

# One

THE BIGGEST IRONY about that night is that I was always scared to fly.

Always. Ever since I was old enough to think about it.

It seemed counterintuitive. Even a little arrogant. Why go up when gravity clearly wanted us to stay down?

Back in high school, my parents took my big sister, Kitty, and me to Hawaii one year. I dreaded the flight from the moment they told us until well after we were home again. The phrase “flying to Hawaii” translated in my head to “drowning in the ocean.” The week before the trip, I found myself planning out survival strategies. One night after lights out, I snuck to Kitty’s room and climbed into her bed.

I was a freshman, and she was a senior, which gave her a lot of authority.

“What’s the plan?” I demanded.

Her face was half buried in the pillow. “The plan for what?”

“For when the plane hits.”

She opened an eye. “Hits what?”

“The ocean. On the way to Hawaii.”

She held my gaze for a second. “That’s not going to happen.”

“I have a bad feeling,” I said.

“Now you’re jinxing us.”

“This is serious. We need a survival strategy.”

She reached out and patted my bangs. “There is no survival strategy.”

“There has to be.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Because if we don’t crash, we won’t need one. And if we do crash . . .” She paused so I could catch her drift.

“We won’t need one?”

A nod. “We’ll just be dead.” Then she snapped her fingers.

“You make it sound easy.”

“Dying *is* easy. It’s *not dying* that’s hard.”

“Guess you have a point there.”

She closed her eyes. “That’s why I’m the brains of the family.”

“I thought I was the brains,” I said, nudging her.

She rolled away. “You know you’re the beauty.”

Impossibly, we survived that trip.

Just as impossibly, I survived many more trips after that, never hitting anything worse than turbulence. I’d read the statistics about how flying was the safest of all the modes of transportation—from cars to trains to gondolas. I’d even once interned at an office right next to an international airport and watched planes go up and come down all day long with nary a problem. I should have been long over it.

But I never could lose the feeling that “flying” and “crashing” were kind of the same thing.

Now, years later, I was dating—seriously dating—a guy who was just days away from getting his pilot’s license. Dating him so seriously, in fact, that on this particular Saturday, as we headed out to celebrate my not-yet-but-almost-official new dream job, I could not shake the feeling that he was also just about to ask me to marry him. Like, any second.

Which is why I was wearing a strapless black sundress.

If I’d thought about it, I might have paused to wonder how my boyfriend, the impossibly fit and charming Charles Philip Dunbar, could be one hundred percent perfect for me in every possible way—and also be such an air travel enthusiast. He never thought twice about flying at all—

or doing anything scary, for that matter, like scuba diving or bungee jumping. He had an inherent faith in the order of the universe and the principles of physics and the right of mankind to bend those principles to its will.

Me, I'd always suspected that chaos was stronger than order. When it was Man against Nature, my money was on Nature every time.

"You just never paid attention in science class," Chip always said, like I was simply under-informed.

True enough. But that didn't make me wrong.

Chip believed that his learning to fly was going to cure my fears. He believed that he'd become so awesome and inspiring that I'd have no choice but to relax and enjoy it.

On this, we had agreed to disagree.

"I will never, ever fly with you," I'd announced before his first lesson.

"You think that now, but one day you'll beg me to take you up."

I shook my head, like, *Nope*. "Not really a beggar."

"Not yet."

Now, he was almost certified. He'd done both his solo and his solo cross-country. He'd completed more than twice his required hours of flight training, just to be thorough. All that remained? His Check Ride, where a seasoned pilot would go up with him and put him in "stressful situations."

"Don't tell me what they are," I'd said.

But he told me anyway.

"Like, they deliberately stall the plane, and you have to cope," he went on, very pleased at the notion of his impressive self coping. "Or you do a short-field landing, where you don't have enough space. And of course: night flying."

The Check Ride was next week. He'd be fine. Chip was the kind of guy who got calmer when things were going haywire. He'd make a perfect pilot. And I'd be perfectly happy for him to fly all he wanted. By himself.

But first, we were getting engaged—or so I hoped. Possibly tonight. On Valentine's.

I can't tell you how I knew, exactly. I'd just sensed it all day, somehow, the way you can sense it's going to rain. By the time I buckled in beside him in his Jeep, I was certain.

I'd known Chip a long time. We'd been dating for three years. I knew every expression in his repertoire and every angle of his body. I knew when he was faking a laugh, or when he was bullshitting. I could tell in seconds if he liked a person or not. And I certainly knew when he was hiding something—especially something he was excited about. Even though this date seemed exactly like every other date we'd ever had, I just knew something big was about to happen.

I figured he'd take us to the Italian place with the twinkle lights where we'd had our first date. But, instead of heading for downtown, he turned toward the freeway and ramped up.

The top was off his Jeep. I clamped my arms down over my hair. "Where are we going?" I called.

He called back, "It's a surprise!"

My stomach dropped at that. Once again, I knew Chip's intentions without his even hinting. This was kind of a problem with us. I could read him too well. He wasn't taking me to dinner. He was taking me to the airport.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we had left the city of Austin far behind. He pulled up the parking brake beside an airplane hangar at a private airfield in the middle of nowhere.

I looked around. "You can't be serious."

He leaned in. "Are you surprised?"

"Yes and no."

"Just pretend. Just once, I'd like to surprise you."

"Fine. I'm shocked. I'm awed."

"Don't pretend that much."

He came around to my side and took me by the hand, and then he pulled me behind him, bent over all sneaky, around to the far side of the hangar.

I followed him in a state of cognitive dissonance—knowing exactly what he was doing while insisting just as clearly that he couldn't possibly be doing it. "Are you sneaking me in here?" I whispered.

"It's fine. My friend Dylan did it with his girlfriend last week."

I tugged back against his hand. "Chip. I can't!"

"Sure you can."

"Is this—illegal?"

"I just want to show you my plane."

"It's not your plane, buddy."

"Close enough."

I had zero interest in seeing his plane. Less than zero. I was interested in wine and appetizers and candlelight. I almost had the job of my dreams! I wanted to be celebrating. I was in the mood to feel good, not bad. "Can't we just go to dinner?"

He peered around, then turned back to me. "*Anybody* can go to dinner."

"I'm cool with being anybody."

"I'm not."

Then, with a coast-is-clear shrug, he pulled me out across the pavement and stopped in front of a little white Cessna. It looked like the kind of plane you'd see in a cartoon—wings up high, body below, and a spiny little propeller nose. Very patriotic, too. Red, white, and blue stripes.

"Cute," I said with a nod, like, *Great. We're done.*

But he took my shoulders and pointed me toward the cockpit.

I took a step back. "What are you doing?"

"Let's go for a ride."

"I'm afraid to fly. Remember?"

"Time to get over that."

"I'll throw up. I'll be motion-sick."

"Not with me, you won't be."

"It's not about you. It's about flying."

"You just need the right pilot."

I was shaking my head—half disbelief, half refusal. "You're not even certified."

“I’m as good as certified. I’ve done everything there is.”

“Except take the test.”

“But the test is just to see what you’ve *already learned*.”

“Chip? *No*.”

“Margaret? *Yes*. And right now before they catch us.”

The force of his insistence was almost physical, like a strong wind you have to brace against. He wanted to do this. He wanted *me* to do this—to show faith in him, to believe in him. It wasn’t a test, exactly, but it was still something I could fail.

I wasn’t a person who failed things.

I was a person who *aced* things.

It felt like a big moment. It felt draped in metaphorical significance about bravery, and trust, and adventurousness—like it would reveal something essential about who I was and how I’d live the rest of my whole life. Saying no to flying right now suddenly felt like saying no to every possibility forever. Did I want to be a person who let minuscule statistical risks undermine any sense of bravery? Was this a challenge I couldn’t rise to? Was I going to let fear make me *small*?

I’m not sure I ever really had a choice. Chip was Chip. He was my perfect man, and I’d thought so ever since his parents moved in next door to my parents, back when we were both in college. Our mothers became best next-door-neighbor friends, drinking wine on the patio and gossiping, but I only saw him on vacations. In the summers, his dad made him mow the lawn, and I’d stand at our window and watch. One time, my mom urged me to take him out a bottle of water, and he glugged the whole thing down in one swoop. I still remember it in slow-mo.

But I really didn’t know him at all until we both wound up at business school together back home in Austin by accident. I was team leader of our study group, and he worked under me, which was good for him.

That’s how we fell in love.

I’d have married him that first night we kissed, if he’d asked me. He was that kind of guy. Tall, clean-shaven, blond, all-American, high-achieving, confident. And dreamy. People did what he wanted. I felt lucky to be with him, and I’d doodled “Margaret Dunbar” more times

than I'll ever admit. I once Googled dog breeds for our future pet. And one night, when shopping for something else—I swear—on the Home Depot website, I clicked on a little pop-up box for wood fence pickets. Just to see how much they were.

Now we were both out of school with our brand-new MBAs, both about to start our new jobs—Chip as an entry-level financial analyst at an investment bank, a job he found through a friend of his dad, and me as a business development manager for an oil and gas company called Simtex Petroleum. His job was good, but mine was far better, and I thought it was sporting of him, and rather gallant, to be so happy for me.

In truth, I wasn't even qualified for my new job. It required "five years of experience in the sector," "advanced knowledge of bidding for commercial contracts," and actual "international experience," none of which I had—but my B-school mentor had gone out on a limb for me, calling in a favor from a friend and writing a stunning letter of recommendation that called me a "fiercely energetic forward thinker, a problem solver, an excellent communicator, and a team player with strong business and financial acumen."

I'd laughed when he'd showed me the job listing. "I'm not remotely qualified for this."

"People get jobs they're not qualified for all the time."

I stared at the description. "They want 'demonstrated strategic and higher operational level engagement with the logistics environment.'"

"You're a shoo-in."

"I'm a joke."

"Now you're just thinking like a girl."

"I *am* a girl."

"We need to remedy that."

I gave him a look.

"When you go to this interview, I want you to pretend to be a man."

I closed my eyes. "Pretend to be a man."

"A *badass* man," he confirmed. "A man who's not just qualified, but overqualified."

I shook my head at him.

“Qualifications,” he said, “pale in the face of confidence.”

“If you say so,” I said. Though I didn’t believe it for a second. I went into the interview that day fully expecting to be laughed out of the room. But I did what he told me to. I pretended like hell—if nothing else, to prove him wrong.

Then they offered me the job. Or, at least, as the HR guy walked me to the lobby, he touched my shoulder and said, “It’s not official, but you’ve got it.”

My starting salary was going to be 50K higher than Chip’s—but my mother told me not to tell him that. The important thing was: We were beginning our lives. Things were falling into place.

And here, at the airfield, I didn’t want to be the only thing that didn’t.

Chip squeezed my hands. “You trust me, right?”

“Yes.” Sort of.

Then he pulled me into a kiss—a manly, determined, all-this-can-be-yours kiss, digging his tongue into my mouth in a way that he clearly found powerful and erotic, but that I, given how the sheer terror of what I was about to do had iced my blood, was too numb to feel.

Then he swatted me on the butt and said, “Climb in.”

What can I say? I did it.

But I’m telling you, my hands were shaking.

As I worked on hooking the shoulder strap, I gave myself a stern talking-to: This was the right thing to do. Wasn’t that what love was, after all? Saying *yes*—not just when it was easy, but also when it was hard?

Of course, any analyst worth her degree could have easily made the exact opposite argument: that I should trust my gut, and I shouldn’t let Chip push me into doing things I didn’t want to do. That his lack of respect for my genuine discomfort in the face of his *Top Gun* fantasies did not bode well for our long-term prospects.

But I wasn’t going there.

I was going flying.

Then he was next to me, buckling up and handing me a set of black headphones. I had that feeling you get once you’ve picked a roller coaster seat and clamped yourself in.



Chip immediately shifted into character as the pilot. He slid his aviator sunglasses on and pressed the headphone mic so close to his mouth that his lips brushed against it, and started speaking a language to the control tower so specialized, it was basically nonsense: “South Austin Clearance Delivery—Cessna Three Two Six Tango Delta Charlie with information Juliet—VFR to Horseshoe Bay cruising three thousand three hundred.”

It sounded to me like he was pretending. Who talked like that? But the tower didn’t agree. Crackling through the headphones came “Cessna Three Two Six Tango Delta Charlie—South Austin Clearance—squawk two three one four, departure frequency will be one two zero point niner.”

Oh, shit. This was happening.

Chip checked instruments and dials, looking them over like a pro. He looked at ease. Capable. Trustworthy. Macho, too. And, dammit, yes: super cool.

“I already went through my safety checklist before I came to get you—twice,” he said. His voice was crackly through the headphones, but he took my hand and squeezed. “Didn’t want to give you time to change your mind.”

Smart.

But I was all in by this point. I’d made my choice. For better or worse, as they say.

So Chip turned his attention to bigger things.

Still in sexy-pilot mode, he spoke into the mic and gave another nonsense message to the tower, confirming that we were waiting for the runway. I’d never been in the cockpit of a plane before, and this plane was all cockpit. Technically, there were two seats behind us, but it felt like we were in a Matchbox car.

Another plane had to land before we could take off, and I studied the dashboard with all its knobs and dials and ’ometers. I pointed at it. “Isn’t this kind of tall?” It was higher than my head. I could barely see over.

He nodded. “It’s not like driving a car,” he explained, “where it’s all about what you see. Flying’s more instrument based.”

“You don’t look out the windshield?”

“You do, but you’re looking at the instruments and gauges just as much. It’s half looking, half math.”

The other plane touched down, slowed, and trundled past us. *See?* I said to myself. *They survived.* We revved up, Chip announced us again over the radio, and he started working the pedals to bring us into position. The blades on the propeller spun so fast they disappeared. The plane vibrated and hummed. I sat on my cold hands so I wouldn’t squeeze them into fists.

“Please don’t do any loop-de-loops or anything,” I said then.

He glanced over. “Loop-de-loops?”

“Spins or flips. Or whatever. Show-offy stuff.”

“I don’t have to show off for you,” he said.

“You sure don’t.”

“You already know how awesome I am.”

I gave a nod. “Yes. And also, I might throw up.”

We sped up, casting ourselves forward. As we lifted off, I decided it wasn’t that different from going up in a regular plane. A little bumpier, maybe. A smidge more front-and-center. A tad more *Out of Africa*.

The ground floated away beneath us. Easy.

Chip was focused and calm, and it was so strange to think he was making it all happen. Once we were airborne, he started narrating everything he was doing, as if he were giving me a lesson. He told me the Cessna 172 was the most popular plane ever built. A classic. We would level off at 3,000 feet. We’d be traveling 125 miles an hour, speeding up as the air thinned out so we didn’t stall. He had to scan the sky for other planes, as well as watch the radar on the screen for towers.

Then something disturbing: He mentioned that the fuel was in the wings.

“That seems like bad engineering,” I said. “What if the wings break off? You’ll get doused in fuel.”

“The wings don’t break off,” Chip said. “That’s not a thing.”

“But *if they did.*”

“If they did, you’ve got bigger problems than a fuel spill.”

I put my hands in my lap and deliberately arranged them so they would not look clenched.

The plane was loud—hence the headphones—and we vibrated more in the air than we had on the ground, especially when we passed under a cloud. Chip explained that clouds actually sit on columns of rising air, and that turbulence happens when you cut through those columns. I had never thought of clouds as sitting on anything—just floating—but once he said it, it made sense. The more sense he made, the safer I felt.

He grinned over at me. “Awesome, huh?”

*Kind of.* “Awesome.”

“Still scared?”

*Yes.* “Nope.”

“Glad you came?”

“I’ll be gladder once we’re back on the ground.”

“I knew you’d enjoy it. I knew you could be brave if you tried.”

Such an odd compliment. As if he’d never seen me be brave before. As if my capacity for bravery had been up for debate.

But I did feel braver now, as we rose above the subdivisions laid out like a mosaic below us.

The hardest part was over, I remember thinking.

Before long, the suburbs beneath us thinned out, and I realized I had no idea where he was taking me.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I’m just going to show you one quick thing,” Chip said, “and then we’ll turn back around and go home.”

I could see that up ahead, dark and jagged, was a body of water.

“Is that Horseshoe Bay?” I asked. My grandparents had a house there. I’d been there a million times, but I’d never seen it from this angle.

Chip nodded. “You guessed it.”

We were approaching the far shore. “What do you want to show me?”

“Wait and see.”

Chip angled us back to circle over the lake, brought our altitude down a bit, and maneuvered us closer to the water. I could see houses and little cars below, but it was hard to recognize anything from this bird’s-eye

view. We dipped a little lower, close enough to see little waves breaking against the shore.

“Keep an eye on the beach,” he said, taking us lower still.

I peered out my window. A thin strip of sand, and people, and picnic tables on the grass nearby. Now I recognized it. The public beach on the far shore.

After a few minutes, he said, “There!” and pointed.

I looked. “Where?”

“Can you read it?” Chip asked.

“Read what?”

He peered down, out his side window. “Shit. We’re too high.”

But any lower made the towers on the radar turn red.

Chip turned my way. “There’s writing in the sand down there.”

I didn’t see anything. “What does it say?”

“It says, ‘Marry me!’”

My heart gave a little jolt, but I played it cool. “It does?” I couldn’t see any writing in the sand.

“I saw it on the news yesterday. A guy proposed by writing the words in giant letters in the sand with rocks, then taking his girlfriend for a picnic by the lake to surprise her.”

“Cool,” I said, like it was just empirically interesting. What were we talking about?

“I really wanted you to see those words.”

“You did?”

“I did.” He glanced over again. “Because I’ve been wanting to ask you the same question.”

It’s one thing to expect something to happen, or root for it, or hope—and it’s another thing entirely to live the actual moment. I put my hand to my mouth and pressed my head to the window one more time for a better look.

“And there’s something else. Open the glove box.”

Sure enough, there was a little storage compartment in front of me. Inside, I found an emerald-green velvet ring box.

I was so glad I’d forced myself into this plane. Sometimes, terrify-

ing, nausea-inducing risks are worth it. I turned to Chip. “You’re asking me to marry you?”

His voice crackled out through the headphones. But I knew the answer was yes.

So I gave my own answer. “Yes!”

“You haven’t even opened the box.”

“I don’t need to. Just: Yes!”

Chip turned toward me with a big smile full of perfect teeth. I could see myself reflected in his sunglasses, and my hair was a mess. I fought the urge to straighten it up. I also fought the urge to climb over and kiss him. It seemed strange not to kiss at a moment like that, but no way was I unbuckling. I couldn’t even remember how to unhook the shoulder strap.

Instead, I gave him a thumbs-up.

“It’s not official till you put on the ring,” he said.

I opened the box to find a very ornate gold-and-diamond engagement ring.

“It was my grandmother’s,” he said.

I pulled it out and slid it onto my finger. It was a bit big. Big enough, actually, that when I held out my hand to admire it, the diamond slid to the side and hung upside down.

“It’s perfect,” I said.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes!” I said. Not my style, but who cared?

“Are you surprised?”

*Yes and no.* I nodded. “Yes.”

“Are you glad you came flying with me?”

“Very,” I said. And that answer really was one hundred percent true. For a little while longer, at least.

WE NEVER FOUND the letters in the sand. But it was okay. We didn’t need them.

It was about twenty minutes back to the airfield, and we filled those minutes by arguing adorably about the wedding.

We agreed we should have the ceremony on that very beach, and then started listing bridesmaids and groomsmen. Most people were shoo-ins, like his brother, and his buddies Woody, Statler, Murphy, and Harris from undergrad—but then, of course, the question of what to do about my sister, Kitty, came up and stumped us for a while.

I hadn't seen or talked to Kitty in three years. Her choice.

"You have to invite her, though," Chip said.

But I wasn't sure I wanted to. When she first went away, she announced she was "taking a breather" from our family. She'd be in touch, she said. Then she never was.

We knew she wasn't dead. Our dad had kept in occasional contact, and he could verify that she was living in New York, alive and well—just unwilling, for some reason she would not share, to come home. Even for a visit.

At first it had been a little heartbreaking, losing her like that—being *rejected* by her like that. But by now, after all this time, I just felt cold. She didn't like me? Fine. I wouldn't like her, either. She wanted to pretend like her family didn't exist? No problem. We could pretend the same thing right back.

Chip thought we needed to invite her to the wedding, at least. If not make her the maid of honor. But I disagreed.

"First of all," I said, "she won't even come. And second, if she does, she'll ruin the whole thing."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Just her being there will ruin things for me. Just feeling weird about seeing her again will suck the joy right out of the day. Instead of looking forward to the most joyful day of my life, I'll dread it. Because of her."

"Maybe you could see each other beforehand and get the weirdness out of the way," Chip said.

I was in no mood for reasonable suggestions. "Even," I went on, "if I manage to get past the weirdness, having her there would still mean *having her there*. Which means a ninety percent chance of her getting drunk and climbing into the punch bowl. Or getting drunk and biting a

groomsman. Or getting drunk and grabbing the microphone for an Ethel Merman impersonation.”

Chip nodded. I wasn't hypothesizing. Kitty had actually done each of these things in the past. He shrugged. “But she's your only sister.”

“That's not my fault.”

“It would seem weird for her not to be there.”

I went on. “And it's not my fault we're not close anymore, either.”

“No argument there.”

“*She* created that situation.”

“I agree.”

“And now she gets to spoil the only wedding day I'll ever have.”

My luck. I'd throw the most exquisite wedding in the history of time, and the only takeaway would be my drunk, black-sheep sister trying to ride the ice sculpture.

If she deigned to come.

Actually, that summed up our dynamic exactly. I was always trying to get things exactly right, and she was always hell-bent on getting them spectacularly wrong.

UP AHEAD, THE airfield came into sight.

Chip was especially good at landings, he mentioned then. He just had a knack for them, kind of the way he had a knack for parallel parking.

That said, the sky up ahead was quite different from the sky we'd seen on the flight down. Darker, stormier. “That's unexpected,” Chip said, taking it in.

“Was it supposed to rain?”

“Not last I checked.”

“You can fly in the rain, though, right?”

“Not really. You avoid it. Or wait for it to pass.”

“I'm fine with either,” I said. So agreeable with that ring on.

“The thing is, though,” he said then, “we're going to need to land sooner rather than later.”

“So we don’t miss our fancy dinner reservation?”

“So we don’t run out of fuel.”

I studied the horizon. The sky behind us was bright blue, but up ahead it was grayer and grayer. And a little purple. With a smidge of charcoal black.

“That’s definitely rain—but way past the airport. Right?”

He nodded. “Right.”

Off on the horizon, there was a flash of lightning.

Maybe the storm was affecting our air. The ride back had become quite a bit bumpier, and soon I was motion-sick.

As we approached, Chip called in our coordinates in that official pilot’s voice, which was a little deeper than his regular one, and then he maneuvered us into the flight pattern for landing. We pulled around to the left, then turned to run along the length of the runway, then U-turned to descend to the ground. Chip was all concentration. I felt, more than saw, the ground getting closer. A welcome idea.

And then a funny thing happened. As we were nearing the runway, the wings did a thing I can only describe as a waggle—dipping sideways a little and then popping back up—that gave me a physical sting of fear in my chest.

It was over in a second, but that second changed everything. Something was wrong.

I looked over at Chip. His face was stone still.

“Chip?” I said.

“The wind’s shifted,” he said.

“What?” I asked. “Is that bad?”

“It’s a crosswind now” was all he answered.

A crosswind? What was a crosswind? It didn’t sound good. Chip was checking dials, and working the pedals with his feet. His face was expressionless.

He seemed to be holding us fairly steady. I kept quiet, concentrating on willing us some good luck.

We were maybe twenty feet above the runway now, coming in straight. And then, suddenly, the tarmac just slid off to the side. It was



below us, and then it shifted away, like someone had tried to do a tablecloth trick—and failed—putting a grove of trees in front of us instead.

“Shit!” Chip said, and he hunched closer to the yoke.

He maneuvered us back into position, lined up over the runway again.

“Chip?”

But he was talking to the radio tower. “Cessna Three Two Six Tango Delta Charlie. Failed approach, strong crosswind.” Then his pilot-speak seemed to fail him, and he fell back into plain English. “Pulling up to try the approach again.”

A blast of static on the headphones. “Roger that, Cessna Three Two Six Tango Delta Charlie, proceed on course.”

And then the earth dropped away from us again. The engine sounded suddenly extra loud, like a lawn mower on steroids. We rose up in the air and repositioned to start the descent pattern over. To the south, blue skies. To the north, purple. Another flash of lightning.

“Is the crosswind because of the storm?” I asked.

Chip didn’t answer. A bead of sweat ran down behind his ear and soaked into his T-shirt collar.

For the second try, he started farther down the runway, as if giving himself room to course-correct if he needed to. Which he did. Twice the runway beneath us rotated out to the side, and twice Chip manhandled the plane into lining up over it again.

“Nice!” I said, wanting to encourage him, hoping like hell he didn’t pull up again and make us start all over. It was the least of my worries at this point, I guess, but I was right on the edge of throwing up.

I wanted nothing more than to touch down on that concrete.

It felt like the longest descent in the history of flight. Chip made one more course correction, and then we were lowering closer, and closer. I could see the concrete of the runway welcoming us down. I willed us to touch.

Then we came to a section of the runway with an airplane hangar right beside it. The size and width of that hangar seemed to provide a little windbreak. We were maybe ten feet above the runway as we passed the hangar—so close—and I could feel the wind ease off as we moved

into its shadow. Everything seemed calmer somehow. Even the engine sounded quieter. Chip eased off his struggle with the controls. The ground was so close.

*We made it*, I thought.

And then we passed out of the wind block, past the corner of the hangar, back into open air again, and as we did, a blast of wind hit, so concentrated and fierce that it scooped up under the wing on my side and punched us into a type of spin that folks in aviation call “cartwheeling.”

I remember it in slow motion. I remember slamming hard against my seat belt—so hard, it felt like a wooden post—as my wing jerked up and the plane rotated on the tip of the other. I remember that wing scraping the tarmac with an eardrum-ripping, metal-against-concrete shriek. I remember Chip’s shocked voice shouting, “Hold on!” though I had no idea what to hold on to. I remember screaming so hard I felt like nothing but the scream—and Chip doing it, too—the two of us holding each other’s shocked gazes, like, *This can’t be happening*. I remember some tiny tendril of my consciousness veering off to a funny little philosophical moment in the center of it all—marveling at the pointlessness of the screaming since we were so clearly beyond help—before arriving at the bigger, more salient picture:

This was the moment of our death.

There was no arguing with what was happening, and there was certainly nothing either of us could do about it. We were the very definition of helpless, and as I realized that, it also hit me that everything I’d been looking forward to was over before it even began. Chip and me—and the lakeside wedding we’d never have, and the rescue beagle we’d never adopt, and the valedictorian babies we’d never make. They say your life flashes before your eyes, but it wasn’t my life as I’d lived it that I saw. It was the life I’d been waiting for. The one I’d never get a chance to live.

My future slid past my fingers as I fumbled for it—and missed.

I felt suddenly coated with anger like I’d been dunked in it. I didn’t think about my parents in that moment, or my friends, or how hard my

death would be on anyone else. I thought only of myself—and how I just couldn't fucking believe this was all the time I got.

I couldn't tell you how many full rotations we completed as we blew across that runway like somebody's lost kite, but there's a reason they call it cartwheeling. The wings were the spokes of a giant wheel, and we were the axle in the middle on a spinning carnival ride from hell. At a certain point, I lost all sense of spatial orientation, and it stopped feeling like we were spinning—more like rocking back and forth. I remember focusing all my energy on not barfing because there was nothing else to even hope to control.

I was maybe three seconds from spewing vomit like in *The Exorcist* when the passenger-side wing mercifully broke off with an unearthly, bone-rattling *crack*. A spray of jet fuel hit the windshield with a *clomp* sound like we were at a drive-through car wash, and we collapsed at last in a ditch, with my side—the passenger side—wedged down in it, and Chip's side angled up at the sky.

We stopped.

Everything was still.

Then I vomited onto the window below me.