug frowns, but she takes his arm, leads him past security and onto a waiting elevator. It is the morning rush, and they are packed in with a dozen other molecules, all destined for different floors, different lives.

Ten minutes later, Doug finds himself in a chair in front of a triple mirror framed in bright lights. A woman with a lot of bracelets brushes his hair and puts foundation on his forehead, dabbing him with powder.

"You got plans for the weekend?" she asks him.

Doug shakes his head. His wife has just thrown him out of the house. He spent the first twelve hours drunk and the last six sleeping in his pickup truck. He feels like Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, that same sense of crazed loss (so close!), not that it's about the money. It's the principle. Eleanor is his wife and the kid is their kid, and, yes, \$103 million (plus 40 more for the real estate) is a lot of money, and, yes, he has already shifted his worldview, luxuriating in the idea that he is now a man of means. And, no, he doesn't think that money solves every problem, but certainly it will make their lives easier. He can finish the restaurant, no problem, and finally finish that novel. They can afford child care for the kid and maybe fix up the Croton house for weekends while they move into the town house on the Upper East Side. The Batemans' cappuccino machine alone is worth relocating for. And, yes, he knows that's shallow—but all about—making sure that every single thing we do is thoughtful and perfect? That every bite of every meal, every step of every day,

HURT

MORNING TRAFFIC—human and vehicular—moves up Sixth Avenue in ever-shifting patterns. Each body, car, and bicycle is a water molecule that would travel in a straight line at maximum speed if not for all the other molecules competing for space in an ever-shrinking channel, like an ocean strained through a fire hose. It is a sea of car-buds, bodies moving to their own beat. Working women in sneakers text on the go, their minds a thousand miles away, cabdrivers half watching the road and half scrolling through messages from faraway lands.

Doug stands outside the entrance to the ALC Building smoking a final cigarette. He has slept three hours in the last two days. A smell test of his beard would yield hints of bourbon, drive-through cheeseburgers, and the peaty curl of Brooklyn lager. His lips are chapped, synapses firing too fast and in too many directions. He is a revenge machine, one that has convinced itself that truth is subjective, and that a man wronged has the right, no the moral duty, to Set The Record Straight.

Krista Brewer, Bill Cunningham's producer, meets him in the lobby, moving at a near run. She actually pushes a black guy with a messenger bag out of the way, her eyes locked on Doug's shuffling form.

everything from our hemp throw pillows to our handcrafted bicycles is like a koan from the Dalai Lama.

We are the enemies of industrialization, killers of the mass market. No more "10 billion served." Now it's one meal at a time, eggs cooked from your own chickens. Selzer infused by your own CO₂ tank. This is the revolution. Back to the soil, the loom, the still. And yet the struggle is hard, the way each man has to claw his way into some kind of future. To overcome the obstacles of youth and *establish himself* without getting lost along the way. And the money would help with that. It would remove the worry, the risk. Especially now, with the kid, and how hard that can be—like, say, if you weren't really ready yet to have that much responsibility, to put your own needs aside for the needs of something small and irrational that can't even wipe its own butt.

In the chair he's starting to sweat. The makeup lady blots his forehead.

"Maybe take off your coat," she suggests.

But Doug is thinking about Scott, about the snake in his home, and how this fucking guy just drives up like he owns the place, like just because he's got this bond with the kid he's invited somehow to move in. And what did Doug ever do to deserve being thrown out of his own home? Yeah, okay, he came home drunk after midnight and maybe he was a little pissed off and yelling, but it's his house, after all. And she's *his* woman. And what kind of bizarro world are we living in if some has-been painter has more of a right to be in a man's home than he does? So he says all this to Eleanor, orders her to send the guy packing as soon as the sun comes up. Tells her that she's his wife and he loves her, and they have a beautiful thing, a thing worth protecting, cherishing, especially now that they're *parents*, right? That he's a father.

And Eleanor listens. Just listens. Sits very still. Doesn't get upset. Doesn't seem scared or pissed or—anything. She just listens to him rant and stomp around the bedroom, and then—when he runs out of

gas—she tells him she wants a divorce and that he should go sleep on the couch.

Krista comes back smiling. They're ready for him, she says. Bill is ready, and Doug is *so brave* for coming in, and the country, the world, is so grateful that there are men like Doug out there who are willing to tell the truth about things, even if it's hard. And Doug nods. This is him in a nutshell. He is the common man, noble, hardworking. A man who doesn't complain or demand, but one who expects the world to be square with him. Who expects a day's work to earn a day's pay. Expects that the life you build, the family you make, is your life, your family. You earned it and nobody should be able to take that away from you.

A lottery won should stay won.

So he takes off the paper bib and goes to meet his destiny.

...

"Doug," says Bill, "thank you for being here today."

Doug nods, trying not to look into the camera. *Just focus on me*, Bill has told him. And this is what he does, focuses on the other man's eyebrows, the tip of his nose. He's not handsome, Bill Cunningham, not in the traditional sense, but he has that alpha bravado—the indefinable nexus of power, charisma, and confidence, the unblinking gaze and crotch-forward carriage of a man at the height of his visceral global impact. Is it physical? Pheromonal? An aura? For some reason, Doug thinks of the way a school of reef sharks will scatter when a great white appears. The way some woodland deer will simply surrender to the jaws of the wolf, ceasing their struggles and lying still, subdued by inevitable and irresistible forces.

And then he thinks, *Am I the deer?*

"These are troubling times," says Bill. "Don't you agree?"

Doug blinks.

"Do I agree that the times are troubling?"

"For you. For me. For America. I'm talking about loss and injustice."

Doug nods. This is the story he wants to tell.

"It's a tragedy," he says. "We all know it. The crash and now—"

Bill leans forward. Their feed is being beamed by satellite to nine hundred million possible screens worldwide.

"For people who don't know the story as well as me," he says, "give a little background."

Doug fidgets nervously, then becomes conscious that he's fidgeting and gives an odd shrug.

"Well, uh, you know about the crash. The plane crash. And how only two people survived. JJ, my nephew. My, uh, wife's nephew. And this painter, Scott, uh, something, who supposedly swam to shore."

"Supposedly?"

"No," says Doug, backpedaling. "I'm just going off something you—I mean, it was heroic—definitely, but that doesn't—"

Bill shakes his head imperceptibly.

"And so you took him in," he says, "your nephew."

"Yes. Of course. I mean, he's only four. His parents are—dead."

"Yes," says Bill. "You took him in 'cause you're a good man. A man who cares about doing the right thing."

Doug nods.

"We don't have much, you know," says Doug. "We're—I'm a writer, and Eleanor, my wife, she's a, like a physical therapist."

"A caregiver?"

"Right, but, you know, whatever we have is his—he's family, right?"

JJ? And look—"

Doug takes a breath, trying to focus on the story he wants to tell.

"—look, I'm not perfect."

"Who is?" asks Bill. "Plus, you're—how old are you even?"

"I'm thirty-four."

"A baby."

"Not—I mean—I work hard, okay? I'm trying to start a restaurant, to rebuild—while also—and, okay, sometimes I have a few beers."

"Who doesn't?" says Bill. "At the end of a long day. In my book that makes a man a patriot."

"Right, and—look, the guy's a—hero—Scott—clearly, but—well, he kind of moved in—"

"Scott Burroughs? He moved into your house?"

"Well, he—he showed up a couple of days ago to see the kid, which—again—he saved him, right? So that's—nobody's saying he can't see JJ. But—a man's home is supposed to be his—and my wife—you know, it's a lot to handle, with the boy—a lot to process—so maybe she's just—confused, but—"

Bill bites his lip. Though he doesn't show the audience at home, he's losing his patience with Doug, who is clearly a basket case and who—left to his own devices—will implode without communicating the story Bill has brought him here to tell.

"Let me see," he interrupts, "not to interrupt, but let me see if I can clarify a few things here, because, well, you're clearly upset."

Doug stops, nods. Bill turns slightly so he's speaking into the camera.

"Your wife's sister and her husband were killed, along with their daughter, under very suspicious circumstances in a private plane crash, leaving their son, JJ, an orphan at four. So you and your wife took him in, out of the goodness of your hearts, and have been trying to give him some kind of family, help him through this terrible time. And then another man—Scott Burroughs—a man rumored to have been romantically involved with your sister-in-law, who was last seen leaving the home of a loose and notoriously single heiress—has moved into your house, while you—meanwhile—have been asked to leave by your wife."

He turns to Doug.

"You were thrown out," he says, "to call it what it is. Where did you sleep last night?"

"In my truck," Doug mumbles.

"What?"

"In my truck. I slept in my truck."

Bill shakes his head.

"You slept in a truck, while Scott Burroughs slept in your house.

With your wife."

"No. I mean, I don't know if there's—that it's something romantic—I'm not—"

"Son, please. What else would it be? The man saves the boy—allegedly—and your wife takes him in, both of them, as if to make, what? A new family? Who cares that her actual husband is now homeless? Heartbroken."

Doug nods, the urge to cry suddenly unstoppable. But he pulls himself together.

"Don't forget about the money," he says.

Bill nods. *Bingo.*

"What money?" he says innocently.

Doug wipes his eyes, aware that he is slumped over. He straightens, trying to regain control.

"So—David and Maggie. JJ's parents—they were—well, you know—he ran this network. That's not to say anything shady, but—I mean, they were very wealthy people."

"Worth what? Approximately?"

"Uh, I don't know that I should—"

"Ten million, fifty?"

Doug hesitates.

"More?" asks Bill.

"Maybe double," says Doug reluctantly.

"Wow. Okay. A hundred million dollars. And this money—"

Doug rubs his beard a few quick times with his hand, like a man trying to sober up.

"A lot of it goes to charity," he says, "but then, of course, the rest is JJ's. In a trust. Which—you know—he's four, so—"

"You're saying," says Bill, "I think you're saying that whoever gets the boy, gets the money."

"That's, I mean, a coarse way of—"

Bill stares at him with disdain.

"I prefer the word *blunt*. My point is—and maybe I'm being dumb here—but there are tens of millions of dollars at stake for whoever parents this kid—my godchild, I should add. So—yeah—I'm not—in the spirit of full transparency—I'm not objective here by a long shot. After what he's been through, the death of his—everybody he loves—that this kid would become a pawn—"

"Well, I mean, Eleanor's not—she's a good person. Means well. I just—my thought is, she must be—it's manipulation somehow."

"By the painter?"

"Or—I don't know—maybe the money made her—the idea of it—changed her somehow."

"Because you thought you had a happy marriage?"

"Well, I mean, there's some struggle, right? We don't always—but that's—in your twenties, thirties—it's hard work—life. Making your mark? And you're supposed to—stick by each other, not—"

Bill nods, sits back. In his right pant pocket, his phone vibrates. He slips it out and looks at the text message, his eyes narrowing. As he does, a second message comes in, then a third. Namor has been bugging the wife's home phone, and is writing to say he heard something. *Calls blunt swimmer and heiress last night. Sexy stuff.*

And then...

Also swimmer and NTSB. Flight recorder damaged.

Followed by ...

Swimmer admits bedding heiress.

Bill pockets his phone, pulls himself up to his full sitting height.

"Doug," he says, "what if I told you we had confirmation that Scott Burroughs bedded Layla Mueller, the heiress, just hours before driving out to your home?"

"Well, I mean—"

"And that he is talking to her still, calling her from your home?"

Doug feels his mouth go dry.

"Okay. But—does that mean—do you think—is he with my wife or—"

"What do you think?"

Doug closes his eyes. He's not equipped for this, for the feelings he's having, the sense that somehow in the last two weeks he has gone from winner to loser, as if his life is a practical joke the world is playing on him.

In the studio, Bill reaches out and pats Doug's hand.

"We'll be right back," he says.

BULLETS

WHO AMONG US really understands how recording works? How an Edison machine, in the old days, laid grooves in a cylinder of wax and from those grooves, when played back with a needle, came the exact replica of the sounds recorded. Words or music. But how is that possible, for a needle and a groove to re-create sound? For a scratch in a piece of wax to capture the exact timbre of life? And then the change to digital, and how the human voice now passes through a microphone into a hard drive and somehow is codified into ones and zeros, translated to data, and then reassembled through wires and speakers to reconstruct the precise pitch and tone of human speech, the sounds of reggae or birds calling to each other on a summer day.

It is just one of a million magic acts we have mastered over the centuries, technologies invented—from anatomical secrets to war machines—their origins traced back to the dirty days of the Neolithic and the creation of fire. Tools for survival and conquest.

And how ten thousand years later, men in shiny jeans and Oberon people overglasses can disassemble a black box inside a scrub car and poke it with wily penknives and penlights. How they can replace damaged ports and run diagnostic software, itself created from binary code. Each line simply a version of on or off.

Gus Franklin sits on the back of his chair, feet on the seat. He has

been awake for thirty-six hours, wearing yesterday's clothes, his face unshaved. They're close. That's what they tell him. Almost all of the data has been recovered. He'll have a printout any second, the flight recorder data detailing every move the plane made, every command entered. The voice recorder may take longer, their ability to go back in time—the translation of ones and zeros into voices—hampering their ability to float inside that ghost cockpit and bear witness to the flight's final moments.

Ballistics shows that the bullet holes are consistent with Gil Baruch's service weapon. Agent O'Brien—tired of looming over NTSB techs and asking *How much longer?*—is in the city, trying to find out more about the Batemans' body man. Because his body is missing, Agent O'Brien has floated a new theory. Maybe Gil turned on his employer, sold his services to another buyer (al-Qaeda? the North Koreans?), then—after the flight was under way—pulled his weapon and somehow crashed the plane, then escaped.

Like a villain in a James Bond movie? Gus asked to no response. He offered O'Brien the more likely theory that Baruch, whom they know wasn't buckled in, was killed in the crash, his body thrown clear, swallowed by the deep or eaten by sharks. But O'Brien shook his head and said they needed to be thorough.

On a parallel track, the autopsy results on Charles Busch came back about an hour ago. Toxicology was positive for alcohol and cocaine. Now there's an FBI team digging deeper into the copilot's history, interviewing friends and family, reviewing work history and school records. There's no evidence of any mental health issues in his files. Did he have a psychotic episode, like the Germanwings copilot? Had Busch always been a time bomb, and somehow managed to keep it secret?

Gus stares at the art gallery on the far side of the hangar. A train derailed. A tornado approaching. He was a married man once, two toothbrushes in the medicine cabinet. Now he lives alone in a sterile apartment by the Hudson, hermetically sealed inside a glass cube. He

owns one toothbrush, drinks from the same glass at every meal, rinsing it afterward and placing it on the rack to dry.

A tech comes over carrying a clutch of papers. The printout. He hands it to Gus, who scans it. His team assembles around him, waiting. Somewhere the same information is being brought up onscreen, a second group gathered around that. Everyone is looking for narrative, a story told in latitude and altitude, the literal rise and fall of Flight 613.

"Cody," says Gus.

"I see it," says Cody.

The data is pure numbers. Vectors of thrust and lift. They're clean. They graph. To trace a journey mathematically, all you need are coordinates. Reading the data, Gus relives the final minutes of the airplane's journey—data divorced from the lives and personalities of the passengers and crew. This is the story of an airplane, not the people on board. Engine performance records, flap specifics.

Forgotten is the disaster scene around him, the art gallery and its patrons.

The data shows that the flight takes off without incident, banking left, then straightening out, the plane rising to twenty-six thousand feet over a period of six minutes and thirteen seconds, as ordered by ATC. At minute six, the autopilot is switched on and the flight heads southwest along a planned route. Nine minutes later, control of the plane is switched from pilot to copilot, Melody to Busch, for reasons the data can't project. Course and altitude remain constant. Then, sixteen minutes into the flight, the autopilot is turned off. The plane banks sharply and dives, what started as a slow port turn becoming a steep spiral, like a mad dog chasing its tail.

All systems were normal. There was no mechanical error. The copilot turned off the autopilot and took manual control. He put the plane into a dive, ultimately crashing into the sea. Those are the facts. Now they know the root cause. What they don't know is (a) why? and (b) what happened next? They know Busch was drunk, high. Was his

perception or judgment altered by drugs? Did he think he was flying the plane normally, or did he know he had begun a death spiral?

More important, did the copilot wait for the pilot to go and then deliberately crash the plane? But why would he do that? What possible grounds would lie behind such an action?

Gus sits for a moment. Around him there is a sudden rush of activity, numbers fed into algorithms, double-checked. But Gus is still. He knows for certain now. The crash was no accident. Its origins lie not in the science of tensile strength or joint wear, caused not by computer failure or faulty hydraulics, but in the murky whys of psychology, in the torment and tragedy of the human soul. Why would a handsome, healthy young man put a passenger plane into a steep and irrevocable dive, ignoring the panicked pounding of the captain outside the cockpit and his own shrieking survival instinct? What sort of unsteady foundation had taken root in the gray matter of his brain—what previously undiagnosed mental illness or recent deafening gripe at the injustices of the world—could inspire a senator's nephew to kill nine people, including himself, by turning a luxury jet into a missile? And can they conclude then that the shots fired were an attempt to reenter the cockpit and take control of the plane?

The solution to this mystery, in other words, lies outside the purview of engineers, and in the realm of voodoo speculation.

All Gus Franklin can do is grit his teeth and wade into the storm. He reaches for the phone, then thinks better of it. News like this, in the aftermath of multiple leaks, is best delivered in person. So he grabs his jacket and heads for the car.

"I'm heading in," he tells his team. "Call me when the techs crack the recorder."

GAMES

THEY ARE PLAYING Chutes and Ladders in the living room when the call comes. *Doug is on TV*. Eleanor comes back from the kitchen, phone shaking. She meets Scott's eye, pantomimes that they need a way to keep the boy busy so they can talk.

"Hey, buddy," Scott tells him, "go grab my bag from upstairs, huh? I got a present for you."

The boy runs upstairs, hair flying behind him, footsteps a sloppy cascade on the stairs. Eleanor watches him go, then turns, her face pale.

"What's wrong?" Scott asks.

"My mother," she says, looking for the TV remote.

"What—"

She is pawing through the junk drawer below the TV. "Where's the remote?"

He spies it on the coffee table, grabs it. She takes it, turns on the TV, pushes buttons. The black screen blinks on, a center star coming to life, becoming sound, birthing an elephant on a savanna looking for water. Eleanor flips channels, searching.

"I don't understand," Scott says.

He throws a glance at the stairs. Overhead, he can hear the boy's feet on the ceiling, the closet door opening in the guest room.

Then there's a sharp intake of breath from Eleanor, and Scott turns back. Onscreen is a flanneled and bearded Doug, sitting across from the red-suspended Bill Cunningham. They are on a newsroom set, behind an anchor desk. It is a surreal sight, as if two different programs have been spliced together, side by side. A show about money and a show about trees. Doug's voice fills the room, mid-sentence. He is talking about Scott and how Eleanor threw her own husband out of the house, and maybe Scott is in it for the money, and Bill Cunningham is nodding and interrupting, and restating Doug's points—at one point even stepping in to tell the story himself.

—*a washed-up painter who beds married women and glorifies disaster scenes.*

Scott looks at Eleanor, who is clutching the remote to her chest, her knuckles white. For some reason he thinks of his sister lying in her coffin, a sixteen-year-old girl who drowned on a late-September day, swallowed by the murky deep, air bubbles rising. A virginal body that had to be dried and cleaned, muscled into its best dress by a forty-six-year-old mortician, a stranger who coated her skin with blush and brushed her waterlogged hair until it shone. And how her hands were raised to her chest, a spray of yellow daisies laced between her unfeeling fingers.

And how his sister was allergic to daisies, which upset Scott to no end, until he realized that it didn't matter anymore.

"I don't understand," Eleanor says, then repeats it—more quietly this time, to herself, a mantra.

Scott hears footsteps on the stairs, and turns. He intercepts the boy as he spills down the stairs carrying Scott's bag, a confused (potentially hurt) look on his face, as if to say *I can't find the present*. Scott approaches him at a raking angle, mussing his hair and detouring him smoothly into the kitchen.

"Couldn't find it?" he says, and the boy shakes his head.

"Okay," says Scott, "let me look."

He sits the boy at the kitchen table. Outside a mail truck pulls up to the driveway. The mail carrier wears an old-school pith helmet. Past him, Scott can see the raised dishes of the news trucks, parked at the end of the cul-de-sac, waiting, watching. The mailman opens the mailbox, puts in a supermarket circular and some bills, oblivious to the drama inside.

From the living room, Scott hears Doug say, "We were fine before he showed up. Happy."

Scott digs through his bag, looking for something he can claim is a present. He finds the fountain pen his father gave him when he left for college. A black Montblanc. It is the one thing Scott has kept through the years, his fortunes rising and falling, the one constant as he fumbled his way through spells of drinking, through his *great painter* phases, kamikaze-ing into periods of abject terror, numbing himself with booze, zeroing in on failure. And then through his rise from whatever ashes were left to a new body of work. A fresh start.

Through his lowest point, when he threw all his furniture out the window, every plate and dish, everything he owned.

Except the pen.

He signs his paintings with this pen.

"Here," he tells the boy, pulling it out of his bag. The boy smiles. Scott unscrews the cap, shows the boy how it works, uses it to draw a dog on a paper napkin.

"My father gave it to me when I was young," he says, then realizes the implication, that he is now passing the pen on to his own son. That he has adopted the boy somehow.

He has the thought and pushes through it. Life can paralyze us, freeze us into statues if we think about things too long.

He hands the pen to the boy, arguably the last piece of the man he once was, his spine, the only thing about him that has stayed straight and true, unfailing, reliable. He was a boy once himself, an explorer setting out for undiscovered lands. Not a single cell of that

boy remains now, Scott's body changed at the genetic level, every electron and neutron replaced over the decades by new cells, new ideas.

A new man.

The boy takes the pen, tries it on the napkin, but can't get a line.

"It's—" says Scott, "—it's a fountain pen, so you have to hold it—"

He takes the boy's hand, shows him how to hold it. From the kitchen he hears Bill Cunningham say, "—so first he befriends the sister—a wealthy woman—and now that she's dead and the money has passed to her son—suddenly he's in your house, and you're sleeping in an old truck."

The boy gets a black line out of the pen, draws another. He makes a happy sound. Watching him, something inside Scott snaps into place. A sense of purpose, a decision he didn't even know he was making. He walks to the phone, like a man on hot coals, determined not to look down. He dials information, gets the number for ALG, then asks for Bill Cunningham's office. After a few misdirects, he finds his way to Krista Brewer, Bill's producer.

"Mr. Burroughs?" she says, sounding breathless, as if she has run a great distance to reach the phone.

Because of the nature of time, the next moment is both endless and instantaneous.

"Tell him I accept," says Scott.

"Pardon?"

"The interview. I'll do it."

"Wow. Great. Should we—I know we have a news truck nearby.

Do you want to..."

"No. Stay away from the house, from the boy. This is between me and the gargyle. A conversation about how maybe bullying and belittling people from a distance is a bullshit coward's way to be a man."

The quality of her voice, in the next moment, can only be described as *elated*.

"Can I quote you on that?"

Scott thinks of his sister, her hands crossed, eyes closed. He thinks of the waves, towering, and the struggle to stay afloat, one arm dangled.

"No," he says. "I'll see you this afternoon."

PAINTING #5

THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

WE ARE SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS.¹

GUS IS ON Second Avenue headed back to the hangar when the call comes.

"Are you following this?" Mayberry asks.

"Following what?" he says. He has been lost in thought, ruminating about his meeting with the state attorney general and heads of the FBI and the OFAC. The copilot was high. He crashed the plane deliberately.

"It's turned into a real soap opera," Mayberry says. "Doug, the uncle, went on TV to say he'd been thrown out of the house and that Burroughs had moved in. And now they're saying Burroughs is headed into the studio for an interview."

"Jesus," says Gus. He thinks about calling Scott to warn him off, but then remembers that the painter has no cell phone. Gus slows for a red light, a taxi merging signal-less in front of him, forcing him to slam on the brakes.

"Where are we on the flight recorder?" he asks.

"Close," says Mayberry. "Ten minutes maybe."

Gus joins a line of traffic headed for the 59th Street Bridge.

"Call me the second you have it," he says. "I'm on my way back."

¹ (White letters on black canvas.)

Sixty miles north, a white rental car threads its way through Westchester, toward the city. It's greener here, the parkway surrounded by trees. Unlike Gus's route, the road here is mostly empty. Scott changes lanes without signaling.

He tries to exist solely in the moment he's living, a man driving a car on an Indian summer day. Three weeks ago, he was a speck of dust in a raging sea. A year before that he was a hopeless drunk waking on a famous painter's living room rug, staggering out into the harsh sunlight and discovering an aquamarine swimming pool. Life is made of these moments—of one's physical being moving through time and space—and we string them together into a story, and that story becomes our life.

So as he is sitting in his rented Camry on the Henry Hudson Parkway, he is also sliding into a chair in studio 3 of the ALC Building an hour later, watching a young man with glasses hide a wire microphone under Bill Cunningham's lapel. And simultaneously he is a teenager home from college, sitting on a ten-speed Schwinn beside a country road at night, waiting for his younger sister to finish her swim in Lake Michigan. Because what if instead of a story told in consecutive order, life is a cacophony of moments we never leave? What if the most traumatic or the most beautiful experiences we have trap us in a kind of feedback loop, where at least some part of our minds remains obsessed, even as our bodies move on?

A man in a car, and on a bike, and in a television studio. But also in the front yard of Eleanor's house thirty minutes earlier, walking to the car, and Eleanor is asking him not to go, telling him that he's making a mistake.

"If you want to tell your story," she says, "fine, call CNN, call the *New York Times*. Not him."

Not Cunningham.

In the ocean, Scott grabs the boy and dives beneath a wave too big to comprehend.

And at the same time, he slows behind a dented station wagon, then puts on his turn signal and changes lanes.

In the dressing room, Scott watches Bill Cunningham grimace, hearing him roll his *r*'s and execute a succession of quick voice exercises, trying to decide if the feeling in his stomach is fear or dread or the thrill of the boxer before a fight he thinks he can win.

"Will you come back?" Eleanor asked him in the driveway.

And Scott looked at her, the boy on the porch behind her, eyes confused, and he said, "Is there a pool around here? I think I should teach the boy to swim."

And how Eleanor smiled and said, "Yes." There was.

In the hair and makeup room, Scott waited for Bill. It would be wrong to say he was nervous.

What was the threat of one man after he had faced down the entire ocean? So Scott simply closed his eyes and waited to be called.

"First of all," says Bill, when they're across from each other and the cameras are rolling. "I want to thank you for sitting down with me today."

The words are kind, but Bill's eyes are hostile, so Scott doesn't respond.

"It's been a long three weeks," says Bill. "I don't—I'm not sure how much any of us has slept. On the air—I'm personally—more than a hundred hours, on the hunt for answers. For the truth."

"Am I supposed to look at you or the camera?" Scott interrupts.

"At me. It's like any other conversation."

"Well—" says Scott. "I've had a lot of conversations in my life. None of them was like this."

"I'm not saying the content," says Bill. "I'm talking about two men talking."

"Except this is an interview. A damn interview isn't a conversation."

Bill leans forward in his chair.

"You seem nervous."

"Do I? I don't feel nervous. I just want to be clear on the rules."

"What do you feel then, if not nervous? I want viewers at home to be able to read your face."

Scott thinks about this.

"It's strange," he says. "You hear the word *sleepwalking* sometimes. How some people sleepwalk through life and then something wakes them up. I don't—that's not how I feel. Maybe the opposite."

He watches Bill's eyes. It's clear Bill doesn't know yet what to make of Scott, how to trap him.

"The whole thing feels like some kind of—*dream*," says Scott. He too is striving for truth. Or maybe he alone.

"Like maybe I fell asleep on the plane and I'm still waiting to wake up."

"Unreal, you're saying," says Bill.

Scott thinks about that.

"No. It's very real. Too real maybe. The way people treat each other these days. Not that I thought we lived on Planet Hugs, but—" Bill sits forward, not interested in a conversation about manners.

"I'd like to talk about how you came to be on that plane."

"I was invited."

"By who?"

"Maggie."

"Mrs. Bateman."

"Yes. She said call her Maggie, so I call her Maggie. We met on the Vineyard last summer. June maybe. We went to the same coffee shop, and I'd see her at the farmers market with JJ and her daughter."

"She came to your studio."

"Once. I work out back of my house in an old barn. There were workmen in her kitchen, she said, and she needed something to do for the afternoon. The kids were with her."

"You're saying the only time you saw her outside of the market or a coffee shop, the kids were with her?"

"Yes."

Bill makes a face to indicate maybe he thinks that's bullshit.

"Some of your work could be considered pretty disturbing, don't you think?" he says.

"For children you mean?" says Scott. "I suppose. But the boy was napping, and Rachel wanted to see."

"So you let her."

"No. Her mother. It wasn't my—and it's not like—for the record—the pictures aren't—*graphic*. It's just—an attempt."

"What does that mean?"

Scott thinks about that, what he's trying to say.

"What is this world?" he says. "Why do things happen? Does it mean something? That's all I'm doing. Trying to understand. So I showed them around—Maggie and Rachel—and we talked."

Bill sneers. Scott can tell that the last thing he wants to do is talk about art. In the cacophony of time he is sitting in a television studio, but part of him is still in his car, driving into the city—the wet road smeared with the red trails of taillights, and he is also somehow sitting on the plane, trying to get oriented—a man who minutes earlier had been running from the bus stop.

"You had feelings for her, though," says Bill. "Mrs. Bateman."

"What does that mean, feelings? She was a nice person. She loved her children."

"But not her husband."

"I don't know. It seemed that way. I've never been married, so what do I know. It's not something we ever—she was very comfortable, it seemed, as a person. They had fun, her and the kids. They laughed all the time. He worked a lot it seemed. David, but they were always talking about him, the things they'd do when Daddy got there."

He thinks for a moment.

"She seemed happy."

Gus is on the Long Island Expressway when the calls comes. The flight recorder is fixed. There is some degradation, they tell him, but it's in the quality of sound, not the content of the recording. His team is about to listen back and does Gus want them to wait for him?

"No," he says, "we need to know. Just put the phone up to the speaker."

They hurry to comply. He sits in his brown government vehicle in stop-and-go traffic. He is mid-island, past LaGuardia, not yet to Kennedy. Through the car's speakers he can hear hurried activity as they prepare to review the tape. It is a record of another time, like a jar that holds the last breath of a dying man. The actions and voices of the tape are secret still, but in moments they will be out. The last unknown thing will become known. And then everything that can be clear, will be clear. Any other mysteries are there for the ages.

Gus breathes recycled air. Rain dots his windshield.

The tape begins.

It starts with two voices from within the cockpit. The captain, James Melody, has a British accent. Charles Busch, the copilot, has a Texas drawl.

"Checklist, brakes," says Melody.

"Are checked," responds Busch after a moment.

"Flaps."

"Ten, ten, green."

"Yaw damper."

"Checked."

"Little crosswind here," says Melody. "Let's keep that in mind. Flight instrument and annunciator panels?"

"Uh, yeah. No warnings."

"Okay then. Checklist complete."

Traffic lightens ahead of Gus. He gets the Ford up to twenty-six mph then slows again as the line of cars ahead of him constricts. He

would pull over to the side of the road and listen, except he's in the center lane with no exits in sight.

The next voice is Melody's.

"Vineyard flight control, this is GullWing Six Thirteen. Ready for takeoff."

A pause, and then a filtered voice comes through their radio.

"GullWing Six Thirteen, cleared for takeoff."

"Thrust SRS. Runway," Melody tells Busch.

He hears mechanical sounds from the tape. The phone relay makes them hard to identify, but he knows that techs in the lab are already making guesses about which ones are yoke movement and which are increases in engine rpm.

"Eighty knots." *Busch?*

More sounds from the tape as the plane leaves the ground.

"Positive rate," says Melody. "Gear up, please."

ATC comes over their radio.

"GullWing Six Thirteen, I see you. Turn left. Fly the Bridge. Climb. Contact Teterboro departure. Good night."

"GullWing Six Thirteen, thanks much," says Melody.

"Gear up," says Busch.

The plane is in the air now, on its way to New Jersey. Under normal conditions it is a twenty-nine-minute flight. Less than a short hop. There will be a six-minute lull before they are in range of Teterboro ATC.

A knock.

"Captain." A female voice comes in. The flight attendant, Emma Lightner. "Can I bring you anything?"

"No," says Melody.

"What about me?" asks the copilot.

A pause. What was happening? What looks were being exchanged?

"He's fine," says Melody. "It's a short flight. Let's stay focused."

...

Bill Cunningham leans forward in his seat. They are on a set designed to be seen from a single direction. This means that the walls behind him are unpainted on the backside, like a set built for an episode of *Tailight Zone*, where an injured man slowly realizes that what he thinks is real is actually theater.

"And on the flight," says Bill. "Describe what happened."

Scott nods. He doesn't know why, but he's surprised that the interview is unfolding in this way, as an actual interview about the crash, what happened. He assumed they'd be trading body blows by now.

"Well," he says, "I was late. The cab never came, so I had to take the bus. Until we reached the runway, I assumed I'd missed it, that I'd get there just in time to see the taillights lifting off into the sky. But I didn't. They waited. Or not waited—they were folding in the door when I—but they didn't leave. So I—got on—and everyone was already—some people were in their seats—Maggie and the kids, Mrs. Kipling. David and Mr. Kipling were still on their feet, I think. And the flight attendant gave me a glass of wine. I'd never been on a private jet before. And then the captain said, *Take your seats, so we did.*"

His eyes have moved off Bill's by now, and he finds himself staring directly into one of the lights, remembering.

"There was a baseball game on, Boston. It was the seventh inning, I think. And the sound of that, the announcer's voice, was going the whole time. And I remember Mrs. Kipling was next to me and we were talking a little. And the boy, JJ, was asleep. Rachel was on her iPhone, maybe choosing songs. She had headphones on. And then we were up."

...

Gus snails past LaGuardia, incoming and outgoing flights roaring past overhead. He has the windows up and the air off so he can hear better, even though it's ninety degrees out. He sweats as he listens, tendrils

running down his sides and back, but he doesn't notice. He hears James Melody's voice.

"I've got a yellow light."

A pause. Gus can hear what sounds like tapping. Then Melody again.

"Did you hear me? I've got a yellow light."

"Oh," says Busch. "Let me—that's got it. I think it's the bulb."

"Make a note for maintenance," says Melody. Then a series of unidentifiable sounds, and then Melody exclaims, "*Merde*. Hold on. I've got a—"

"Captain?"

"Take over. I've got a goddamn nosebleed again. I'm gonna—let me get cleaned up."

Sounds from the cockpit that Gus assumes are the captain getting up and going to the door. As this happens, Busch says:

"Copy. Taking control."

The door opens and closes. And now Busch is alone in the cockpit.

...

Scott listens to the sound of his own voice as he speaks, both in the moment and outside of it.

"And I was looking out the window and thinking the whole time how unreal it felt—the way you sometimes feel like a stranger when you find yourself outside the limits of your experience, doing something that feels like the actions of another person, as if you've teleported somehow into someone else's life."

"And what was the first sign that something was wrong?" says Bill. "In your mind."

Scott takes a breath, trying to make logical sense of it all.

"It's hard, because there was cheering and then there was screaming."

"Cheering?"

"For the game. It was David and Kipling, they were—something

was happening onscreen that had them—Dworkin and the longest at bat—and their seat belts were off by that point, and I remember they both stood up, and then—I don't know—the plane—*dropped*—and they had to scramble to get back in their seats."

"And you've said before, in your interview with investigators, that your seat belt was off?"

"Yeah. That was—it was stupid really. I had a notebook. A sketchbook. And when the plane pitched down my pencil flew out of my hands and I—unbuckled and went after it."

"Which saved your life."

"Yeah. I guess that's true. But in the moment—people were screaming and there was this—*banging*. And then—"

Scott shrugs, as if to say, *That's all I really remember*.

Across from him Bill nods.

"So, that's your story," he says.

"My story?"

"Your version of events."

"That's my memory."

"You dropped your pencil and unbuckled to grab it, and that's why you survived."

"I have no idea *why* I survived, if that's even—if there is a why, and not just, you know, the laws of physics."

"Physics."

"Yes. You know, physical forces that picked me up and threw me from the plane and somehow let the boy survive, but not—you know—anyone else."

Bill pauses, as if to say, *I could go deeper, but I'm choosing not to*.

"Let's talk about your paintings."

...

There is a moment in every horror movie that hinges on silence. A character leaves a room, and rather than go with him, the camera re-

mains in place, focused on nothing—an innocuous doorway perhaps, or a child's bed. The viewer sits and watches the empty space, listening to the silence, and the very fact that the room is empty and the fact that it is silent convey a dawning sense of dread. *Why are we here, waiting? What's going to happen? What will we see? And so, with a creeping fear, we begin to search the room for something unusual, to strain against the silence for whatever whispers live beneath the ordinary. It is the room's very unremarkableness that adds to its potential for horror, what Sigmund Freud called the Uncanny. True horror, you see, comes not from the savagery of the unexpected, but from the corruption of everyday objects, spaces. To take a thing we see every day, a thing we take for granted as normal—a child's bedroom—and transform it into something sinister, untrustworthy—is to undermine the very fabric of life.*

And so we stare into the normal, the camera motionless, unwavering, and in the tension of that unblinking stare, our imagination produces a feeling of fear that has no logical explanation.

It is this feeling that comes over Gus Franklin as he sits in his car on the LIE, surrounded by commuters on their way to points east, men driving home from work, families heading home from school or to the beach for a late-afternoon adventure. The silence in his car has a crackle to it, a hiss that fills the recycled air. It is machine noise, impenetrable, but unignorable.

Gus reaches over and turns up the volume, the hiss becoming deafening.

And then he hears whispering, a single word, whispered over and over again.

Bitch.

...

"Let's not talk about my paintings," says Scott.

"Why? What are you hiding?"

"I'm not—they're paintings. By definition everything relevant about them is there for the eye to see."

"Except you're keeping them secret."

"The fact that I haven't shown them yet is not the same as me keeping them secret. The FBI has them now. I have slides at home. A few people have seen them, people I trust. But the truth is, my paintings are literally irrelevant."

"Let me get this straight—a man who paints disaster scenes, literal plane crashes, is in a plane crash and we're supposed to think, what? That it's just a coincidence?"

"I don't know. The universe is filled with things that don't make sense. Random coincidences. There's a statistical model somewhere that could work out the odds of me being in a plane crash or a ferry accident or a train derailment. These things happen every day, and none of us is immune. My number came up is all."

"I spoke to an art dealer," says Bill, "who said your work is now worth hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"Nothing's been sold. That's theoretical money. Last time I checked I had six hundred dollars in the bank."

"Is that why you've moved in with Eleanor and her nephew?"

"Is that why I've moved in with Eleanor and her nephew?"

"Money. The fact that the boy is now worth close to a hundred million dollars?"

Scott looks at him.

"Is that a real question?" he says.

"You bet your ass."

"First of all, I haven't moved in."

"That's not what the woman's husband told me. In fact, she threw him out of the house."

"Just because two things happen in sequence, doesn't mean there's a causal relationship."

"I didn't go to an Ivy League school, so you're gonna have to explain that one."

"I'm saying the fact that Eleanor and Doug have separated—if that's what happened—has nothing to do with the fact that I came to visit." Bill pulls himself up to his full height.

"Let me tell you what I see," he says. "I see a failed painter, a drunk, who's floating along ten years past his prime and then life hands him an opportunity."

"A plane crashed. People are dead."

"He finds himself in the spotlight, a hero, and suddenly everyone wants a piece of him—he starts banging a twenty-something-year-old heiress. His paintings are hot shit all of a sudden—"

"Nobody's banging—"

"And then, I don't know, maybe he gets greedy and thinks, Hey, I've got a good thing going with this kid, who's suddenly worth a fortune, and who has a beautiful, a very attractive, aunt and a kind of lost uncle—so I can come in like the hot shit I am, and take over. Get a piece of that."

Scott nods, amazed.

"Wow," he says. "What an ugly world you live in."

"It's called the real world."

"Okay. Well, there's maybe a dozen mistakes in what you just said. Do you want me to go through them in order, or—"

"So you deny you've been sleeping with Layla Mueller?"

"Am I having sex with her? No. She let me stay in an unused apartment."

"And then she took off her clothes and got in bed with you."

Scott stares at Bill. How does he know that? Is it a guess?

"I haven't had sex with anyone in five years," he says.

"That's not what I asked. I asked if she got naked and jumped in the sack with you."

Scott sighs. He has nobody to blame but himself for being in this position.

"I just don't understand why it matters."

"Answer the question."

"No," he says, "tell me why it matters that an adult woman is interested in me. Tell me why it's worth outing her in public for something she did when she was under her own roof that she would probably want to keep quiet."

"So you admit it?"

"No. I'm saying, what possible difference does it make? Does it tell us why the plane crashed? Does it help us process our grief? Or is it something you want to know because you want to know it?"

"I'm just trying to figure out how big a liar you are."

"About average, I'd say," says Scott. "But not about things that matter. That's part of my sobriety, a vow I took, to try and live as honestly as possible."

"So answer the question."

"No, because it's none of your business. I'm not trying to be an asshole here. I'm literally asking what possible difference it makes. And if you can convince me that my personal life after the crash has any relevance to the events leading up to the crash and isn't just this kind of parasitical vulture exploitation, then I'll tell you everything I am, happily."

Bill studies Scott for a long moment, a bemused look on his face. And then he plays the tape.

...

Bitch.

That fucking bitch.

Gus realizes he's holding his breath. The copilot, Charles Busch, is alone in the cockpit, and he is muttering these words under his breath.

And then, louder, he says:

No.

And switches off the autopilot.

CHARLES BUSCH

DECEMBER 31, 1984–AUGUST 23, 2015

HE WAS SOMEBODY'S nephew. That was the way people talked behind his back. As if he never would have gotten the job any other way. As if he was a bum, some kind of hack. Born in the final minutes of New Year's Eve 1984, Charlie Busch had never been able to escape the feeling that he had missed something vital by inches. In the case of his birth what he missed was the future. He started life as last year's news, and it never got much better.

As a boy he loved to play. He wasn't a good student. He liked math okay, but bore zero love for reading or science. Growing up in Odessa, Texas, Charlie shared the same dream as all the other boys. He wanted to be Roger Staubach, but he would have settled for Nolan Ryan. There was a pureness to high school sports, the knuckle slider and the backfield flea flicker, that got into your soul. Wind sprints and alligator drills. The low-shoulder kanikaze into heavy blocking sleds. The football field, where boys are hammered into men by pattern and repetition. Steve Hammond and Billy Rascal. Scab Dunaway and that big Mexican with hands the size of rib eyes. *What was his name?* A fly ball shagged on a cloud-free spring day. Pads and helmets struggled on in jockstrap locker rooms, stinking of heat and the fight-or-fuck pheromones of hot teen musk. The oiled mitt between your mattress and box spring, and how you always slept better with it under there,

Noah Hawley

hardball wrapped in a web of leather thumbs. Boys on the verge of what comes next, grappling in the dirt, using their heads to open alleys. And how it felt to run forever and never get tired, to stand in a dusty dugout trash-talking relief pitchers, your buddy Chris Hardwick lowing like a cow. The coffin corner and the crackback block. The primal mon-key joy of picking dirt from your cleats with any old stick, a bunch of boys on a bench spitting sunflower shells and digging deep down in the rubber. The in-between hop and the lefty switch. Hope. Always hope. And how when you're young every game you play feels like the reason the world exists. The pickoff and the squeeze play. And the heat. Always the heat, like a knee in your back, a boot on your neck. Drinking Gatorade by the gallon and chewing ice chips like a mental patient, bent at the knee sucking wind in the midday sun. The feel of a perfect spiral as it reaches your hands. Boys in shower stalls laughing at each other's dicks, bell-curling the cheerleaders, and pissing on the next guy's feet. The beanball and the brushback, and how it feels to round first base and dig for second, eyes on the center fielder, sliding headfirst, already safe in your mind. The panic of getting caught in a pickle, and how white chalk lines when they're fresh gleam like lightning against the grass, itself a deep, impossible green. Heaven is that color. And the bright lights of Friday night, those perfect alabaster lights, and the roar of the crowd. The simplicity of the game, always forward, never back. You throw the ball. You hit the ball. You catch the ball. And how after graduation nothing would ever be that simple again.

He was somebody's nephew. Uncle Logan, his mother's brother. Logan Birch, a six-term US senator from the great state of Texas, friend to oil and cattle, longtime chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Charlie knew him mostly as a rye drinker with sculpted hair. Uncle Logan was the reason Charlie's mother pulled out the fancy plates. Every Christmas they drove out to his mansion in Dallas. Charlie remembered the family all dressed in matching Christmas sweaters. Uncle Logan would tell Charlie to make a muscle, then squeeze his arm hard.

"Gotta toughen this boy up," he told Charlie's mother. Charlie's father had died a few years earlier, when Charlie was six. Coming home from work one night an eighteen-wheeler sideswiped him. His car flipped six times. They had a closed-casket funeral and buried Charlie's father in the nice cemetery. Uncle Logan paid for everything.

Even in high school, being Logan Birch's nephew helped him. He played right field for the varsity team, even though he couldn't hit as well as the other boys, couldn't steal a base to save his life. It was unusual, this special treatment. In fact, for the first thirteen years of his life, Charlie had no idea he was being elevated above his station. He thought the coaches liked his hustle. But that changed in high school. It was the locker room that woke him up to this conspiracy of nepotism, the wolf pack mentality of boys in jockstraps surrounding him in the shower. Sports is a meritocracy, after all. You start because you can hit, because you can run and throw and catch. In Odessa, the football team was notorious for its speed and precision. Every year veterans of the baseball team got a free ride to good colleges. West Texas sports were competitive. You put up lawn signs. Businesses closed early on game days. People took this shit seriously. And so a player like Charlie, mediocre in all things, stood out like a sore thumb.

The first time they came for him, he was fifteen, a skinny freshman who'd scored the starting kicker spot after shanking a thirty-six-yard field goal. Six hulking ranch thugs, stripped down and sweaty, showed him into a shower stall.

"Watch your shit," they told him.

Cowering in the corner, Charlie could smell their sweat, the musky funk of half a dozen teenage linebackers, not one under 250 pounds, who'd just spent three hours steam-cooking in the August sun. He bent and vomited onto their feet. They beat him good for that, slapping him around with their cocks for good measure.

In the end, huddled on the floor, he flinched when Levon Davis bent and hissed in his ear.

"Tell a fucking soul and you're dead."

It was Uncle Logan who pulled the strings to get Charlie into the flight training program of the National Guard. It turned out he wasn't a bad pilot, though he tended to freeze in sudden emergencies. And after the National Guard, when Charlie was kicking around Texas unable to hold down a job, it was Logan who spoke to a friend at GullWing and landed Charlie an interview. And though he had yet to find anything in life he was truly good at, Charlie Busch did have a certain sparkle in his eye, and a certain cowboy swagger that worked with the ladies. He could charm a room and he looked good in a suit, and so when he sat down with the HR director of the airline he seemed like the perfect addition to GullWing's fast-growing stable of young, attractive flight personnel.

They started him as a copilot. This was September 2013. He loved the luxury jets, loved the clients he served—billionaires and heads of state. It made him feel important. But what he really loved was the grade-A, top-shelf pussy working the main cabin. Goddamn, he thought the first time he saw the flight crew he'd be working with. Four beauties from around the world, each more fuckable than the next.

"Ladies," he said, lowering his aviators and giving them his best Texas grin. The girls didn't even blink. Turns out they didn't sleep with copilots. Sure, the company had a policy, but it was more than that. These women were international sophisticates. Many spoke five languages. They were angels that mortal men could look at, but never touch.

Flight after flight, Charlie made his play. And flight after flight he was rebuffed. Turns out, not even his uncle could get him into the pants of a GullWing flight attendant.

He had been at the company for eight months when he met Emma. Right away he could tell she was different from the others, more down to earth. And she had that slight gap between her front teeth. Sometimes during a flight he'd catch her in the galley humming to herself. She would blush when she realized he was standing there.

She wasn't the hottest girl in the fleet, he thought, but she seemed attainable. He was a lion stalking a herd of antelope, waiting for the weakest one to wander off.

Emma told him her father had flown for the air force, so Charlie inflated his experience in the National Guard, telling her he spent a year in Iraq flying F-16s. He could tell she was a daddy's girl. Charlie was twenty-nine years old. His own father had died when he was six. The only real role model he'd had for how to be a man was a rye drinker with fancy hair who told Charlie to make a muscle every time they met. He knew he wasn't as smart as the other guys or as skilled. But being less talented meant he'd had to develop ways of passing. You didn't have to be confident, he realized early on. You just had to seem confident. He was never a great fastball hitter, so he learned how to get on base by walking. He couldn't deliver the monster punt so he mastered the inside kick. In classroom situations he'd learned to deflect hard questions by making a joke. He learned how to talk shit on the baseball field and how to swagger in the National Guard. Wearing the uniform made you a player, he reasoned. Just like carrying a weapon made you a soldier. It may have been nepotism that got him in, but there was no denying now that his résumé was real.

And yet who had ever really loved Charles Nathaniel Busch for who he was? He was somebody's nephew, a pretender, the varsity athlete who'd become a pilot. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like an American success story, so that's what he called it. But deep down inside he knew the truth. He was a fraud. And knowing this made him bitter. It made him mean.

...

He caught a ride from Heathrow on a GullWing charter, landing in New York at three p.m. on Sunday August 23. It had been six months since Emma broke up with him, since she told him to stop calling her, stop going by her place and trying to get on her flights. She

was scheduled to do a milk run to Martha's Vineyard and back, and Charlie had it in his head that if he could just get a few minutes alone with her he could make her understand. How much he loved her. How much he needed her. And how sorry he was about what had happened. Everything, basically. The way he'd treated her. The things he'd said. If he could just explain. If she could only see that deep down he wasn't a bad guy. Not really. He was just someone who'd been faking his way through the world for so long, he had become consumed by the fear of being found out. And all of it, the cockiness, the jealousy, the pettiness, was a by-product of that. *You* try pretending to be someone you're not for twenty years, see how it changes you. But my God, he didn't want to be afraid anymore. Not with Emma. He wanted her to see him. The real him. To know him. Because didn't he deserve that for once in his life? To be loved for who he was, not who he pretended to be?

He thought about London, seeing Emma again, like a snakebite, poison spreading through his veins, and how his instinct when he felt out of his depth was to attack, close the distance between himself and his—what? Opponent? Prey? He didn't know. It was just a feeling, a kind of panicked advance, that had him put on airs, had him hike up his pants and slip on his best cowboy swagger. The only thing you can do, he had long ago decided, when you care too much, is to act like you could give two shits—about school, about work, about love.

It had worked often enough that the behavior had calcified inside of him, and so when he saw Emma, when his heart jumped into his throat and he felt vulnerable and exposed, this is what he did. Turned up his nose. Insulted her weight. Then spent the rest of the night following her around like a puppy.

Peter Gaston had been happy to give Charlie the Vineyard flight, get a couple more days of R&R in London. They'd bonded Friday night, drinking until dawn in Soho, bouncing from bar to nightclub—vodka, rum, ecstasy, a little coke. Their next scheduled drug test wasn't for two weeks, and Peter knew a guy who could get them clean piss. So they

threw caution to the wind. Charlie was trying to get his courage up. Every time he looked at Emma, he felt like his heart was splitting in two. She was so beautiful. So sweet. And he'd fucked it up so royally. Why had he said that to her before, about putting on a few pounds? Why did he have to be such an asshole all the time? When she came out of the bathroom in a towel, all he'd wanted to do was hold her, to kiss her eyelids the way she used to kiss his, to feel the pulse of her against him, to breathe her in. But instead he made some bullshit wisecrack.

He thought about the look on her face that night when he put his hands around her throat and squeezed. How the initial thrill of sexual experimentation turned first to shock, then horror. Did he really think she would like it? That she was *that kind of girl*? He had met them before, the tattooed kamikazes who liked to be punished for who they were, who liked the scrapes and bruises of reckless animal collision. But Emma wasn't like that. You could see it in her eyes, the way she carried herself. She was normal, a civilian, unblemished by the trench warfare of a fucked-up childhood. Which was what made her such a good choice for him, such a healthy move. She was the Madonna. Not the whore. A woman he could marry. A woman who could save him. So why had he done it? Why had he choked her? Except maybe to bring her down to his level. To let her know that the world she lived in wasn't the safe, gilded theme park she thought it was.

He'd had some dark times after that night, after she left him and stopped answering his calls. Days he lay in bed from sunrise to sundown, filled with dread and loathing. He kept it together at work, riding the second chair through takeoffs and landings. Years of covering his weaknesses had taught him to pass, no matter how he felt inside. But there was an animal attraction inside him on those flights, a live wire sparking in his heart that wanted him to push the yoke nose-down, to roll the plane into oblivion. Sometimes it got so bad he had to fake a shit and hide out in the washroom, breathing through the blackness.

Emma. Like a unicorn, the mythic key to happiness.

He sat in that bar in London and watched her eyes, the corner of her mouth. He could feel her deliberately not looking at him, could feel the muscles in her back tensing whenever his voice got too loud at the bar, trading jokes with Gaston. She hated him, he thought, but isn't hate just the thing we do to love when the pain becomes unbearable?

He could fix that, he thought, turn it back, explain the hate away with the right words, the right feelings. He would have one more drink and then he would go over. He would take her hand softly and ask her to come outside for a cigarette and they would talk. He could see every word in his head, every move, how first it would be just him. How he would lay it all out, the History of Charlie, and how she would have her arms folded across her chest in the beginning, defensive, but as he went deeper, as he told her about his father's death, being raised by a single mom, and how somehow he ended up a ward of his uncle, how, unbeknownst to him, his uncle paved the way for Charlie to coast through life. But how it was never what he wanted. How all Charlie wanted was to be judged on his own merits, but how, as time went on, he got scared that his best wasn't good enough. So he surrendered and let it happen. But that was all over now. Because Charlie Busch was ready to be his own man. And he wanted Emma to be his woman. And as he talked she would lower her arms. She would move closer. And in the end she would hold him tight and they would kiss.

He had another seven-and-seven, a beer back. And then, at some point when he was in the bathroom with Peter doing another line, Emma disappeared. He came out of the john wiping his nose and she was gone. Charlie made a beeline for the other girls, feeling jittery and spooked.

"Hey," he said, "uh, so Emma, did she split?"

The girls laughed at him. They looked at him with their fucking haughty model eyes, and barked their disdain.

"Sweetie," said Chelsea, "do you really think you're in the same league?"

"Just, fucking, is she gone?"

"Whatever. She said she was tired. She went back to the flat."

Charlie threw some cash on the bar, ran out onto the street. The booze and the drugs had him feeling turned around, which was why he walked ten blocks in the wrong direction before finally figuring it out. *Fuck. Fuck.* And by the time he got back to the apartment she was gone. Her stuff was gone.

She had vanished.

And the next day, when Peter groaned and said he had to get to New York for a job and that Emma would be on it, Charlie offered to take the gig. He lied and told Peter he would clear it with the company, but it wasn't until he showed up at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey that anyone knew that Charlie was taking Peter's place. And at that point it was too late to do anything.

Riding a jump seat in the cockpit of a 737 across the Atlantic, Charlie drank coffee after coffee, trying to sober up, to get his shit together. He'd startled Emma, showing up like that in London. He could see that now. He wanted to apologize, but she'd changed her phone number, had stopped responding to his emails. So what choice did he have? How else could he fix this, except to track her down once more, to plead his case, throw himself on her mercy?

Teterboro was a private airport twelve miles outside Manhattan. GullWing kept a hangar there, its corporate logo—two hands crossed at the thumb, fingers spread like wings—was emblazoned in gray on the flat tan siding. The hangar office was closed on Sunday, except for a skeleton crew. Charlie took a cab from JFK, bypassing the city to the north and coming in on the George Washington Bridge. He tried not to look at the meter as the fare rose. He had a Platinum Amex card, and besides, he told himself it didn't matter what it cost. This was for love. Peter had given him the flight's itinerary. Scheduled time of departure from New Jersey was six fifty p.m. The plane was an

OSPRY 700SL. They'd take the short hop to the Vineyard sans passengers, board their charter, and head right back. They wouldn't even need to refuel. Charlie figured that gave him at least five hours to find a private moment with Emma, to pull her aside and touch her cheek and talk the way they used to, to take her hand and say *I am so sorry*. To say *I love you*. *I know that now*. *I was an idiot*. *Please forgive me*.

And she would, because how could she not? What they'd had was special. The first time they'd made love she'd cried, for God's sake. Cried at the beauty of it. And he'd fucked it up, but it wasn't too late. Charlie had seen all the romantic comedies these chicks swooned over. He knew that perseverance was the key. Emma was testing him. That was all. Putting him through his paces. It was Female 101. She loved him, but he needed to prove himself. To show her he could be steady, reliable, to show her that this time it was storybook. She was the fairy princess and he was the knight on the horse. And he would. He was hers, now and forever, and he would never give up. And when she saw that she would fall into his arms and they'd be together again.

He showed his pilot's license at the Teterboro security gate. The guard waved them in. Charlie felt the nerves in his stomach, rubbed his face with his hand. He wished he'd remembered to shave, worried that he looked sawlow, tired.

"It's the white hangar," he told the cabbie.

"Two sixty-six," the guy told him after they came to a stop.

Charlie ran his card, climbed out, taking his silver roller bag. The OSPRY was parked on the tarmac just outside the hangar. Floodlights from the building made the fuselage glow. He never got tired of the sight, a precision aircraft, like a gleaming thoroughbred, all thrust and lift under the hood, but smooth as butter on the inside. A three-member ground crew was gassing her up, a catering truck parked near the nose. A hundred and four years ago two brothers built the first airplane and flew it on a North Carolina beach. Now there were fleets of fighters, hundreds of commercial airliners, cargo planes, and private jets. Flying had become routine. But not for

Charlie. He still loved the feeling as the wheels left the ground, as the plane surged into the stratosphere. But that didn't surprise him. He was a romantic, after all.

Charlie scanned the area for Emma, but didn't see her. He had changed into his pilot's uniform in the bathroom at JFK. Seeing himself in the crisp whites steadied him. Who was he if not Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman*? Wearing it now, he wheeled his roller bag into the hangar, heels clicking on the asphalt. His heart was in his throat and he was sweating like he was back in fucking high school, angling to ask Cindy Becker to prom.

Jesus, he thought. *What is this chick doing to you? Pull it together, Busch.*

He felt a flash of anger, the rage of an animal against its cage, but he ignored it.

Squelch that shit, Busch, he told himself. *Stay on mission.*

Then he spotted Emma in the second-floor office. His heart rate multiplied.

He dropped his bag and hurried up the stairs. The office was a carwalk overlook built into the hangar. Staff only. Clients never even entered the hangar. They were ferried directly to the plane by limousine. It was the strict written policy of the company that employees keep the behind-the-scenes process of GullWing Air invisible, nothing that would burst the bubble of the traveler's luxury experience.

To reach the office you had to climb an exterior flight of metal stairs. Putting a hand on the grip railing, Charlie felt his mouth go dry. On impulse, he reached up and adjusted his hat, giving it a slight cock. Should he put on the aviators? No. This was about connection, about eye contact. His hands felt like wild animals, fingers twitching, so he shoved them in his pockets, focusing on each stair, on lifting his feet and putting them down. He had thought about this moment for the last sixteen hours, seeing Emma, how he would smile warmly and show her he could be calm, gentle. And yet he felt anything but calm. It had been three days since he'd slept more than two hours straight.

Cocaine and vodka were what was keeping him smooth, keeping him moving. He went over it again in his head. He would reach the landing, open the door. Emma would turn and see him and he would stop and stand very still. He would open himself to her, show her with his body and his eyes that he was here, that he'd gotten her message. He was here and he wasn't going anywhere.

Except it didn't happen that way. Instead, as he reached the landing, he found Emma was already looking his way, and when she saw him she went white. Her face. And her eyes went giant, like saucers. Worse, when he saw her see him, he froze, literally, with his right foot hovering in midair, and gave a little... wave. *A wave?* Like what kind of idiot gives a faggy little wave to the girl of his dreams? And in that moment she turned and fled deeper into the office.

Fuck, he thought, fucking, fuck fuck.

He exhaled and finished climbing. Stanhope was in the office, the coordinator who'd be working tonight. She was an older woman with zero lips, just an angry slash under her nose.

"I'm, uh, here to work Six Thirteen," he said. "Checking in."

"You're not Gaston," she said, looking at her logbook.

"Stellar fucking observation," he told her, eyes searching the inner offices, visible through the glass wall, for Emma.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Sorry. I just—Gaston is sick. He called me."

"Well, he should have called me. We can't just have personnel swapping shifts. It screws up the whole..."

"Absolutely. I'm just doing the guy a... did you see where Emma..."

He peered through the glass, looking for his dream girl, feeling a little frantic. His mind was racing, auditioning scenarios, working double time to figure out how to rectify this whole disaster.

She ran, he thought. She fucking turned tail and... what the hell was that about?

Charlie looked at the desk troll, gave his best smile.

"What's your name? Jenny?" he said. "I'm sorry, but we—it's almost liftoff time. Can we figure out the paperwork when we come back?"

The woman nodded.

"Okay. We'll deal with this after the flight."

Charlie turned away. She called after him.

"Check in with me when you land, though. We have these protocols for a reason."

"Yeah," said Charlie. "Sure. Sorry for the—I don't know why Gaston didn't call."

He stumbled back to the plane, casting around for Emma. He climbed the steps and was surprised to find her in the galley, breaking up ice.

"Hey," he said. "Where did you—I was looking for you."

She turned on him. "Why are you even—I don't want you here. I don't—"

He reached out to hug her, hold her, to show her how love would fix everything. But she reared back, hate in her eyes, and slapped him hard across the face.

Check stinging, he stared at her. It was as if the sun had—in the course of an otherwise normal day—suddenly exploded in the sky. She held his eye defiantly, then looked away, afraid suddenly.

Charlie watched her walk off, then turned dully—his mind a perfect blank—and entered the cabin, where he almost ran into Melody, the captain on the flight. James, Older guy, not much fun, but competent. Extremely. British ponce, thought he was the boss of everything. But Charlie knew how to kowtow. It was part of passing.

"Afternoon, Captain," he said.

Melody recognized him, frowned.

"What happened to Gaston?" he asked.

"You got me," said Charlie. "Stomach thing, I think. All I know is I got a call."

The captain shrugged. It was the front office's problem.

They chatted some more, but Charlie wasn't really paying attention. He was thinking about Emma, what she'd said. What he could have done differently.

Passion, that's what they had, he told himself suddenly. Fire. The thought cheered him, the buzz in his cheek fading.

Powering up the system and running diagnostics, Charlie told himself that he'd handled things well, maybe not perfectly, but... She was just playing hard to get. The next six hours would go like fucking clockwork. Textbook takeoff. Textbook landing. There and back in five hours and then he'd be the one changing his phone number, and when she came to her senses and realized what she'd lost, well, she'd be the one begging him for forgiveness.

Cycling the engines, he heard the cockpit door open. Emma stormed into the main cabin.

"Keep him away from me," she told Melody, pointing at Charlie, then stalked back to the galley.

The captain looked over at his copilot.

"You got me," said Charlie. "Must be her time of the month."

They finished their pre-flight run-through and closed the hatch. At six fifty-nine p.m. they taxied to the runway and lifted off without incident, moving away from the setting sun. A few minutes later, Captain Melody banked to starboard and pointed them toward the coast.

For the rest of the flight to Martha's Vineyard, Charlie stared out at the ocean, slumping visibly in his seat. As the rage left him, the serious lightning nerves that had been fueling him, he felt exhausted, deflated. The truth was, he hadn't slept, really, in maybe thirty-six hours. A few minutes on the flight from London, but mostly he'd been too amped up. A lingering effect of the coke, possibly, or the vodka/Red Bulls he'd been drinking. Whatever it was, now that his mission had failed, had epically imploded, he felt destroyed.

Fifteen minutes from the Vineyard, the captain stood, put a hand on Charlie's shoulder. Charlie jumped in his seat, startled.

"She's all yours," said Melody. "I'm gonna grab a coffee."

Charlie nodded, straightening. The plane was on autopilot, gliding effortlessly over the open blue. As the captain exited the cockpit, he closed the door (which had been open) behind him. It took Charlie a few moments to register that. That the captain had closed the door. And why? Why would he do that? It had been open for takeoff. Why close it now?

Except for privacy.

Charlie felt a hot flush go through him. That was it. Melody wanted privacy so he could talk to Emma.

About me.

A new burst of adrenaline hit Charlie's bloodstream. He needed to focus. He slapped himself in the face a couple of times.

What should I do?

He ran through his options. His first instinct was to storm out and confront them, to tell the pilot that this shit was none of his business. *Go back to your seat, old man.* But that was non-rational. He could be fired for that probably.

No. He should do nothing. He was a professional. She was the drama queen, the one who brought their private business in to work. He would fly the plane (okay, watch the autopilot fly the plane) and be the grounded adult.

And yet he had to admit that it was killing him. The closed door. Not knowing what was going on out there. What she was saying. Against his better judgment he stood, then sat, then stood again. Just as he was reaching for the door it opened, and the captain came back with his coffee.

"Everything okay?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

Charlie turned at the waist and did a kind of upper-body stretch.

"Absolutely," he said. "Just... got a cramp in my side. Trying to stretch it out."

The sun was starting to set as they made their final approach into Martha's Vineyard. On the ground, Melody taxied past ground control and parked. Charlie stood as soon as the engines were off.

"Where are you going?" the captain asked.

"Cigarette," said Charlie.

The captain stood.

"Later," he said. "I want you to run a full diagnostic on the flight controls. The stick felt tight on landing."

"Just a quick cigarette?" Charlie said. "We've got, like, an hour before takeoff."

The captain opened the cockpit door. Behind him Charlie could see Emma in the galley. Sensing the cockpit door open, she looked over, saw Charlie, and looked away fast. The captain shifted his hip to block Charlie's view.

"Run the diagnostic," he said, and exited, closing the door behind him.

Fucking petty bullshit, thought Charlie, turning to the computer. He sighed, once, twice. He stood. He sat. He rubbed his hands together until they felt hot, then pressed them against his eyes. He'd flown the plane for fifteen minutes before landing. The stick felt fine. But Charlie was a professional, Mr. Professional, so he did what he was asked. That had always been his strategy. When you spend your life playing a role you learn how to make it look good. File your paperwork on time. Be the first on the field for grass sprints. Keep the uniform pressed and clean, your hair trimmed, your face shaved. Stand up straight. Be the part.

To calm himself he pulled out his headphones and put on some Jack Johnson. Melody wanted him to run diagnostics? Fine. He wouldn't just do what he was asked. He would spit-polish this thing. He started in on the diagnostic, soft guitars strumming in his ears. Outside the last sliver of sun dipped behind the trees and the sky took on a midnight hue.

The captain found Charlie in his seat thirty minutes later, fast asleep. He shook his head and dropped into his chair. Charlie shot up, heart jackhammering, disoriented.

"What?" he said.

"Did you run the diagnostic?" Melody asked.

"Uh, yeah," said Charlie, flicking switches. "It's... everything looks good."

The captain looked at him for a beat, then nodded.

"Okay. The first client is here. I want to be ready for wheels-up at twenty-two hundred hours."

"Sure," said Charlie, gesturing. "Can I... I gotta piss."

The captain nodded.

"Come right back."

Charlie nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said, managing to keep all but a hint of sarcasm out of his voice.

He stepped out of the cockpit. The crew bathroom was right next to the cockpit. He could see Emma standing in the open doorway, waiting to greet the first guests as they arrived. Charlie could see on the tarmac what looked like a family of five, illuminated in the headlights of a Range Rover. He studied the back of Emma's neck. Her hair was up in a bun, and there was a loose wisp of auburn arc across her jaw. The sight of it made him dizzy, the overwhelming urge he had to fall to his knees and press his face into her lap, an act of penance and devotion, the gesture of a lover, but also that of a son to a mother, for what he wanted was not the sensual pleasure of her naked flesh, but the maternal feeling of her hands on his head, the unconditional acceptance, the feel of her fingers in his hair, the motherly stroking. It had been so long since anyone had just stroked his hair, had rubbed his back until he fell asleep. And he was so tired, so profoundly tired.

In the bathroom he stared at himself in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks dark with stubble. This was not who he wanted to be. A loser. How had he let himself fall this far? How did he ever let this girl break him down? When they were dating he found her affection stifling, the way she would hold his hand in public, the way she put her head on his shoulder. As if she were marking him. She was so into him he felt it had to be an act. As a lifelong role player, he was

certain he could spot another bullshitter from a mile away. So he went cold on her. He pushed her away to see if she would come back. And she did. It made him mad. *I'm on to you*, he thought. *I know you're fucking faking. The con is up. So drop the act.* But she just seemed hurt, confused. And finally, one night, when he was fucking her and she reached up and stroked his cheek and said *I love you*, something inside him snapped. He grabbed her by the throat, at first just to shut her up, but then, seeing the fear in her eyes, the way her face turned red, he found himself squeezing harder, and his orgasm was like a white bolt of lightning from his balls to his brain.

Now, staring at himself in the mirror, he tells himself he was right all along. She was faking. She had been playing him, and now that she was done she'd just thrown him away.

He washes his face, dries his hands on a towel. The plane is vibrating as passengers climb the stairs. He can hear voices, the sound of laughter. He runs his hands through his hair, straightens his tie.

Professional, he thinks. And then, just before he opens the door and reenters the cockpit.

Bitch.

FLIGHT

GUS HEARS AN automated voice on the tape.

"Autopilot disengaged."

This is it, he thinks. *The beginning of the end.*

He hears the sound of the engines, an increase in rpm that he knows from the data recorder was the copilot putting the plane into a turn and powering up.

You like that? he hears Busch mutter. *Is that what you want?*

It's just a matter of time now. The plane will impact the water in less than two minutes.

And now he hears pounding on the door, and hears Melody's voice.

Jesus, let me in. Let me in. What's going on? Let me in.

But now the copilot is silent. Whatever thoughts he has in the last moments of his life he keeps to himself. All that remains, under the sound of the pilot's desperation, are the sounds of a plane spiraling to its death.

Gus reaches over and turns up the volume, straining to hear something, anything, over the low mechanical noise and the thrum of the jets. And then—gunshots. He jumps, swerving the car into the left-hand lane. Around him, car horns blare. Swearing, he corrects back into his own lane, losing count of the number of shots in the process.

At least six, each like a cannon on the otherwise silent tape. And under them the sound of a whispered mantra.

Slit, slit, slit, slit.

Bang, bang, bang, bang.

And now a surge in rpm as Busch leans on the throttle, the plane spinning like a leaf circling down a drain.

And even though he knows the outcome, Gus finds himself praying that the captain and the Israeli security man will get the door open, that they'll overcome Busch and the captain will take his seat and find some miracle solution to right the plane. And, as if in sympathy with his own held breath, the gunshots are replaced by the sound of a body slamming into the metal cockpit door. Later, technicians will re-create the sounds, determining which is a shoulder and which is a kick, but for now they are just the urgent sounds of survival.

Please, please, please, thinks Gus, even as the rational part of his brain knows they're doomed.

And then, in the split second before the crash, a single syllable:

Oh.

Then—impact—a cacophony of such size and finality that Gus closes his eyes. It continues for four seconds, primary and secondary impacts, the sounds of the wing shearing off, the fuselage breaking up. Busch will have been killed immediately. The others may have lasted a second or two, killed not by the impact, but by flying debris. None, thankfully, lived long enough to drown as the plane sank to the bottom. This they know from the autopsies.

And yet somewhere in the chaos, a man and a boy survived. Hearing the crash on tape turns the fact of this into a full-blown miracle.

"Boss?" comes Mayberry's voice.

"Yeah. I'm—"

"He did it. He just—it was about the girl. The flight attendant."

Gus doesn't respond. He is trying to comprehend the tragedy, to kill all those people, a child, for what? A lunatic's broken heart?

"I want a full analysis of all the mechanics," he says. "Every sound."

"Yesir."
"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Gus hangs up. He wonders how many more years he can do this job, how many more tragedies he can stomach. He is an engineer who is beginning to believe that the world is fundamentally broken.

He sees his exit approaching, moves to the right lane. Life is a series of decisions and reactions. It is the things you do and the things that are done to you.

And then it's over.

...

The first voice Scott hears on the tape is his.

What's going on? he asks. In your mind. With us.

The recording quality is distant, a layer of mechanical hiss over the top. It sounds like a phone call, which is what Scott realizes it is, in the instant he recognizes his own voice.

Let's go to Greece, he hears Layla say. There's a little house on a cliff I own through, like, six shell companies. Nobody knows a thing. Complete mystery. We could lie in the sun and eat oysters. Dance after dark. Wait till the dust clears. I know I should be coy with you, but I've never met anyone whose attention is harder to get. Even when we're together it's like we're in the same place, but different years.

"Where did you—" Scott asks.

Bill looks at him and raises his eyebrows with a kind of triumph.

"You still think we should believe nothing happened?"

Scott stares at him.

"Did you—how did you—"

Bill holds up a finger—*Wait for it.*

The tape plays again.

How's the boy?

It's Gus's voice. Scott doesn't have to hear the next voice to know that it will be his.

He's not—talking, really, but he seems to like that I'm here. So maybe that's therapeutic. Eleanor's really—strong.

And the husband?

He left this morning with luggage.

A long pause.

I don't have to tell you how that's going to look, says Gus.

Scott finds himself mouthing his next words along with the tape.

Since when does how a thing looks matter more than what it is?

Two thousand twelve, I think, says Gus. Especially after—your hideout in the city. How that made the news. The heinous, which—I said find someplace to hide, not shack up in a tabloid story.

Nothing happened. I mean, yeah, she took off her clothes and climbed into bed with me, but I didn't—

We're not talking about what did or didn't happen, says Gus. We're talking about what it looks like.

The tape ends. Bill sits forward.

"So you see," he says. "Lies. From the very beginning you've been telling nothing but lies."

Scott nods, his mind putting the piece together.

"You recorded us," he says. "Eleanor's phone. That's how you knew—when I called her from Layla's house—that's how you knew where I was. You traced the call. And then—did you have Gus's phone too? The FBI? Is that how—all those leaks—is that how you got the memo?"

Scott can see Bill's producer waving frantically from off camera. She looks panicked. Scott leans forward.

"You bugged their phones. A plane crashed. People died, and you bugged the phones of the victims, their relatives."

"People have a right to know," says Bill. "This was a great man, David Bateman. A giant. We deserve the truth."

"Yeah, but—do you know how illegal it is? What you did? Not to mention—*immoral*. And we're sitting here, and you're worried about what—that I had a consensual relationship with a woman?"

Scott leans forward.

"And meanwhile, you have no idea what actually happened, how the copilot locked the captain out of the cockpit, how he switched off the autopilot and put the plane into a dive. How six shots were fired into the door—gunshots—probably by the Batemans' security guard, trying to get it open, trying to regain control of the plane. But they couldn't, so they all died."

He looks at Bill, who—for once in his life—is speechless.

"People died. People with families, with children. They were murdered, and you're sitting here asking me about my sex life. Shame on you."

Bill gets to his feet. He looms over Scott. Scott stands himself, facing off, unflinching.

"Shame on you," he repeats, this time quietly, just to Bill.

For a minute it seems Bill will hit him. His fists are balled. And then two cameramen are grabbing him, and Krista is there.

"Bill," she yells. "Bill. Calm down."

"Get off me," yells Bill, struggling, but they hold him firm.

Scott stands. He turns to Krista.

"Okay," he says. "I'm done."

He walks away, allowing the anger and struggle behind him to fade. He finds a hallway and follows it to an elevator. Feeling like a man waking from a dream he presses the button, then waits for the doors to open. He thinks about the floating wing, and how it was on fire, thinks about the boy's voice calling in the dark. He thinks about his sister, and how he waited on his bike in the growing darkness. He thinks about every drink he ever took, and what it feels like to hear the starting gun and dive into chlorinated blue.

Somewhere the boy is waiting, playing trucks in the driveway, coloring outside the lines. There is a lazy river and the sound of the leaves blowing in the wind.

He will get his paintings back. He will reschedule those gallery meetings, and any others that present themselves. He will find a pool

and teach the boy to swim. He has waited long enough. It's time to press PLAY, to let the game finish, see what happens. And if it's going to be a disaster, then that's what it's going to be. He has survived worse. He is a survivor. It's time he started acting like one.

And then the doors open, and he gets on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noah Hawley is an Emmy, Golden Globe, PEN, Critic's Choice, and Peabody Award-winning author, screenwriter, and producer. He has published four novels and penned the script for the feature film *Lie and Alibi*. He created, executive produced, and served as showrunner for ABC's *My Generation* and *The Unusuals* and was a writer and producer on the hit series *Bones*. Hawley is currently executive producer, writer, and showrunner on FX's award-winning series, *Fargo*.