

FALLING

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were at cruise, but that was the best she would get until they landed in New York.

“Okay. ‘Before start’ checklist to the line, please,” Bill said.

Ben pulled out the laminated checklist. “Logbook, release, tail number . . .”

Reaching up, Bill flicked the FASTEN SEAT BELT sign off. The plane had leveled off and now floated eastward, a mass of humanity hanging in limbo.

“Coastal four-one-six, contact LA center one-two-niner-point-five-zero,” the squawk of the air traffic controller rang throughout the cockpit.

“Coastal four-one-six,” Bill identified, “LA on one-two-niner-point-five-oh. Good day.”

Ben reached to his left and pushed a knob on the lower console control panel. Turning it counterclockwise, yellow digital numbers descended toward the new frequency. The controller who would answer the other end of the line would guide them through his jurisdiction before handing the plane off to the next sector’s en route controller. Like that, all the way across the country, the plane’s communication to ground would be passed off like a baton.

Bill waited until Ben stopped at 129.50 and pressed the transfer button. “Good afternoon, Los Angeles center,” he said into the mic, studying the panel indicating their altitude, direction, and speed. “Coastal four-one-six checking in at flight level three-five-zero.”

“Good afternoon, Costal. Maintain three-five-zero,” responded the controller. Bill holstered the mic and punched a button on the console in front of him. A green light lit up above the label “AP1,” confirming the autopilot had been engaged. Releasing the shoulder straps of his five-point harness and reclining his seat, Bill settled in for the cruise.

“Sir?” Jo said. “Sir?”

The man stared at the seatback TV in front of him. Jo wiggled her

fingers in front of the screen, his eyes darting up as he hastily removed his headphones and accepted the glass of wine she held out.

“Sorry,” he apologized, returning to the screen.

“Big game?” she asked, passing a seltzer no ice off her tray to the college-aged girl in the first-class seat next to him.

“You kiddin’?” he said, with a thick New York accent. “Game seven of the World Series? Yeah, it’s a big game.”

“I’m assuming you’re rooting for the Yankees,” Jo said.

“Since the day I was born,” he replied, putting his headphones back on to hear the pregame coverage. Next to him, the girl sent a text to her boyfriend. *We land at 10:30. Can you pick me up?* She watched his three dots at work, smiling when his text came through.

Four rows back in the main cabin, a man turned the page in his book. The beam of the overhead light irritated the guy in the middle seat next to him who was trying to sleep. Across the aisle, a woman pressed “Send” on her laptop, the email arriving seconds later in her boss’s inbox back in LA. The guy by the window squirmed in his seat, wondering how long he could wait before he’d have to ask the row to get up so he could use the bathroom. Behind him, neck arched, mouth agape, a loud snore came from the “passenger of size” who had asked the flight attendants for a seat belt extender during boarding. A toddler ambled down the aisle past them all. His mother held on to his raised hands, steadying the child in the plane’s gentle rock.

On the other side of the cockpit door, the pilots spoke with air traffic control, adjusting the plane’s altitude or speed when directed. They checked weather reports for updates and surveyed the open expanse in front of them, endless stretches of deserts and snow-covered mountaintops, a rolling procession of the dramatic landscapes of the western United States. But with the plane steadily cruising, they mostly passed the time just like their passengers. Ben read a book on his tablet and occasionally sent a text. Bill chewed a granola bar, working on the computer-based portion of the biannual recurrent training he had coming up in a few weeks.

Bill's laptop pinged with an incoming email. It was from Carrie—but it had no subject or text, only a picture attachment. *That's odd*, he thought as he clicked on the attachment. It wasn't unusual for her to send pictures of the kids or of an activity that he was missing at home. But after the way they'd left things, the gesture felt out of place.

Studying the picture, Bill blinked a few times, even more confused. He recognized the couch and the television behind it. He was familiar with the books and the picture frames. He saw the beer bottle where he had left it the night before after he and Scott finished watching the Dodgers lose game six, and he could envision the tall oak tree in the backyard that left its shadowy outline on the floor of his sunlit family room.

These things made sense to him.

The two figures that stood in the middle of the room did not.

Barefoot, bare-legged, their arms outstretched in the shape of a cross; timid hands opened toward the heavens in a silent plea of helplessness. He knew their faces, but he could not see them beneath the black hoods that covered their heads. He did not need to glimpse his wife's pink toenail polish to know one figure was her, and he did not need confirmation that the other's skinny legs were those of his son.

Bill leaned forward, trying to make sense of what Carrie was wearing. Strapped across her whole torso was some strange sort of vest. Pockets covered it front to back, brightly colored wires protruding from small bricks that lay inside. He'd seen such vests on the news in grainy video footage of suicide bombers making their final martyrdom statements. But in the moment, his mind couldn't process the sight of something so perverse strapped across his wife's body.

His mouth went dry. Steadying himself with a hand on the tray table, his head spun. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, hoping that when he opened them, the picture would be gone. Or that he would wake up and find this was all a dream. Somehow, maybe, he could start over. Or just—disappear.

Opening his eyes, he thought he might be sick.

The picture of his wife, wearing an explosive suicide vest, standing next to their son in their own living room, was still there.

Another email hit the inbox.

Put on your headphones.

With that, an incoming FaceTime call popped up on the screen.