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Routine can be a very dangerous word, for it is in that mind frame where unexpected tragedy lurks. Through the crystal-clear skies over a Midwestern American city, a commercial airliner was on final approach for landing. It seemed like a routine flight as the 737 gently descended from the heavens. Flight attendants had made their final cabin check, ensuring that the passengers had stowed their carry on items, secured their tray tables and returned their seats to the upright position. Through the aircraft windows, the summer sun glistened upon the shiny-metallic wings, trimmed for descent. With the engine power reduced, only the occasional humming of control-surface adjustments was heard throughout the aircraft, reminding all souls onboard that they were at the mercy of a complex machine, assembled from countless moving parts, manufactured and maintained by well intended, though imperfect men and women. For those onboard, everything still seemed routine.

After an unexpected surge of engine power, the 737 again began to climb skyward. Several minutes later, two bells chimed over the PA. The lead flight attendant left her seat and walked from first class to the inter-flight phone panel. After stepping in front of the peephole, she gently knocked on the door. When the security latch was released, she entered the cockpit to find the pilots, both middle-aged men, appearing abnormally busy flying the airplane.

Seated to the left, the captain half-raised his headset above his ear. “Maggie, we’re having a problem with the landing gear,” he calmly stated. “We may have to come in for a wheels-up landing.”

The flight attendant, a woman in her forties, with blond hair and gray-blue eyes, stood strong and erect. “Yes, Captain,” she replied.

Maggie listened as the first officer spoke into his headset microphone. “O’Hare tower, Southland 313. After our go-around, we’re still unable to lower our left main landing gear, both manually and by free fall. We have no indicator light and we need to declare an emergency.”

“Southland 313, O’Hare tower, your maintenance people are on their way up here.”

“O’Hare tower, Southland 313, standing by for maintenance recommendations.”

The captain turned to his first officer. “Ted, let’s start dumping some fuel, and when the Chicago emergency crews are ready for us, we’ll land on the foam.”

“Roger that,” he dutifully replied.

“Maggie, prepare the cabin for an alternative-emergency landing on foam,” the captain ordered.

“I understand,” she replied without wavering. “The cabin will be ready, sir.”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” he said with a reassuring wink. It was as if he could sense the flight attendant’s fear, even though she appeared to be working hard to disguise her emotions.

At the same moment Maggie left the cockpit, the captain activated the aircraft-wide PA. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he announced, “this is Captain Swanson, up on the flight deck. We seem to be having a problem with the landing gear, so we are going to be required to make an alternative-emergency landing.”

Maggie reached the twelve seats in first class as the announcement continued. “There is no reason to be concerned. This is protocol procedure,” Swanson assured. “The flight attendants will be coming through the cabin giving you specific

instructions. Please do everything they ask, and most importantly, stay calm.” She studied the shocked and bewildered expressions of the people seated in the comfortable loungers, who only moments before, had been finishing their coffee, cocktails, or Diet Cokes.

“What does alternative-emergency landing mean?” a man in a business suit demanded. “Why can’t we use the landing gear?”

“Please, sir, stay calm,” Maggie replied. “Everything will be explained to you.”

“We’re still going to be landing in Chicago,” another man insisted. “I have an important meeting in Chicago this afternoon.”

Maggie silenced him with a stern glare. It always amazed her how thoughtless and self-centered people could be, even in a time a crisis. “Please, sir,” she cautioned. “I need you quiet and paying attention to my instructions.”

Glancing out the window, Maggie noticed the slow, steady turn the pilots were executing. She knew from training that it was crucial for the aircraft to stay within the vicinity of the airport, while at the same time, reducing the amount of fuel they were carrying. The combination of half-full wing tanks and air pockets made for a deadly combination should there be a fire upon impact. Without landing gear, according to the company manual, alternative-emergency landing, was a gentler way of describing a controlled crash. While activating the cabin-wide PA, Maggie tried to put the idea of the impact, fire and toxic smoke out of her mind. She had to stay focused, and most importantly, for the sake of the passengers, she had to appear unafraid.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please pay special attention to the instructions you are going to be given,” she announced. “All loose carry-on items must be stowed in the overhead compartments. Flight attendants will be coming through the cabin to make sure that nothing can become airborne when we land. Afterward, please remain in your seats with the belt tightly fastened and await further instructions.”

Drilled for that exact scenario during training, the three other attendants working that flight were already checking for loose objects, securing overhead latches, and calming 144 frightened passengers on the filled-to-capacity flight. While all the cabin doors were unlocked for slide activation and emergency egress, Maggie began consulting economy-class passengers seated in exit rows at the center of the aircraft.

She leaned in from the aisle toward the man in the window seat. Of the three people in that row, he was clinching his armrest and appeared nearly catatonic. “Sir, once we’ve landed,” she instructed, with a pointing finger, “I’ll need you to pull back on that latch handle and open the emergency exit door.”

Looking at her, the young man was stone-faced and void of perceivable emotion.

“Sir,” Maggie reiterated. “Can you hear me?”

A businessman in the middle seat, next to the speechless passenger tapped the young man on the arm. “The emergency door. She’s asking you about the door.”

With the young man seemingly unwilling, or unable, to answer, the businessman said to Maggie, “I can open the door when we land.”

She nodded. “If necessary, sir, will you also be willing to help passengers out to the wing?”

At first, he didn’t appear eager for heroics. It took him a moment to answer. “Yeah, I’ll do what it takes.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll need you two to switch seats,” Maggie instructed the two men.

A young woman in the aisle seat of that row tugged on Maggie’s skirt. “He’s my fiancé and he really hates flying,” she stammered. “We didn’t know the flight was going to be full. We requested an aisle and a window in hopes of getting an empty seat between us. I know you asked us about the emergency exit when we boarded, but we never thought we’d have to actually use it.”

“Most people don’t,” Maggie remarked. “But now, I need your fiance seated away from the emergency exit door. Please step into the aisle.”

The woman hesitantly complied, as if merely standing required fortitude she couldn’t muster. After the businessman in the middle seat moved into the aisle as well, Maggie reached in to help the young man still gripping his armrest.

“Tim, please,” the young woman implored over Maggie’s shoulder. “Sweetheart, you have to get out of that seat.”

With quivering lips, he nodded. Maggie helped him release his fingers from the armrest. “Come on, Tim,” she quietly urged. “These people will get us down on the ground, Tim, no problem,” the wife-to-be whispered.

While the seat swapping progressed, Maggie noticed the exchange was upsetting nearby passengers. Though no one said anything, clearly the urgent need for the emergency exit was a chilling manifestation of the impending landing. Usually, during the pre-flight safety video, most passengers disregarded the instructions. They would rarely look up from newspapers or in-flight magazines. The idea of a real emergency seemed inconceivable, or remote at best. However, Maggie understood that when an emergency really occurred, the amount of repetitive or foolish questions was beyond belief.

Once the businessman moved to the seat by the emergency exit door, Maggie leaned over to him. “Everything will be just fine, sir. Thank you for helping.”

“Ian, my name is Ian,” he gulped. “When the time comes, I’ll do what I can.”

“Thank you, Ian. Just relax and wait for further instructions.”

When two bells again chimed from the cockpit, Maggie hurried that way. Stepping inside to consult the pilots, she got a flight-deck view of the airport looming in the distance. Though it was several miles away, she could clearly see the emergency vehicles and flashing lights lining the taxiways. Ominously, thick-white foam covered the runway.

“How are things going in the cabin, Maggie?” Captain Swanson asked.

“Cabin check is complete, Captain.”

Swanson glanced at his first officer. The man was speaking into his headset while at the same time he was focusing on the landing gear indicator lights. “O’Hare tower, Southland 313. I understand that during our flyby, left main landing gear was still not down, I repeat not down,” he stressed.

The copilot grimaced ever so slightly before turning to Captain Swanson. “No gear sighted, so we don’t have a faulty indicator light. Hydraulic pressure is okay. It must be jammed up there somehow.”

“Well, we can’t very well get out and pry the gear down.” The captain turned to Maggie. “Start giving the passengers the alternative-landing commands. After landing, if it’s necessary to evacuate the aircraft, we’ll give the evacuation command from the flight deck.”

“Yes sir,” she respectfully replied. At the same moment, the aircraft buffeted from turbulence, causing Maggie to stumble into the flight-deck bulkhead.

As she regained her balance, she overheard the first officer report, “ATIS and O’Hare tower are now advising us about fifteen-knot crosswinds, gusting to twenty-five. But now that the foam is down, they’re not going to change the active.”

“The Windy City. A problem with the main gear had to happen here,” Swanson grumbled. “Well, we can’t go anywhere else with the last of our fuel in Lake Michigan.”

As their discussion continued, Maggie calmly exited the cockpit and closed the door. Taking a deep, calming breath, she activated the cabin-wide PA on the wall panel near her forward jump seat.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I am going to divide the cabin into sections,” Maggie instructed. “Passengers in the back should exit the back door with a slide, those in the front, exit the forward door with a slide. And those in the center should use the left and right emergency exits over the wings.”

After confirming the passenger division was clearly understood between front and back, and left and right, she continued her instructions.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, in preparation for our alternative-emergency landing, you will be hearing a series of commands,” she announced. Another turbulence bump punctuated her words. “It is very important that you follow all of our instructions. This will help the pilots and flight attendants get us on the ground safely. We understand that this is difficult for everyone, but please stay calm. What you are about to hear is routine for these kinds of landings.”

Giving their undivided attention, the passengers were completely silent as they waited for her to continue. Ominously, the oxygen masks dropped from the overhead panel interrupting the process.

“The oxygen masks have been lowered as standard procedure,” Maggie explained, “please disregard the masks, as they are not needed at this altitude.” However, just the very sight of them was unnerving for those who had only seen the devices as part of a safety demonstration.

“This is a test run. The commands are grab ankles, heads down, stay down.”

Passengers did exactly as instructed, and not a head could be seen behind the seat backs. Maggie then instructed, “after landing you will be told to release seatbelts, release seatbelts, come this way, come this way, and get out, get out. Test complete. Thank you.”

As passenger began resuming their upright-seated positions, Maggie summarized her instruction. “When we say, command start, please continue to follow our commands. Again, these are normal procedures for an alternative-emergency landing. There is no reason to be alarmed. Stay calm, we will get you on the ground safely.”

After the flight attendants made one last cabin check, five bells chimed from the cockpit, followed by another five bells. Each of the four flight attendants manned their jump seats, two in the aft cabin and two forward. There came another distinct

altitude drop, resulting in cabin wide, anxious groans. With the exception of Maggie, giving commands on the PA from her seat, there was nothing else the flight attendants could do—like the passengers, they were at the mercy of the two men in the cockpit—it would come down to their judgment, their skills and a measure of luck.

“Command start!” Maggie ordered over the PA. “Grab ankles, heads down, stay down.”

During the minutes that felt like countless hours for every soul in the cabin, the 737-300 traveled down from a circular orbit above Chicago. As the pilots targeted the runway growing in their cockpit windscreens, the engines had been throttled back for final approach and the control surfaces were optimally set. Those two men were the only ones who could see anything for that matter, for everyone in the cabin was doing exactly as instructed—staying down. Even Maggie was required to keep her arms wrapped firmly around her ankles. For her, in a balled-up position, the only word that came to mind was powerless, utterly powerless.

After Maggie’s commands, an eerie stillness filled the cabin. Though there was no interior movement, there were distinct sounds. Through the thin aluminum skin, she could hear the engines humming with healthy compression and final adjustments being made to the control surfaces. There were muted prayers spoken by some passengers, and loving goodbyes whispered by others. Another gust of crosswind inspired a sobbing “Hail Mary” from a woman seated in first class.

Feeling the aircraft nose beginning to flare, Maggie understood they were only moments away from contacting the runway. The pilots were required to keep the aircraft level enough for the nose wheel and right main landing to support the fuselage. As the airspeed dropped, the aircraft’s wheelless left underside would eventually impact the runway. Maggie knew that it would be a noisy and unnerving event. During her decades of flying, it would be her second alternate landing. She’d found the process to actually be much less violent than expected. In theory, the fire-retardant foam would help lubricate

the initial impact of the aircraft before it slid down the runway with friction acting as brakes. Although the other aircraft she'd been in never flew again, the passenger and crew had walked away with only rattled nerves. And once the wheelless underside contacted the ground, there would be no going around for another try. When the pilots committed, they had one shot at keeping the aircraft on the centerline. In ideal weather conditions, the procedure was very survivable, however, after another gust of Midwestern wind, Maggie realized that all bets were off.

Those fateful moments for everyone onboard Flight 313 occurred in slow frames, experienced in their collective minds, like surreal snapshots from a photographer's lens. The approach over the apron appeared flawless until a whipping-wind gust lifted the right wing and raised the nose. Accordingly, the left wing dipped dangerously close to the tarmac. Before the pilots could add power or correct the flight controls, the tail section of the fuselage struck into the pavement. Deprived of airspeed, the nose wheel of the aircraft followed in the downward direction. The port engine slammed into the O'Hare tarmac, causing the 737 to careen sharply to the left. Having lost the flow of air required for lift, gravity and inertia took control. The nose of the aircraft veered off the pavement, away from the fire-retardant foam.

Judging by the stomach-wrenching g-forces, Maggie Lund knew something had gone wrong. Keeping her head between her knees, she began to whisper a prayer. Suddenly, there came the tearing of metal, and then a burst of bright sunlight as the fuselage had split apart. Terrified passengers called out and cried, but even their shrieking voices were barely audible over the sounds destruction. Having been traveling at over 140 knots, it took a few hundred yards of grass and gravel before the crumpled craft settled to rest on an adjacent taxiway. Sensing that her body was bruised but at least intact, Maggie opened her eyes and surveyed the hellish environment—she knew the survivors had to get out, immediately.

“Release seat belts! Come this way!” she bellowed over the sounds of the injured and the dying.

The emergency floor lights were glowing at her feet and they were illuminating wisps of acrid smoke. What followed was the smell of burning fuel, plastic and flesh. Though the fuselage was partially intact, the left side of the cabin suffered the most impact damage. The left wing fuel tank and engine had been crushed into the seat rows, causing, from what Maggie could see, unspeakable carnage. And from a distance, she could see that Ian, the brave man who had changed seats with the frightened fiancé, had not lived long enough to open the emergency exit door. As for the engaged couple, the searing conflagration took them as partners in eternity.

“Release seat belts! Come this way!” she ordered to several dozen passengers able to get out of their seats.

The other flight attendant posted to the forward cabin had the door open and the slide extended. The passengers on the right side had opened the emergency exits over the wing. From outside, Maggie could hear the sounds of emergency vehicles rushing into action. When dazed passengers began stumbling past her, she noticed one middle-age woman was reaching up into an overhead compartment and attempting to remove a bag.

“Miss! Come forward, now!” Maggie demanded.

Whether the woman was stunned from an injury or just insensitive beyond measure, she didn’t respond. She simply kept tugging at an object stuck in the overhead bin. With the smoke having thickened to what felt like a toxic-black paste, flames appeared from within a mass of port-side seats, twisted metal and bloodied bodies. Knowing that breathable air and time was running out for everyone still onboard the aircraft, Maggie charged towards the woman in the aisle under the bin.

“Dammit! Leave your bag and come this way!” Maggie shrieked. The experience filled her with an unparalleled feeling of frustration. Within seconds, she reached the woman and grabbed her by the arm. “Come forward! Now!” she repeated.

The woman glared at Maggie with black, seemingly hallow eyes. Void of facial expression, she appeared like the walking

dead. Shocked by the hideous sight, Maggie let go of her grip and backed away.

“You have to come forward, Now!”

Without responding, the woman smiled, menacingly before resuming her seemingly senseless effort of removing a bag. Knowing that she had to help others get outside before the entire plane was consumed in smoke and flames, Maggie turned back toward the emergency exit row. Oddly, she tried to walk but her feet were stuck, as though the flooring had melted and was gluing her shoes in place. Her frustration turned to panic as the interior had grown into a hellish caldron of destruction.

“This is what they want,” the ghoulish woman said as she pulled the bag free. “This was our price to pay. . .all of us.”

From what Maggie could see through the billowing smoke, the woman was holding a Southland Air cargo satchel. The zipper was open, revealing wads of cash stuffed inside.

“This isn’t happening! This isn’t real!” Maggie pleaded. Struggling to lift her feet from the liquefied cabin floor, she was still unable to move. The feeling of frustration gave way to sheer panic, as the conflagration surrounded her, leaving no direction of escape. She could feel the searing heat upon her face and upper body. She could hear the screams of the dying. Maggie wanted desperately to cry out but she was unable to make a sound. In spite of the raging temperature, she then felt an inexplicably cold, wet sensation. Her panic, fear and confusion reached a crescendo as everything went dark. Was she also dying? Or was she already dead?

Then, suddenly, Maggie Lund awoke in a modest hotel room, alone, and covered with a sweat that had drenched her pillows. Convinced her flesh had been roasting on the bone she began sobbing upon feeling her body unharmed. Traumatized by her nightmare, she didn’t have the energy to wipe away the tears. Only after several minutes, did she muster the strength to check her watch.

“Three-ten,” she gasped into the darkness. “Oh my God. I just can’t do it anymore. I just can’t.” She stared at the ceiling, wide awake, her eyes glued open.

After another few minutes, Maggie reached over to the nightstand and fumbled with her cell phone. She programmed a number, swiped away blond hair, and placed the receiver to her ear.

“Southland Air, Central Dispatch,” a young female operator answered.

“Yes, yes, this is Maggie Lund, senior flight attendant on Flight 313,” she stammered.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that please.”

The tapping of computer keys followed Maggie’s slowed reiteration. “Yes, Ms. Lund,” the woman replied. “How can I help you?”

“I’m on a layover in Phoenix and I can’t finish the trip.”

“Are you sick?”

“I don’t know. No.”

“Oh.” A pause followed. “May I ask why you can’t make your flight?”

“Because. . .because, I think,” she faltered. After several seconds and few deep breaths, she admitted, “I have a bad feeling. . .and I won’t get on that flight.”

“All right,” the woman said without sounding judgmental. “We’ll schedule a replacement.”

Maggie breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank you.”

“Is there anyone else you need to talk with? I can refer you to Physiological Services.”

“I’m not crazy,” Maggie insisted. “Really, I’m not.”

“I’m not saying you are, but you know I’m going to have to report this to your supervisor, and it will go in your progress report.”

Maggie paused, and again the tears began to flow. “Do what you need to do, but I just won’t. . .I can’t get on that plane.”

* * *

Junior flight attendant, Stephanie Stevens was asleep in her tiny Los Angeles apartment when her Southland Air pager sounded. She rolled over on her daybed and squinted to read the

number on the LCD. Resting on her end table was a cell phone, also kept at arms lengths for on-call nights. Attempting to focus her sleepy vision, she programmed a number.

“Southland Air Central,” a man answered abruptly.

“This is Stephanie Stevens. I was just paged.”

Keystrokes preceded his response. “Are you available for a trip, Stephanie?”

Yes, of course.” Looking at her clock radio, it was just past five. Even at that early hour, she was happy to get work. “When and where?”

“At seven-thirty you’ll dead-head Flight 129 out of LAX to meet Flight 313. It’s a two-day trip. Get your printout at the gate.”

Still in bed, she jotted down the numbers. “Seven-thirty, Flight 129 out of LAX to meet Flight 313. Got it. Thank you.”

After disconnecting, Stephanie hurriedly prepared for her departure. As part of her wake-up routine, she lit a candle at her small altar, that consisted of a folding table covered with a silk scarf and various sentimental icons. There was a porcelain goddess statuette, colorful crystals, tiny family photos, and a die-cast jetliner toy, purchased in an airport after her graduation from flight attendant school.

One crystal amulet on a chain was wrapped around the statuette’s abdomen. She removed the charm and placed it around her neck. “Goddess, thank you for the work, and please protect me during my journey,” she whispered.

Stephanie felt more than emotionally connected with her Goddess. She sensed an affinity and kinship, as if the icon was an entity that watched over and protected her. Stephanie wasn’t religious in the Christian sense. She considered herself a spiritualist who honored earthly goddesses and a natural world order.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Now that I feel your strength, Goddess,” she assured, “only Mr. Coffee will give me energy.”

After making a pot, and gulping down a cup, Stephanie sprang into action. With street clothing, underwear and one clean uniform already rolled up inside a flight bag that was kept

by the door, she took a second uniform from a hanger in the closet. That important process was learned in training, affectionately known as “Barbie Boot Camp.” After dressing, she went into her cramped bathroom to freshen.

She studied her reflection in the medicine-cabinet mirror. “Twenty-three, and you already have wrinkles, Stephanie,” she remarked to her image. “My wonderful singles life at thirty-five-thousand feet.”

Upon the sink basin, soaking in jewelry cleanser, was her mother’s original wedding ring. She got it as a gift when she was in sixth grade, and since that time, Stephanie only took it off for cleaning. She slid the two-carat diamond in a platinum setting on her right ring finger. “Forever on the wrong hand,” she said to the stone.

After brushing her brown hair that bobbed at the shoulders, she applied makeup to accentuate her striking blue eyes. “That’s the best Southland Air gets at five-fifteen.”

Stephanie enjoyed compliments for her looks though she tried not to obsess about her outward appearance. Since graduating college, then flight attendant school, and facing years of female competitiveness in the process, she was learning that inner beauty would last, while the physical qualities were fleeting.

Stepping back into the center of the apartment, out of the corner of her eye, Stephanie thought to see a figure sitting upon the daybed. At first, the sight startled her, as she was a single woman. With sleepiness still dictating her brain functions, it took her a moment to make the connection.

“Oh Mom, you’re back,” she said. “I was ready to call 911.”

An attractive middle-aged woman didn’t look up from her lap. With a needle and thread, she was methodically hand stitching a white dress.

“Not much to say this morning, I see,” Stephanie commented. She displayed the sparkling ring. “Well, I’m glad you’re here. . . I was just thinking about you.”

Without a response or gesture, the woman continued working the fabric.

“I’ll be home from my trip in a few days. Maybe you’ll look after the place while I’m gone. By that time, I’m sure you’ll be finished with your pattern.” She smiled, affectionately. “It looks just like the dress you made for me when I was a little girl.”

After phoning for a cab, Stephanie filled a second cup of coffee. She placed the serving on the end table. “Black, just the way you like it.”

As her mother continued silently sewing, Stephanie refilled her own coffee cup and sat on the opposite edge of the daybed. There was no communication between them while Stephanie waited for her cab. She didn’t feel the need to chit-chat or make small talk. Besides, she thought, considering her mother’s present state, any attempt to force a conversation would be futile.

After the taxi driver phoned from the street, Stephanie opened her apartment door and stepped into the chilly mid-October morning. From outside she studied her undersized unit for a moment. Decorated for Halloween since August, with pride, she surveyed the room. She knew it wasn’t much, yet she was independent, self-reliant and beholdng to none. “Mother and Goddess protect,” she said upon closing the door. “Please keep my home and family safe.”

By 5:45, she was in the cab, speeding south on Interstate 405 towards LAX. The sun was just rising, the traffic was still light, by LA standards, and Stephanie had no trouble reaching the Southland Air terminal an hour before her departure time. After passing through the post 9-11 “security invasion,” and having quickly picked up coffee and an Egg McMuffin, by seven, Stephanie was at her gate.

A woman working Flight 129 looked up from her computer terminal. “Good-morning, Stephanie,” she said with her head slightly cocked. “Are you assigned to this flight?”

“Hi, Sandy. No, I’m dead-heading your flight to Phoenix.”

“Oh. . .I’m A-flight attendant. I’m checking to see how many bodies I have in first.”

“While you’re back there, would you mind pulling my trip manifest?”

Sandy began typing. With short black hair and chocolate-brown eyes, she wore just enough makeup to create an attractive appeal that wasn’t overdone. “Been keeping busy?” she asked with her eyes fixed on the monitor. “God knows I spend my life at altitude.”

Stephanie shrugged in response to a tone she considered slightly condescending. “Well, today I’m working.”

Though her colleague was also a junior flight attendant, Stephanie wondered if Sandy’s beauty had anything to do with why she was always working, and why she was an A-attendant.

Sandy nodded. “That’s a good thing in this business. Any kind of work, I mean. I’ve heard that more layoffs are coming from top to bottom; pilots to baggage handlers. The other day I did a trip with two young guys right out of Flight Attendant U. They got their layoff notices the first morning. Offering what they could for smiles, they had to fly two more days knowing they were going home to no jobs.”

“Bummer.”

Sandy stopped typing and glanced over her shoulder, ensuring their chat was private. “Emm hmm. And the way Southland Air is doing, those poor guys won’t be the last.” With a classic flight attendant smile, and underlying austerity, Sandy handed Stephanie her document in a ticket jacket as if she was just a passenger. “Enjoy your trip.”

She returned a similarly insincere grin. “Thanks, Sandy. Have a nice day.”

Taking her printout, Stephanie turned away from the counter. “We’re all Goddesses’ creatures,” she mumbled under her breath.

A few steps away from the counter, she scanned the single page. Okay, what wonderful cities today? She thought. Meet flight 313 in Phoenix. There, my scheduled departure is 9:40. I

go Burbank, Dallas then Chicago. After a twelve-hour turn-around in the Windy City, I reverse the route home.

Taking her coffee and breakfast into the passenger waiting area, she found a group of empty seats. After a few bites of the cooling sandwich, and a glance at her watch, she came to a realization. "Oh, that's right, Amanda," she said.

Sliding her cell phone out of a standard issue, Southland Air purse, she programmed a number. As she sipped the coffee, a man brusquely answered. "This is Michael Stern."

"Hi, Michael. It's Stephanie."

He tempered his tone. "Oh hey, Stephanie. How are ya?"

"I'm so sorry, Michael. I got called for a trip and I won't be able to come over and watch Amanda today. I'm on a flight out to Phoenix that leaves in thirty minutes."

He hesitated to answer, as if scanning a mental day planner. "Phoenix, huh? Hmm, I have a few appointments today. Your dad already left for the golf course, and your sister doesn't get back from her trip until tomorrow."

"Sorry, Michael, but the airline hasn't been working me much this month, and as I'm sure you know from Jillian, on-calls flight attendants can't turn down trips."

"I remember her on-call days," he said upon reflection. "And my flying days."

"Again, I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I'll work something out." Though understanding, his tone remained guarded. "And it's not easy with your sister taking so many long trips."

"Yeah, I can imagine." Becoming upbeat, she steered the conversation in a more favorable direction. "Is your precious daughter up yet? Can I say good-morning?"

"She just finished eating breakfast. I'll put her majesty on for you."

"Sorry, again, Michael."

"Really, Stephanie, no stress. Have a safe flight and we'll see you in a few days."

After a moment came a young girl's voice. "Hello?"

"Hey, Amanda."

“Auntie!” she beamed.

“How’s my little starseed?”

“Good. . .are you still coming over after school?”

“That’s why I’m calling, sweetie. I’m starting a trip and I’m not going to be able to see you for a few days.” A marked silence followed. “Are you still there, Amanda?”

“Yes.”

“How ‘bout I come over and visit as soon as I get home—”

“—but I don’t want you to go on this trip, Auntie.” Though disappointed, she didn’t sound bratty—it was concern.

Stephanie set down her coffee cup. The abrupt motion caused hot liquid to splash on her leg. With the phone propped against her chin, she dug a napkin out of the McDonald’s bag. “I have to, Amanda. A nice lady I work with is sick, and I have to take her place.”

“You’re going to the fiery-bird?”

She instantly stopped blotting the spot. “Yes, that’s right. I’m going to Phoenix. How did you know that? Did you hear your daddy and I talking?”

“It’s in Arizona, but it’s not the capitol.”

“And what is the capitol?” she asked as would a teacher. Stephanie was always impressed by Amanda’s intelligence and impish wisdom. Remarkable, she thought, for a seven-year-old, only child.

“Flagstaff.”

Stephanie grinned. “You are a smart girl aren’t you.”

“Yes.”

“And how did you know a Phoenix is a fiery-bird?”

“Anastasia told me.”

“And how is Anastasia?”

“Good. She doesn’t want you to go to Phoenix either.”

Once again, Stephanie checked her watch, as passengers were starting to pre-board. “Well, you tell Anastasia that everything will be just fine and I’ll come over to see both of you in a few days. Dream a happy dream for me?”

“I will.” Amanda’s voice was but a whisper. “Good-bye, Auntie.”

After disconnecting, Stephanie quickly finished her breakfast. Joining the stragglers down the jetway, she was one of the last people to board. As part of her personal routine, before stepping onto the plane, she gently patted the fuselage above the cabin door.

“Be good, metal bird,” she whispered. Stephanie wasn’t overly superstitious, and she knew there was no way in the physical world the inanimate aircraft could heed her request. Still, the symbolic gesture, one she did before starting every flight, gave her inexplicable comfort.

Upon boarding, Stephanie turned left toward the flight deck where the captain and his first officer were performing their checklist duties.

“Excuse me, Captain,” she respectfully requested. “Permission to board?”

The man in the left seat turned to her. With a handsome face and fit physique, he was a young captain. The only sign of aging were the grays in his neatly-trimmed sideburns. “Granted. And you are?”

“Stephanie Stevens. I’m dead-heading out to Phoenix.”

“Welcome aboard, Stephanie. I’m Jack Riordan, and this first officer, Bob Tanner. We’re only half-full, so make yourself comfortable in the cabin.”

Wearing a headset and chatting with the LAX departures, the mid-thirties first officer winked his greeting. Remaining focused on his cockpit duties, he returned his attention to the instrument panel.

“Thank you, Captain Riordan,” she said.

Other flights Stephanie had dead-headed were full, requiring her to fly jump seat on the flight deck. Seeing the plane actually flown, however, and being reminded that she was entrusting her life with two pilots and their skills, wasn’t an automatically reassuring sensation. Though flying for a living had been her dream, inspired by her jet-pilot father, and flight attendant older sister, Jillian, Stephanie preferred being busy serving the passengers, and not constantly reminded that she was in a pressurized aluminum tube, loaded with volatile jet

fuel, hurtling through the air at over three-hundred knots, thirty-five thousand feet above the ground.

Turning from the cockpit, she passed the forward galley where Sandy was preparing coffee service. “There’s room in first, Stephanie,” she said on the move.

Stephanie joined a handful of business travelers sipping java and flipping through newspapers. Settled and buckled in her 737-800 leather lounger. The aircraft was one of the companies newest models. Purchased from Boeing only months before 9-11, by Southland Air fleet standards, it was the most comfortable, the most fuel efficient and the most profitable-per-passenger. Through the cabin window, she watched the baggage handlers load the last few items into the cargo hold. Upon the ramp, the LA sun painted the planes and gates shades of orange-gold, forcing her to squint.

With no duties to perform until she reached Phoenix and Flight 313, she reached into the seat-back pocket and took out a copy of Soaring Southland, the company in-flight magazine. After skimming the first few pages, she came upon an article written by the companies CEO, Percy Pierpont. Included, was a black and white photo of the man dressed and in suit, and looking every part the corporate paper-pusher, with thin, wiry features and eyeglasses to match.

“Keeping it in the Southland Family,” the article’s caption read. Not one to be particularly interest in the internal politics of her company, she only skimmed the words. One passage, however, seized her full attention. “. . .aging Southland Air founder, Tony Horan,” she read, “made his will public this week. It was announced that his majority ownership shares of our publically held company, will be distributed through the unions to all past and present Southland Air pilots, flight attendants, and baggage handlers, as a way of thanking them for years of hard work, loyalty, sacrifice, and in Mr. Horan’s words, ‘the main reason why Southland continues to soar.’ Southland Air executives, whom Horan has been at odds with since the Eighties, when Southland Air went public after deregulation, are not entitled to any of Horan’s estate. But there are no hard

feelings, though, as we are a flying family, eager to better serve our passengers. Amidst Wall Street takeover rumors, and with other airlines interested in acquiring Southland aircraft and routes, we at Southland Air,” Stephanie read, “are still soaring, with newer aircraft, expanded routes, unions and management together, as the flying family Tony Horan envisioned.”

“Yeah, I’m sure my stock certificates are in the mail,” Stephanie commented under her breath. She wasn’t cynical by nature, but the financial problems at Southland Air, and her lack of steady work, made it hard to be optimistic.

She closed the magazine, the window shade and then her eyes. The coffee hadn’t completely chased away the sandman, and the seat was very comfortable. The moment the jet was pushed back for taxi and departure, Stephanie Stevens drifted off to sleep, not with the thought of stocks, but just happy to be working.

* * *

Stephanie didn’t recall waking, nor did she remember any of the flight to Phoenix. Where she was, the setting sun was enveloped by a purple twilight that seemed to ooze from a crescent moon, arched high above the cactus-dotted, desert horizon. A blazing campfire spewed golden sparks that flew from the flames like agitated fireflies. Seated on cold sand, and feeling displaced from her body and rational mind, Stephanie Stevens was watching a Native American perform a mysterious tribal ritual. Standing across from her, the shaman wore a bird mask and was covered with vulture feathers. The figure raised a bearskin rattle and stepped closer to the flames.

“Who are you? And why am I here?” Stephanie demanded. When the shaman didn’t reply she repeated her questions. A loud squawk, indistinguishable from man and animal, emanated from under the mask. A cold wind followed another bird sound, and Stephanie felt a chill on her neck and shoulders.

Fearful and disoriented, she insisted, “Take me home. I don’t want to be here!”

The shaman squawked with more intention, as if warning her against further interruptions or disrespect.

“I’m so afraid,” she quietly wept.

“It’s all right, Auntie,” came a reassuring voice.

Stephanie turned in the direction of the sound. Appearing out of nowhere, and seated on the ground next to her, was a little girl. She had blue eyes and long brown hair that was tied with ribbons. Holding a fine porcelain doll, the girl was wearing a white dress that was appeared too proper for playtime.

“Amanda?” Stephanie gasped.

As the girl began stroking the doll’s brown hair, its large glass eyes wandered from side-to-side without provocation. The doll looked eerily alive and animated. After whispering something in the doll’s ear, suddenly, it looked sharply at Stephanie.

“Anastasia just told me that you shouldn’t be scared, Auntie,” Amanda said.

“Amanda, what are you talking about? And what are we doing out here in the desert?”

“Showing you the fiery-bird, Auntie,” she whispered, as if not to disturb the shaman.

“I don’t understand,” Stephanie implored. “Please, Amanda, take me away from this place.”

“Really, Auntie, soon you will understand.”

Stephanie watched as the little girl carried her doll toward the flames. “No, Amanda!” she insisted.

Before Stephanie could move to stop her niece, Amanda carried her Anastasia doll directly into the fire pit. The shaman began a tribal dance and shaker rattling, as if prompted by Amanda’s suicidal display. Though fully engulfed in the inferno, miraculously, neither she nor her doll were burned. Her dress remained perfectly white and not a strand of brown hair was singed.

“Soon, you’ll know the fiery-bird, Auntie,” Amanda assured. “When, your time comes, please don’t be afraid.”

Yet, Stephanie was more than afraid—she was terrified. While Amanda remained in the fire, the shaman began shaking

the rattle with more fervor. It felt as if the desert floor was actually quaking. And though the intense flames raged up into the night sky, oddly, an icy sensation chilled her face. The intense shaking became more violent, and the cold more profound, until suddenly, she opened her eyes.

“We’re going to be landing soon, Stephanie,” Sandy said. The A-flight attendant was leaning in from the aisle, literally shaking Stephanie by the shoulder.

“Oh my,” she gasped. “I was sound asleep.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Sandy remarked. Though Stephanie was not working, and not required to be awake, there remained subtle annoyance in Sandy’s tone. As she resumed her cabin duties, Stephanie closed the AC vent that had been blowing on her face.

Two chimes sounded over the intercom prompting Sandy into the cockpit to discuss landing preparation with the captain. Stephanie took out her compact and checked the status of her hair and makeup. She’d been in the air for less than an hour, and already she noticed the dry, puffy nature of the skin around her eyes. In the pressurized cabin, her feet had swollen a half size in her regulation flats, prompting her to wiggle her toes and increase the circulation. “This is the life I chose,” she whispered to her reflection. “I love flying.”

“Folks, we’ve started our descent into Phoenix and we’ll be on the ground shortly,” First Officer Tanner announced. “Currently, the temperature is eighty-two degrees with scattered clouds. Local time is eight-twenty. We at Southland Air know you have a lot of choices of airlines and we really do appreciate your business. On behalf of Captain Riordan and me, we hope to see you all again very soon. Flight attendants, prepare for landing and cross check.”

Awake and alert, Stephanie opened the window shade and looked out at the Arizona desert. Appearing every shade of brown, the wasteland steadily gave way to strip malls, housing developments and irrigated grass. Her senses were oddly active, considering how deep she’d slept. The cabin smelled of spilled coffee, sun-baked vinyl and aging seat covers. Another routine

flight, she thought—one of the countless she'd experience during her career, provided luck had anything to do with her mortality. Though she seldom thought about crashing, the horrifying films she had to watch in flight attendant school did leave that possible scenario in the back of her mind, where she wanted it to remain.

Sandy activated the flight attendant intercom and went through her cabin-preparation spiel: tray tables closed, seats in the forward position, the stowing of carry-on bags and electronic devices.

Seated across the aisle from Stephanie was an executive who hadn't looked up from his palm pilot since they boarded in L.A. After switching off the device, he summoned Stephanie. "Excuse me, Miss?"

He was young, handsome, not wearing a wedding ring; and she was single. Although she did feel like a waitress upon hearing "excuse me, miss," she knew it came with the territory. "Yes?" she asked with an engaging smile.

His eyes were fixed upon the golden wings pinned to her uniform. "You're a Southland Air flight attendant, aren't you?"

"Yes. . .I'm off duty."

"May I ask you a something?"

The way it was phrased, she expected a proposition. She'd found that executives in first class, especially those taking advantage of the free drinks, were insufferable flirts. Most returned to wives and families in far distant cities with their egos stroked by a little friendly banter. Yet this person wasn't drinking, was likely from LA, she surmised, and since becoming a flight attendant, her love life hadn't left the hanger. "Certainly," she said. "Ask away."

He hesitated, as if having second thoughts.

Again, she smiled. "It's okay, really."

"I don't want to sound foolish. It's probably obvious—"

"—you won't know unless you ask."

"All right. . .what's a cross check?"

That wasn't what she expected and it took her a second to remember the regulation answer. "Oh ah, that's when flight

attendants activate the doors so they can be opened after landing, or in an emergency.”

“Interesting. I’ve always wondered about that. Thank you.” After giving a polite nod, he took out stock quotes that were stuffed in his seat back, as though any time without his Palm Pilot had to be properly utilized.

A few minutes later, with her cross check complete, and connection gates given, Sandy began her final cabin walk-through. Stephanie heard the rumble of the landing gear being lowered, and the thump of the wheels locking in place. Mere seconds after she did, there was a violent altitude drop, followed by the sudden climb, and actuation of the wing flaps. On a Boeing roller coaster without a restraint, the fierce motion caused Sandy to hit her head on the cabin ceiling. Appearing stunned but unharmed, she struggled to her feet, using an armrest for leverage.

When a first class passenger unbuckled to help her, Sandy commanded, “Please, Sir, stay in your seat!”

“Flight attendants, take your seats,” Captain Riordan abruptly stated over the intercom. Though his words weren’t fearful, he was obviously occupied with landing the plane. Holding the top of her head, Sandy scrambled forward and strapped herself in her jump seat.

Stephanie gripped her armrests, though she tried to appear comfortable. Wearing her Southland Airlines uniform, it was her duty to look calm and collected in flight, regardless of the circumstances. Though not known for bad weather, easterly desert winds beyond Phoenix’s Sky Harbor Airport whipped up stomach-wrenching turbulence. More aileron corrections were made and the pilots increased the power.

She turned to the businessman. He too was clutching his armrests and didn’t appear as comfortable as Stephanie was pretending to be. “This sometimes happens in Phoenix,” she said, attempting to reassure him. “And if you think this is bad, try landing in Colorado Springs.”

He swallowed hard and forced a smile. “Thanks. . . I’ll let my corporate sales office know.”

Stephanie glanced out the window. From her perspective, and being familiar with the airport, it appeared like they were coming in too low. There came another nauseating drop and then a sudden rise. More power was added and the aircraft angled slightly upward.

“I’m sure it’s too late for cocktail service,” the businessman quipped. “But I could sure use a Jack and Coke right now.”

“Captain Riordan is the best,” she said. However, never having flown with him, Stephanie hoped her vote of confidence was correct.

Seconds felt like minutes, and minutes, hours, as flight 129 dropped from the heavens toward the active runway. Seeing the apron then the tarmac outside the window, Stephanie took a deep breath and closed her eyes. The main undercarriage hit the concrete with a deafening thud and deflected the 737-300 to the right. After an aileron correction left, and a power reduction, again, the wheels slammed onto the runway. The nose gear quickly followed and the engines were reversed. With her jaw locked and her teeth grinding, Stephanie finally heard the ripping thrust of a successful landing. The aircraft quickly slowed on the centerline, and within seconds, turned off the active runway toward the terminal.

Inside the cabin, the passengers began clapping. Stephanie had experienced difficult landings before, usually in the winter, on approach to snowy airports. And occasionally the passengers would celebrate those tricky, yet successful arrivals—again, she reminded herself that it was her chosen occupation. She touched her wings that actually were her big sister Jillian’s wings. They were symbolically gifted to Stephanie after graduation. In keeping with the tradition, her niece, Amanda was given Stephanie’s graduation wings. “Oh, thank you, Goddess,” she whispered.

No sooner than Sandy came on the intercom, welcoming the passengers to Phoenix, and reminding them to stay in their seats, the businessman already had his Palm Pilot out, as though nothing had happened. “Glad I could be there for you,”

Stephanie thought to say. But then again, that came with the territory as well.

* * *

Once inside the Phoenix terminal, Stephanie checked the boards for Flight 313. Though she'd heard Sandy make that announcement before the hard landing, the notion of possibly meeting her maker had forced nonessential thoughts out of her mind. As a co-worker, Stephanie was concerned about Sandy's condition, but upon deplaning, she seemed fine—nothing aspirin and a post-passenger ice pack couldn't cure.

Before Stephanie could buy another cup of coffee, as she equated Southland Air java to Avgas, her pager sounded. Finding a red company phone near her gate, she connected with the Central office.

"This is Stephanie Stevens; I was just paged."

The woman who answered rattled her keyboard. "Yes, Stephanie; apparently there's been another scheduling change."

With the phone against her ear, she took out a notepad. "All right. I'm ready."

"The flight attendant you were replacing on Flight 313 is back on the trip. You will be dead-heading that flight, number 313, to Burbank."

"Oh, I see," she replied.

Stephanie quickly realized that her entire morning, two dead-head flights only to end up back at home, had been a waste of time. Knowing the airline was still going to pay her for the day, wasn't enough of a justification. She stuffed the notepad back inside her purse. "Anything else?"

"Sorry about the changes, Stephanie. We appreciate your understanding."

After Central disconnected, Stephanie stood for a moment with the phone in her hand. For some reason, she believed Goddess didn't want her on that trip. She had to think positive because there was nothing she could do about the situation, though she really wanted to cry. Even after a nerve-racking

landing, she simply loved flying, and she certainly needed trips to pay the rent.

“Is that Stephanie Stevens?” a man called out. “Hey, Girlfriend.”

Turning in the direction of the voice, she instantly recognized him. The recognition brought her instant happiness in an otherwise upsetting morning. “Hey, Latrell,” she called back while hurrying toward him.

Tall, thin and impeccably well-groomed, fellow flight attendant Latrell Adams approached her with outstretched arms. “Girlfriend, I haven’t seen you since Barbie Boot Camp.” He put down his flight bag and gave Stephanie a low contact hug with only light taps on her shoulders. “What trip are you on?”

She smiled, though it was hard to mask her disappointment. “I dead-head 313 to Burbank.”

He grinned, displaying perfect teeth surrounded by flawless mocha skin. “I’m the A-bitch on 313, Girlfriend. What trip are you meeting?”

“I was supposed to join your trip out to O’Hare, but after the Central runaround I’ve had since five this morning, I’m going back home.”

“Maggie Lund,” he sighed with a rolling of the eyes.

“I don’t understand what happened.”

Latrell glanced over at the Phoenix gate, and then took a step closer to Stephanie. “She’s senior and has some major connections over at Central,” he whispered.

“Still, why would she go through the trouble of getting off a trip only to change her mind? It’s almost unheard of, right?”

He subtly mimicked taking pills. “Emm hmm, Girlfriend, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

She squinted, unknowingly. “But with all the testing, how can she still fly?”

“I’ll say one word. . .prescription.”

“Really?”

“She was on Flight 593. Since then, the meds keep her flying, and in more ways than one.”

Stephanie appeared uneasy and her words were guarded. “How could I forget? It happened when we were in flight attendant school. Flight 593 made the belly landing in Chicago, at Midway, right?. It was a miracle that so few people were seriously injured.”

Appearing sympathetic, Latrell resorted to humor. “The lawsuits and loss of an old 737-300 wasn’t quite enough to put Southland Air in Chapter Eleven, but it did leave poor Maggie Lund with flying phobia. We may cruise at thirty-five thousand, but she’s usually higher than that.”

Eager to get off the disturbing subject, Stephanie quipped, “considering my morning, I could sure use some happy pills right now.”

He returned a warm smile. “Don’t worry, Beautiful. The problems in our industry can’t last forever. Like other carries, we just have to trim a little fat.”

“9-11 was bad enough; now it’s high fuel prices. I guess we’ll see more pensions cuts to pay executive salaries. Do you think Southland Air management can weather the storm? And what about these supposed shares of stock Tony Horan is going to give Southland employees? Did you hear about that?”

“And more,” he confided. “This sexy, young pilot I’m acquainted with told me that we also have two brand new planes on order. . .737-900s. The company can’t be doing that bad.”

“That’s good news, right?”

Latrell looped the flight-bag strap over his shoulder. “Emm hmm. . .I just love new equipment.”

Understanding his euphemism, she returned a playfully-scolding look. “Someone who actually enjoys flying more than I do.”

Grinning, he turned toward the gate. “Don’t you know it, Girlfriend. See you onboard.”

Taking advantage of the time before departure, Stephanie finally got that cup of coffee she needed to combat the sleep acids still lingering in her brain. Hoping that stretching her legs would also get the blood flowing, she took a brisk walk through the terminal. Then, after browsing through a few bookstores,

and losing track of time, she hurried back to Flight 313 and met the gate agent moments before the doors were closed.

A woman with low-maintenance, bobbed hair and just a hint of makeup, looked up from her collection of boarding pass stubs. Her curious look could have been construed as annoyed. “Are you working this flight?”

Winded, Stephanie took a deep breath. “I’m dead-heading to Burbank.”

“We almost left without you.”

She tried to remain upbeat. “I had kind of a rough morning.”

The gate agent wasn’t sympathetic. “There are a few seats in the back.”

Not wanting to delay any longer, Stephanie hurried down the jetway and boarded the flight. Passing the closed cockpit door and Latrell in the forward galley, she stowed her flight bag in the first class closet. Before heading to the back of the 737-300, it occurred to her that she hadn’t performed her symbolic ritual of touching the fuselage and asking the metal bird to be good. Nor had she checked in with the captain. As she took a step that way to do so, the cockpit door abruptly opened.

The captain, an imposing man in his late-fifties, with a potbelly and permanent scowl, studied her from head to toe. “Who are you?” he demanded. “Are you working this flight?”

His aggravated demeanor made her nervous. “I . . . I’m Stephanie Stevens, sir,” she stammered. “I’m dead-heading this flight to Burbank.”

His eyes squinted to thin lines. “Who the hell do you think you are, Ms. Stevens, walking onto my airplane like this?”

Not being on duty, and technically not late, Stephanie was truly at a loss for words. “I don’t understand, Sir,” she hesitantly answered.

“I’m Captain Roger, Ms. Stevens, and any flight attendant on my crew salutes.”

Stephanie immediately did so, just as she’d been trained in flight attendant school. Though some of the older Southland Air captains, especially those from the military, demanded salutes

from crew members before the passengers boarded, it had become quite rare.

Captain Roger glanced over her shoulder. Stephanie had her back turned to the passengers in first class who were all watching the chastising. “Step inside my office, Ms. Stevens. I’d like to have a word with you.”

Inside the cockpit, a young first officer was buckled in the right seat, referring to a checklist. Upon seeing Stephanie, the handsome first officer offered a kind smile but said nothing. Captain Roger, having little in the way of looks and appeal, plopped himself in the left seat, leaving Stephanie standing in front of the closed cockpit door. “How dare you,” he grumbled.

The first officer did his best to ignore the situation, though Stephanie could see him smirking, as if Captain Roger should be taken in stride. Even though Southland Air was only a medium-sized carrier, Stephanie was aware of the fact that captains and first officers didn’t always know each other. In some cases, they were flying together for the first time. Though she was uncomfortable and tense, she appreciated the first officer’s subtle compassion.

“I still don’t understand, Captain. What have I done?”

“By not checking in with me, if you were to get killed on this flight, how would anyone know you were onboard?”

“The trip manifest,” she remarked. The moment Stephanie spoke, she regretted it, for Captain Roger turned beet red. Even though she was correct, clearly that wasn’t his issue.

“You have a real attitude problem, young lady,” he insisted.

She shrugged, innocently, afraid to say anything else.

“Get out of my cockpit,” he ordered.

Wanting to do so in haste, she turned to leave, prompting another rebuke. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Again, she looked at him with questioning eyes.

“A salute, maybe?”

Tired, stressed, and having just about enough humiliation, Stephanie saluted and said, “Roger. . .Roger.”

“Over, under. . .” the first officer joked with a Texas accent and charming smile.

Captain Roger threw him a dagger stare, giving Stephanie the chance to escape. Quietly closing the cockpit door behind her, she walked down the cabin aisle, passing the gate agent who was in the process of making a final headcount. Stephanie selected a seat at the very back of the plane near the aft galley. Against a bulkhead and not able to recline, for passengers it was one of the least desirable seats in the plane. For an off-duty flight attendant, however, it was a quite place to enjoy the company of coworkers during the trip. And in the back of her mind, Stephanie preferred the aft cabin, near the black boxes, in the most survivable section of the aircraft.

Once settled in her seat, she looked up to see Latrell walking down the aisle toward the aft galley. He stopped and leaned over her shoulder. "I just can't wait for this plane to be replaced. She's one of the oldest in our fleet. I can't tell you how many times during a trip I have to come back here to restock first."

During her unpleasant boarding, Stephanie hadn't noticed the age of the cabin interior. As 737-300s went, she figured the Wright Brothers could have flown the one she was entrusting with her life. "I can see what you mean," she commented.

"Oh, and by the way," he whispered while gesturing toward the front. "See that older blond flight attendant with the bad roots."

Stephanie looked that way. A woman, appearing in her late-forties, was helping a passenger stow a carry-on in an overhead bin.

"That's Maggie Lund; she's the reason why you had to dead-head 313."

She sighed, forgivingly. "Well, Latrell, once a dead-head, always a dead-head, I guess."

"Now, where's the positive thinker I knew in Barbie Boot Camp? Girlfriend, things will get better for Southland Air, for us I mean, especially because of the stock shares were going to receive. I've heard rumors that once we have majority ownership, our union leaders want to totally restructure Southland. I bet the first thing they'll do is fire most of those blood-sucking

Southland executives. Especially Percy Pierpont. We just can't have another situation like Flight 593. The FAA would probably ground our fleet for inspection, and during that time, no passengers would mean Chapter Eleven for sure. That would just prove to the FAA and the board of directors that the unions aren't capable of managing airline safety."

"Really?" Stephanie asked quietly. "I'm impressed, Latrell. How do you know all this stuff?"

"It's hush-hush," he whispered back. "Behind closed doors, kind of stuff; but I know behinds and closed doors," he said with a wink and a grin. "You know, someday soon, part of this steel bird you'll own." He then confided under his breath. "Although this one is more like a lead buzzard."

She returned an appreciative smile. "Thanks for making me laugh, Latrell. You're the best."

"Think of everyday, as the first day, of the rest of your life," he professed. "And for you, Honey, there's so much life to look forward to and savor." Turning into the aft galley, Latrell left Stephanie alone to reflect on his encouragement.

She looked out the window and watched the ground crew preparing the plane for departure. The complicated process of fueling, baggage loading, catering and safety checks impressed Stephanie. She pondered what Latrell had said about Southland Air and its financial situation. She'd always heard rumors that her company and its routes were going to be acquired some other carrier. She didn't really give much thought to the airline business beyond her job responsibilities. But what she did know was that after 9-11, the country had been reminded of just how important the commercial airline industry was to the economy, and America's freedom to travel. Despite some negatives, as no profession was immune from them, she was happy and proud to be a flight attendant—it was a dream realized.

"Stephanie Stevens?" a woman asked.

She turned away from the window and her enjoyment of the clear Arizona sky. Settling in the rear jump seat across the aisle was the flight attendant Latrell had described.

“I’m Maggie, and I just wanted to say how sorry I am that you had to fly out here on my account.”

“It has been a long morning.”

“I am really sorry.”

Although she was more than a little annoyed, Stephanie tried to be polite. “That’s all right. Things like this happen.”

Maggie’s skin lacked healthy rose hues. She appeared exhausted and tense. “I haven’t been myself lately, and I really didn’t think I’d be able to finish the trip,” she admitted. “But I realize I have a responsibility; one that I can’t neglect.”

With the cabin check complete and safety announcements made, the aircraft began pushing back from the gate. “Really, Maggie, you don’t have to explain.”

Though Maggie relaxed her back in the jump seat, she didn’t look like she could sit still. She fidgeted with her seatbelt, as though she couldn’t secure the buckle to her satisfaction. After a moment, she asked with a hushed tone, “You’re young and attractive. Do you like flying?”

Stephanie cocked her head and squinted. “Of course. It’s my job.”

Before she could elaborate, as for some reason, she felt the need to do so, an announcement was made over the intercom: “Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Roger, up on the flight deck. ATC is reporting a little low-level turbulence this morning, so they’re spacing out the departures. Right now, we’re third in line so the wait shouldn’t be too long.”

“Jesus Christ,” Maggie grumbled under her breath.

Stephanie heard it and knew nearby passengers could’ve as well. “I came in with turbulence this morning. It’s really not that bad,” she quietly assured Maggie. Truthfully, Stephanie wasn’t looking forward to experiencing it again so soon.

Maggie appeared ten years older than she did only moments before. She didn’t reply, but instead closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

To keep her own mind off the impending departure, Stephanie took the Soaring Southland magazine out of the seat

jacket and began flipping through the pages. Before long, the 737 had made several short rolls down the taxiway.

“Well folks,” Captain Roger announced, “again, we’re sorry about the delay. We’re next in line and we’ll be in the air shortly. Flight attendants, please take your seats.”

Stephanie closed the magazine and glanced out the window. The way Captain Roger spoke over the intercom, she imagined all the passengers picturing him as a loving uncle—not the stodgy-codger who had belittled her so severely. “Let’s hope your flying skills are better than your people skills, Roger-Roger,” she thought.

On the active runway, an American Airlines 757-200 floated in on final, and with wisps of blue tire smoke, the elegant liner gently touched down. After the 757 cleared the active, the crew of Flight 313 increased the power and turned onto the centerline. With brakes released, the 737 throttles were increased to takeoff power. Her two engines roared with ripping thrust and the aircraft quickly accelerated. Then, after the first hundred yards of roll, there was came a muffled, though distinct thump. Immediately, the engines were throttled back, the brakes were applied and Flight 313 slowed to a crawl.

“Ah, ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Roger,” he calmly announced. “You may’ve heard a strange noise outside, and we heard it too. . .so, as a precaution, we’re gonna have to taxi back to the gate and have our mechanics check things out. We’re very sorry for any inconveniences this may cause you, and as soon as we find out what the situation is, we’ll let you know.”

The passengers remained completely passive, until it occurred to them that they’d miss business meetings, connecting flights, or vacation days at Disneyland. Soon, the grumbling started, at first in hushed tones, then in resounding protests.

“I knew I should’ve flown Southwest,” one man near the back insisted. He turned toward the flight attendants. “This is bullshit.”

“All an airline has to do is keep their planes flying,” a businessman said to a colleague. “How damn hard can it be?”

“I’m going to write a letter to Southland Air about this,” a nearby businesswoman insisted to Maggie. Remaining stone-faced, she looked away without replying.

Stephanie reacted with unsettled emotions. It was her first aborted takeoff, and so many potential scenarios occurred to her in disjointed frame, like bad edits in a plane crash movie. They could have lost that engine in flight, requiring a risky emergency landing, or worse, an explosion could have compromised the wing and control surfaces. In that case she would have experienced her first “uncontrolled descent into terrain,” as it was called in the training films. For her, experiencing those last few, horrifying moments of life was unimaginable. She could understand why the passengers were upset, though she knew most weren’t considering what could have been a worst-case scenario had they become airborne. After a few minutes, and as the plane returned to the gate, she closed her eyes and thanked Goddess for protecting everyone onboard.

* * *

Inside the terminal, behind the counter, Stephanie checked with the gate agent for the next Southland Air flight she could dead-head back to Los Angeles. There was a mob of passengers trying desperately to make other arrangements. Like those stranded by Flight 313, she knew she’d be at the mercy of scheduled service and aircraft availability. Through the window overlooking the tarmac and jetway, she saw the maintenance crews already inspecting the starboard engine cowling.

“Maybe it’s minor,” she commented.

The same embittered agent checked her computer. “There’s another LAX flight at three-twenty,” she stated. “It’s already full. You’ll have to fly cockpit jump seat.”

Stephanie glanced at her watch. “That’s almost six hours from now. Any word on a replacement plane before that?”

She stealthily rolled her eyes. “Be serious.”

Latrell stepped behind the counter. Having overheard the exchange, he whispered, “Honey, if I were you, I wouldn’t wait around for us.”

“Well, it looks like I’m gonna have to wait anyway,” she sighed.

“We’re talking nighttime, Girl. Take the flight at three-twenty.”

“Emm, maybe you’re right.”

“And to pass the morning, you can always visit the beautiful city of Phoenix, a short cab ride away.”

At first, the idea was very unappealing, until something occurred to her. “You know, come to think of it, I have a good friend from UCLA who lives out here. She just had a baby. That’s a great excuse to pop in on her this afternoon.”

“See, there you go. Be proactive, not reactive. Turn this little incident into a good thing.”

She leaned into Latrell’s ear, so those at the counter couldn’t overhear. “What was our incident, exactly? Do you know?”

He confided, as would a Cheshire cat, knowing too much. “That sexy young pilot I was telling you about? He just happened to be our first officer today. He said that we lost an engine, and if we had been flying, it could have been a very serious problem. Told you she was a lead buzzard.”

“Goddess,” she gasped, and then without thinking, said, “Maybe Maggie Lund was right.”

“Girlfriend, what are you talking about? Every flight attendant in the business will experience some kind of emergency during his career. Her mind is still stuck on Flight 593 and she couldn’t bounce back. Maggie is just flying for her pension now.”

“Maybe not. She could have had some kind of. . .” she paused, “knowing—”

“—knowing. . .” Latrell repeated with a smile. “How could I forget your gifts?”

Stephanie unconsciously touched her amethyst. “I don’t know if ‘gifts’ is the right word. Responsibility maybe.”

“I remember during training when we’d drink cheap wine and talk about the occult.” He leaned in closer and whispered, “Do you think old Maggie Lund had a psychic moment?”

“People often know things, Latrell, without understanding why. Most times people don’t act on their intuitions. Maybe this morning, Maggie did.”

He cocked his head, curiously. “But we’re all still here, Honey, shaken but not cooked bacon.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “It’s not like watching a movie, Latrell. People not in tune with their knowing, see only bits and pieces that are often misinterpreted.”

He appeared to understand. “It seems like such a long time since graduation, Stephanie. I’ve missed our talks.”

She lightly touched his wings. “Me too. You’ve always been so open minded.”

“Honey, try being a gay, black, flight attendant; it tends to do that,” he quipped. “By the way, how is your mother?”

She grinned. “You remember.”

“Of course. She was staying in your room during training.”

“Good thing my roommate couldn’t psychically see my deceased mother, sitting on the daybed and sewing, while we studied. The room was barely big enough for two trainees.”

“You’re a rare angel in a world of demons,” Latrell said, giving an equally devilish grin. “I’ve missed you.”

Before she could return the compliment, Maggie stepped from the jetway. One of the last to deplane, she appeared robotic, as if her emotions had overloaded and shutdown.

“Any form of knowing,” Stephanie whispered, “can be both a blessing and a curse.”

As the crowd of stranded passengers swarmed the gate agents and working flight attendants, Stephanie could sense their rabid venom. Being off duty, it appeared as though she was just standing around, chatting with coworkers. Emotionally, it was difficult for her to deflect or ignore the wrath in their stares. “I’m gonna go,” she whispered to Latrell. “These people are out for blood.”

He grimaced. “I don’t blame you.”

“See you next time, Latrell.”

As she turned to leave he quickly jotted down a number. “Girlfriend, let’s stay in touch. Lately, I could use a little spirituality in my life.” He appeared serious, and for the Latrell she knew, Stephanie thought his request was the ultimate compliment.

“I’d enjoy that, Latrell.” Taking her flight bag, she moved away from the counter. However, before she could take three steps, Stephanie felt a tapping on her shoulder. A young man was standing behind her. He appeared distraught to the point of tears.

“Please, Miss, I have to get back to Burbank this morning,” he pleaded.

“I’m very sorry for the inconvenience, Sir. We’re going to get a replacement plane flown out here.”

“No, no, you don’t understand. I can’t wait that long. I’m from Burbank, out here on business. My wife was in a car accident early this morning. She was on her way to work. She’s in a hospital, in Glendale,” he rambled. “It was really bad.”

Her tone changed from airline public relations to humanitarian. “I am so sorry. Is your wife okay?”

His hands were trembling as he held up his cell phone. “She’s in critical condition. That’s all the hospital would tell me.”

“Have you tried the other airlines?”

“Yes, yes, I have.”

“Try to relax and tell me what they said.”

“Two others put me on standby for flights late this afternoon. Southland Air told me there’s a three-twenty flight to LAX but it’s full. Is that true?”

She glanced at the gate and the overwhelmed agents. “I’m afraid it is true.”

“Please, is there anything you can do? Can’t they make exceptions for emergencies?”

“Really, I wish it was that simple, but Southland will have to get a volunteer to give up their seat—”

Tears were welling in his eyes. “—please. This is my wife,” he begged.

Stephanie knew there wasn't anything she could do for him at the moment; she felt powerless. "Have you thought about renting a car and driving? On Interstate Ten, you can make L.A. in about six hours."

"My God, I never thought of that," he insisted, as if wanting to put his feet in motion before finishing the words. "Thank you, Miss."

As the man bolted away from gate toward ground transportation, it occurred to Stephanie that he might be in no condition to make the long trip. He was extremely upset, justifiably so, and driving alone in the desert for hours could be dangerous, especially because he'd be in a major hurry. "Oh, why didn't you think of that, Stephanie?" she muttered. "Someone would have given up their seat for the three-twenty flight."

Considering how fast the man sprinted away, even if she had track shoes, and not leather pumps, it would have been impossible to follow. She instead closed her eyes, took a centering breath, and attempted to release the negative thoughts. "Goddess, please protect him and his wife with your white light."

Walking into the main terminal, and away from the chaos at the gate, Stephanie took out her cell phone and programmed a number.

A woman answered. "Hello?"

"Julie. . . Julie, Julie McKay," she said. "Is this the cutest little Delta from UCLA?"

"My God, Stephanie Stevens!" she shouted on the other end.

"How are you, Beautiful?" Stephanie tried to sound upbeat, but the troubled traveler and his wife remained in the back of her mind.

"Great, Steph. It's so nice to hear from you. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Touring airport bookstores."

"Sounds fun."

“I’m kinda on a trip, and actually, I’m on a short layover in Phoenix. I was thinking that you and I could get together for a little while this afternoon.”

“I’d love that. Where are you now? I’ll come and get you.”

“Sky Harbor, but just give me your new address and I’ll take a cab.”

“Nonsense. I’ll put Tim Junior in his child seat and pick you up. I can be there in thirty minutes.”

Stephanie smiled. “And how is that lovely newborn of yours?”

“Just like his daddy, a real handful. I can’t wait for you to see the little guy.”

“I can’t wait either, Julie.”

“Great. Where will you be waiting?”

“In front of Southland Air departures, if you’re sure you don’t mind driving.”

“Absolutely not. Southland Air departures, in thirty minutes. I’ll be in a black Hummer.” Without giving Stephanie a chance to again suggest a taxi, Julie disconnected.

True to her word, Julie arrived exactly on time as Stephanie could see through the departures window. She walked out into the searing Phoenix heat and waved at the monstrous vehicle as it rolled up to the curb. It would take her three years to make enough money to buy the vehicle, assuming of course, that she didn’t have rent and bills.

Julie rolled down her window. With petite features, she looked tiny behind the wheel. However, there was nothing mousy about her appearance. She had a beautiful, perfectly defined face, straight blonde hair, and blue eyes. At UCLA, Stephanie always considered her the classic California beauty.

“Hey, Stevens!” Julie called out over the traffic.

Stephanie hurried over to the passenger side and opened the door. Climbing up onto the seat, the air conditioning vents could have cooled a meat locker. An infant was strapped in a rear child seat. How precious he appeared, she thought, snuggling in warm pajamas and a blue bonnet. She leaned over and gave Julie a hug. “It’s so nice to see you, Jules.”

“Oh, you too, Steph. It’s been way too long.”

She turned toward the smiling baby. “And how are you, little man?”

Julie eyes were filled with pride. “Tim Junior is a little charmer. He gets it from his father, of course.”

“He is absolutely adorable, Julie. I’m so happy for you.”

“It’s the most incredible thing,” she said. “A little person came out of me. Birth is surreal when you think about it. There has to be things going on in the universe that we don’t understand. I never really bought into spirituality or miracles, that is, until the moment he was born.”

“Most people don’t,” Stephanie replied, “even after they experience a miracle. You’re very lucky, Julie, in many ways.”

“Tim and I talk about that all the time,” she said, as though genuinely grateful. “In a world filled with pain and tragedy, we are truly blessed.”

“And how is the big man on campus?” Stephanie casually asked, sensing the conversation had become too deep for catching-up.

Julie looked into the side view mirror and pulled away from the curb. “Missing his carefree UCLA days, now that he’s working for his daddy full time.”

“I’m sure it’s all worth it, though,” she said with her body angled toward the backseat. With big blue eyes, the baby smiled playfully. “He is a charmer, Jules.”

“Isn’t he? Every time I look at TJ I want to cry with happiness. Even when he’s keeping me up all night or making little messes.”

“I’m sure that’s a very small price to pay,” Stephanie said reflectively. Considering her present profession, it wasn’t likely she’d have children anytime soon. And she didn’t have a husband to help her get the job started, let alone many dates for that matter.

“So, how’s the exciting flight attendant world?” she asked in an upbeat way, as if sensing Stephanie’s subtle lament.

“Sometimes exciting, sometimes not so exciting. It all depends on the day, and today happened to be both.”

Julie exited the airport center for an interstate entrance. “Why? What happened?”

“Oh, where to start. During my two morning flights, I experienced a very hard landing and then an aborted takeoff. Turns out we lost an engine. All of that excitement and I wasn’t even on duty. The woman I flew out from LA to replace changed her mind about being taken off her trip. Although I’m getting paid, all the flying I did today was for nothing, and I can’t even get home until tonight.”

“Well, Steph, I’m sure every job has its drawbacks. Besides, being a flight attendant must be so glamorous.”

“You’re right, it really can be glamorous. Just not today,” she remarked.

After ten minutes of driving and chitchat, Julie exited the highway, traveled a few surface streets, and then entered a gated community, sprawling with opulent homes. At the end of a cul-de-sac, she pulled up the driveway in front of what appeared to be the grandest in the development. It was a three-level, Spanish colonial, with sloping eaves and a turret. Surrounded by manicured lawns and gardens, Stephanie thought it was inspired from the pages of a Castilian fairytale. The front lawn displayed pumpkins and Halloween decorations in anticipation of the holiday soon to come.

“Welcome to our little starter house,” Julie said. Her off-handed tone signaled that even she was overwhelmed by its splendor.

“Oh my. . .” Stephanie gasped. “It’s magnificent, Jules.”

Julie parked the Hummer in front of the three-car garage and shut off the engine. “I’m too embarrassed to let you see inside our messy garage. But otherwise, the place is a dream come true.”

Stephanie opened the door and stepped down to the paving-stone driveway. The late-morning Phoenix heat made it difficult to breathe after being in the AC. “And I always think LA is hot.”

Julie hurried around the vehicle and lifted TJ out of his child seat. “This is nothing compared with some of the days we had this summer. I guess that’s what happens when you build a

city in a desert. Seems fitting that a Phoenix is a fiery bird, rising from its ashes.”

As Julie carried TJ toward the house, the words halted Stephanie on the walkway. “Fiery bird? That’s the second time I’ve heard that today,” she noted with a curious squint. “What made you say that?”

“Fiery bird?” Julie slowed her pace. “That’s what a Phoenix is, right?”

“Sure, I guess. . .it’s just such a unique expression.”

Continuing toward the front door, Julie avoided the sun the same way a New Englander would dodge freezing rain. “Come on, Steph, you’re going to roast out here.”

Stephanie didn’t have time to dwell on the *deja vous* after Julie led her into the house. The frosty central air reminded her of diving into the ocean after sunbathing. Landing on the foyer, she placed her flight bag by the door.

“Welcome,” Julie said.

Stephanie took a step inside. “It’s breathtaking, Jules.”

The vaulted ceilings were supported with hardwood beams, creating an expansive ground floor. The first thing Stephanie noticed was a sunken living room with modern furnishings, yet tapestries, swords and lances decorated the walls. It was a uniquely artful merging of medieval and contemporary. Having once shared bare walls and futon beds in their sorority house room, the adult nature of Julie’s residence was quite unexpected.

Julie referenced the stone flooring. “Tim’s mother did the interior work. She had the marble shipped here from Spain. Supposedly, it was taken from a Moorish Castle.”

“My goodness, Jules. Tim must be doing very well.”

She placed TJ down in a crib adjacent to the kitchen. Even when separated from his mother, the baby didn’t cry. “Actually, the house was a wedding present from Tim’s parents. You saw the condo we had out here when we first got married, right after we left Westwood. And I was happy with that place.”

Stephanie was still soaking up the surroundings. The moment her eyes landed on one rich spot, some other lavish quality drew her attention. “And I thought your condo was

incredible, not to mention your wedding. It was such a beautiful event," she said.

Julie returned from the kitchen. "Tim calls this place our little castle in the desert."

"You're home already," came a female voice. The presence of another in the house startled Stephanie. She turned in that direction. Standing at the foot of the stairwell leading up to the second floor was a stunning young blonde. "So sorry. . . I took nap," she said with a heavy Scandinavia accent.

"Stephanie, this is my nanny, Ingrid," Julie said. "She's from Denmark. We're hosting her stay in America."

"Oh, hello."

Ingrid smiled, though her attention didn't remain on the introduction. "Would you like me to feed TJ now," she inquired of Julie. "It is just about lunchtime, yes?"

"I'll let you know when it's time to feed TJ, Ingrid, thank you," she coolly replied. "And I'd like a little private time with my friend, if you don't mind."

From Stephanie's perspective, Julie's light, happy disposition had dissipated. Upon seeing Ingrid, she had changed from joyful to jaded—it didn't appear as if Julie was happy with the hiring choice—then again, that made sense to Stephanie, as Tim Senior had quite the ladies-man reputation at UCLA.

"Okay. I go back to my room then," Ingrid replied without taking offense. "It was nice meeting you." With that, she returned upstairs, though her steps were more of a saunter than a casual climb.

"How about some wine?" Julie offered abruptly.

When Stephanie hesitated, Julie insisted, "Oh, come on, it's five o'clock somewhere in the world, right?"

"I should know, I'm a flight attendant," Stephanie quipped to ease the discomfort. Quickly, she was detecting a few blemishes in Julie's otherwise polished life veneer. She glanced at her watch—it was not yet eleven.

"Come on, we'll drink and reminisce about the old days," she invited.

Stephanie knew that drinking in uniform, even off duty, was considered taboo. But she thought to make an exception for a friend in need. Besides, she concluded, not being in the public eye, who would know? “Oh, why not a glass of wine? I could stand to forget this morning.”

“Great. Champagne it is,” she playfully said. “Join me at the bar, Madame?”

After activating the baby monitor, Julie led Stephanie through the kitchen to the other side of the first floor. Less elegant, but no less detailed in decoration, was a literal sports bar room. It was outfitted with a pool table, air hockey and video games. The walls were covered with prints of Tim during his UCLA Bruin glory days. The hardwood bar supported top-shelf bottles, signed footballs and trophies.

“Tim’s memorial to carefree days.”

“Yeah, I guess. You certainly know where to find your man at last call,” Stephanie joked.

It took Julie a moment to understand the humor. “Oh, Tim’s shrine to his dreams, you mean? After he broke his ankle senior year, the pro scouts stopped calling.”

Stephanie took a seat at the bar on a leather-backed stool. “I remember how hard that was for both of you.”

Julie took a bottle of Dom out of the bar fridge. “With all the pins and screws, the doctors said that another break could do permanent damage, maybe even leave him crippled.”

Stephanie watched Julie struggle with the wire cage. “Do you want me to help?” she asked. “I can open champagne at thirty-five thousand feet standing on my head.”

“Thanks, Steph, I just had a manicure.” Julie cringed as if the admittance sounded pathetic. “Okay, okay, lame I know.”

“Truly lame,” Stephanie said. She made quick work of the opening while Julie placed two pint glasses on the bar. Though it wasn’t stem ware befitting a hundred-dollar bottle, Stephanie released the cork and poured.

“Anyway,” Julie continued as the bubbles settled, “Tim still talks about one day going pro, though we both know the reality of the situation.”

“That one moment in life,” Stephanie said reflectively. “One second that changes everything. You wake up one day and life seems routine, then, one unexpected, unforeseeable event changes everything. For Tim, it was a quarterback sack, something remotely foreseeable. For me, it’s flying, I mean planes crash, right? But think about the person that’s hit by a bus, say. One minute, you’re alive, putting on underwear like you do every morning, and then, on your way to work, bam, in an instant, you’re gone.”

Julie didn’t at first respond to Stephanie’s philosophical scenario. Instead, she took a glass and stared at the teaming bubbles, as though deep in thought. She finally raised it and said, “Here’s to not getting hit by a bus.”

Stephanie smiled and clinked her glass. “Cheers.”

* * *

When little TJ was heard crying through the baby monitor, Stephanie and Julie had already ordered and finished a pizza, gone through a dozen photo albums, and managed to drink three bottles of Dom.

Julie studied the clock over the bar. “My God, he was so quite that I forgot his noontime feeding,” she giggled then straightened.

Stephanie focused on her watch. Though a bit blurry, she confirmed the time to be 2:15. “Come to think of it, I should be getting back to the airport. If I’m late, the only available seat to LA may be on a pilot’s lap, not that most of them wouldn’t prefer it that way.”

“Sexy pilots,” Julie chuckled. “I bet your lay-overs are quite exciting.”

She smirked. “They’re overrated. . . believe me.”

Julie led Stephanie out of the barroom into the kitchen where Ingrid was already preparing baby formula. “I heard him crying,” she said from the sink. Though she didn’t use a provoking tone, Stephanie sensed there was competition between

the women. Knowing Tim Senior, likely, she thought, it had less to do with mothering skills than marital indiscretion.

Julie took the formula bottle from the counter. “I have it handled, Ingrid, thank you.”

Sensing the underlying tension, Stephanie felt uncomfortable. In spite of Julie’s material luxuries, it seemed that not all was well in Spanish Camelot. “Jules, can I use your phonebook?” she casually asked.

She cocked her head. “For what?”

“I need to call a cab, Jules. My flight leaves at three-twenty.”

“Oh, really? If you’re not working, I was thinking maybe you could stay for a day or two. You haven’t seen Tim since the wedding. We can all go out to dinner.”

“I’m on call though, Jules. When I get back to LA this afternoon, I could be scheduled on another trip.”

Though Julie appeared disappointed, her focus was divided between filling the formula bottle and disregarding Ingrid. If that wasn’t enough for her alcohol-dulled concentration, the phone rang seconds later. Julie placed the formula bottle on the counter and answered the kitchen cordless.

“Hello? Oh Tim, we were just talking about you. Guess who’s here visiting? Stephanie Stevens. Yeah, she had a lay-over, so I went out to the airport to get her.”

While Julie stopped to listen, Stephanie asked of Ingrid, “Could you get me the number of a cab company?”

She smiled, pleasantly. “Going so soon?” Without waiting for a response, she walked to a kitchen drawer, took out the phonebook, and flipped through the pages.

“That will be the third night this week, Tim,” Julie insisted. She turned away from the others and lowered her voice, though she was still audible. “I understand that you have to work late, but this is getting ridiculous.”

Ingrid folded back a page and handed it to Stephanie. She in turn programmed a number into her cell and placed an order for a cab, while Julie continued her muted discussion with her husband.

“All right, Honey. I love you,” Julie announced before abruptly disconnecting. “Well, Tim’s gotta work late.”

Stephanie closed her cell. “That’s a bummer, Jules.”

Ingrid withdrew from the kitchen with a look of marked satisfaction. “I’ll be upstairs if you need me,” she said in passing.

At that same moment, TJ began crying. Julie took the formula bottle from the counter and placed it in the microwave. “Why don’t you just stay here for a few days, Steph? It’ll be fun. And if you’re worried about missing work, I can pay you for the days you’d miss.”

Though Stephanie could have taken offense, she was sensing Julie’s desperate need for friendship, and her offer of payment was not condescension. “I’d really love to, Jules,” she said. “But aside from work, I need to see my niece, Amanda. My sister and brother-in-law have been having some problems lately, and I’ve been spending a lot of time with my little starseed.”

Julie removed the bottle from the microwave and dripped formula on her wrist. “Starseed?”

Stephanie glanced at her watch. She expected the cab in ten minutes. “That’s what I like to call her. She’s a very gifted child; seven years old with an ancient soul.”

“I’ve always loved your spirituality,” Julie said warmly. “I wish I had a better understanding of. . .souls, that sort of thing.”

“Next time we get together, we’ll talk more about it. Spirituality, I mean.”

Julie walked the bottle over to TJ and began feeding. His crying ceased when he started suckling the rubber nipple. “I’d really like that.”

Stephanie wondered why Julie wasn’t breast feeding yet she didn’t feel it was her place to ask. Logically, she assumed a conscientious mother wouldn’t want to nurse with nearly two bottles of champagne in her system.

“So, what kind of problems are your sister and brother-in-law having? Marital?” Julie eagerly asked. There was a measure

of misery-loving-company in her tone, and the alcohol lowered any inhibitions to inquire.

“The usual for couples,” she said guardedly. “After eight years of marriage, it’s common, I guess.”

“Does he cheat?” Julie bluntly asked.

Though Stephanie felt like it was none of Julie’s business, she realized the root of the question had little to do with Jillian and Michael Stern. “I can’t say for sure, Jules. What makes you ask?”

Julie removed the bottle from the baby’s mouth and looked around the corner. “Maybe it’s just something I should accept,” she stated.

Stephanie angled her head and whispered, “Tim?”

Julie sighed and closed her eyes. “I don’t know for sure but there’s no other explanation.”

“Oh, Jules. . .I’m so sorry.”

“Bad enough that he has all those ‘late nights’ at work, but in my own Goddamned house.”

“Ingrid?” Stephanie mouthed.

“She prances around here like she owns the place,” Julie said with disgust, and loud enough that any eavesdropper could hear the words. “Ingrid’s a nanny but I won’t let her near the baby. Tim thinks I don’t know about his indiscretions. He’s always been the kind to believe what he wants to believe.”

“What are you going to do, Julie?”

Returning to TJ, she resumed the feeding. “I’m a mommy now,” she said with adoring eyes. “I have more important things to think about. Things that outweigh my. . .pride.”

After a quiet moment befell them, Julie cheerfully said, “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t I fly out to LA and visit you. I could use a little time away and TJ can stay with my parents. You and I could visit our old haunts in Westwood. It would be a hoot.”

“Oh, I’d love that Jules, but I have to warn you, I have a pretty small place.”

“Are you kidding? I’d get us a hotel somewhere. One of those ritzy places on Wilshire that we couldn’t afford when we were back in college.”

Stephanie smiled. “Back when we got by on Ramen noodles and Boone’s Farm.”

“Those were the days,” Julie sighed. “Now that I have all these material things, I think back to having little, and appreciating just being alive and happy. If only I’d known it then, about the simple things in life.”

“You did, I’m sure,” Stephanie assured. However, she’d always considered Julie to be somewhat of a gold digger. Like many of the sorority sisters in their UCLA chapter house, she had ‘majored-in-mister’ and rarely if ever, did Julie consider the simple things in life.

Julie took a shallow breath and said, “I just turned twenty-four, and already I’m looking back instead of forward.” The cool, reflective words were not said in a way that warranted a response. Finished feeding, she placed the baby bottle in the fridge and returned with an already opened bottle of Chardonnay. She placed two water glasses on the counter, filled both, and passed one to Stephanie.

“Will I be able to hear the cab when it arrives?” she asked.

Julie sipped her wine. “Oh, you called a cab? I was going to drive you back to the airport.”

Stephanie placed her glass back on the counter. “That’s all right, Jules. It’s already on the way, and besides, we’ve been drinking. I don’t want you to worry about driving.”

“I’m not drunk, Stephanie,” she insisted. Her firm denial bordered upon sounding offended.

Stephanie took a few steps toward the foyer with a view of the driveway. “I’m not saying you are. It’s getting close to rush hour and I don’t want you to worry about the traffic coming home.”

Before Julie could reply, a horn sounded. “That was fast,” Stephanie said. She walked to the foyer, retrieved her flight bag and glanced out the window at a waiting taxicab.

With glass in hand, Julie followed. “It’s not too late to change your mind, Stephanie. I could really use the company.”

Sensing serious desperation in Julie’s tone, for a moment, Stephanie considered staying. Something, an inexplicable sense perhaps, was telling her to stay, and to be a friend for someone so obviously in need. However, after quick deliberation, she rejected the idea. She was on call for work and was expected to be back in LA that evening. Besides, she thought, she really wanted to be there for Amanda, who was an emotional victim of circumstance—as opposed to bad marital choices.

When the cab honked a second time, Stephanie gave Julie a hug. “I really have to go now, Jules. But we’ll talk later on tonight, after I get home. How’s that?”

With tears in her eyes, Julie nodded. She then gave what she could for a smile. “That would be great. Thanks for coming to see me, Stephanie. Whether you know it or not, our day together really helped me see my life from another perspective.”

“Things will work out, Jules, you’ll see.” Stephanie removed her crystal amulet and looped it around Julie’s neck. “Take this and Goddess will help you see your life more clearly.”

Julie studied the clear quartz for a moment. “It’s beautiful and it feels so warm, but I can’t take this.”

“I want you to. There’s a great deal of good energy on it, Julie. You can return it when you’re ready. You’ll know when.”

A third blast of the horn prompted Stephanie to open the door and step out into the broiling afternoon. As she hurried towards the waiting cab, Julie followed. “Have a safe flight, Stephanie.”

Waiving from the cab door, a favorite expression came to mind—one Stephanie would tell Amanda whenever she was feeling down. “Hey Julie. . .dream a happy dream for me.”

As Julie retreated into the cold comforts of her castle, Stephanie slipped into the cab and closed the door. Without air-conditioning, the vinyl seats were soft and tacky. When she reached down into the seat for the belt buckle, she discovered

that it was coated with chewing gum. Instead of buckling-up, she placed her flight bag over the disgusting sight.

The Middle Eastern driver, reeking of curry and cigarettes, turned to her from the front seat. Though he appeared annoyed at first, Stephanie's attractive looks eased his impatience.

"Sorry I made you wait," she said pleasantly. "Sky Harbor Airport, please. The Southland Air terminal."

After setting the meter, the driver sped away from the house and out of the gated community. "I followed a car inside," he proudly claimed while turning onto the highway. "Very nice neighborhood. You live there?"

Already deep in thought, Stephanie wasn't in the mood to chat. Besides, all the talking with Julie had been exhausting. "No, a friend of mine," she replied.

She didn't want to sound rude, but the time she'd spent with Julie required reflection. For all the material things Julie possessed, it would seem that she had more of a dungeon than a palace. Like the garage that she was too embarrassed to open, Julie's treating of Tim's infidelity was another dirty little thing, kept hidden for sight.

Stephanie thought about her own life and felt more alive than she had in recent memory. She actually missed her tiny apartment and wanted to get home. Though she wasn't making a lot of money, she was independent, able to travel for a living and beholden to no one.

"You're a flight attendant, huh?" the driver asked, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

"Yes, for Southland Air," she replied while looking out the window.

When she didn't say anything more, the driver sped up, as if his macho-driving-bravado would inspire further conversation. "Do you live here in Phoenix?"

"No, I live in LA." Stephanie took out her compact and thought to do touch-ups before reaching the airport.

Her distraction prompted the driver to accelerate again. "I'll get you there in plenty of time for your flight," he boasted.

“No hurry. I have over an hour.” She glanced at her watch. In reality, she had just under that, as her visit had been longer than expected.

A sudden burst of speed prompted her to look up from her compact mirror. The driver was racing through a yellow light in a crowded intersection. Suddenly, an ominous foreboding saturated her senses. “Hey, you should slow down, really!” she demanded.

Then, as the cab crossed into the intersection, to the right, a black SUV jumped the green light. Stephanie watched the approaching encounter through the windshield, unable to do anything. Alone in the backseat, never in her life had she felt such an utter and complete lack of control. “Goddess protect,” she whispered.

The panicked cab driver locked his brakes, causing the taxi to skid. “Oh shit!” he exclaimed.

The tires screeched and burning rubber scented the interior. Each frame in that moment, though occurring in microseconds, for Stephanie, seemed like portraits of time, painstakingly put on canvass—a seeming eternity passed until finally, metal met metal, and flesh met blunt force.