

# NETBLUE

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James L. Hayhurst



PARASCENSION PRESS

# *Netblue*

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Cover design: Bill Jackson

"Jars of Air" by Cathy Cox, Canadian Parachuting Team and Women's World Accuracy Champion, 1978.

"What is This Thing Called Love" by Cole Porter, excerpt used by permission of Warner Bros. Publications.

ISBN 9798607455477

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## Author's Note

In 1994, when this story takes place, the average speed of the central processing unit of a home computer was 20 megahertz. A typical hard drive held 400 megabytes of data. Modem connection speeds ranged from 2400 bits to 28.8 kilobits per second. All this performance cost about \$2500.

A little over a quarter century later, these numbers seem laughable. CPU clock speeds are measured in *gigahertz*, hard drives hold *terabytes* of data, and computers play streaming video content. A decent laptop costs well under \$1000.

In 1994, America Online was a hip new on-line service, offering innovative features like chat rooms and Instant Messages. On the Internet, 'cybersex' was something jointly imagined — not pay-per-view porn viewed in living color.

*Netblue* is fiction, but I offer it as an accurate portrayal of romance at the dawning of the Internet era. For all our technological advancements, the boy-meets-girl romantic issues raised in the story are unchanged from the days of Shakespeare—a reminder that even in the new millennium, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

# PART ONE

1991

*Security is mostly a superstition  
It does not exist in nature, nor do the children  
of men as a whole experience it.  
Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run  
than outright exposure.  
Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing at all.*

*– Helen Keller*

# 1

Paul Allison knew he should have called in sick. Cathy had begged him to last night, after he had hung up on the scheduler and they lay in bed wide awake, trying to fall back asleep. And then again this morning, after the alarm went off and he stared groggily at the ceiling. By way of argument, she placed his hand on her belly and let him feel the baby kick.

Through the twin skylights above their bed, his eyes registered stars. Jupiter shone brightly above Orion's left shoulder. Back on earth, the debate between head and heart raged. The stirring under his hand told him to stay; the voice in his head said go, duty called.

In the end, duty had won. He got up, showered, got dressed. Cathy was a good sport. She got up too, made him coffee. A banana for later.

"Want me to leave a message when we know?" she had asked without a trace of rancor in her voice.

"Please," he replied. "I'll take you and Samantha out to dinner. Bring the pictures."

At the door she said she loved him and kissed him goodbye. Driving away, he felt a premonition that he was making a mistake, that he should turn around and call in sick. Let some other reserve pilot save the day. He had a pregnant wife who needed him.

Instead, ever the good soldier, he drove on.

On the flight to St. Louis, Paul's uneasy feeling of dread faded, but then returned with a vengeance on the ground, when before he even made it to the cockpit, three different people warned him the captain was a royal prick.

The first warning came from Andy Howard, the first officer he was replacing, getting off the trip after flying in from Milwaukee. You don't get off sick on the last day of a trip unless you're really sick—or really sick of the captain.

Howard stormed up the jetway on the heels of the last passenger, slowing only when he recognized Paul. He paused to shake his head and mutter, "Sorry to do this to you, pal, but it was all I could do to stay on the trip this long. Nelson's such an asshole!"

Paul knew Andy from recurrent training. They'd eaten lunch together. Soft-spoken and even-tempered, Andy had flown air force fighters, the same as Paul. They'd bantered over which was the better jet, Andy's F-15 Eagle or the F-16 Viper Paul had flown.

Andy was on his way to the chief pilot's office and too upset to go into detail, but the gist of it was that Nelson had dogged him over nitnoids for two days straight. His parting words were, "Never have I flown with someone who can piss off every single person he comes in contact with!"

Second was a cleaner, mopping the forward galley, blocking Paul's path to the cockpit. "You really don't want to go up there," he warned. "Your captain's a friggin' jerk!"

Paul had seen graffiti about Nelson on the walls of the bathroom stalls down in operations. It was juvenile stuff, some of it funny: "Lord Nelson's a Ninny!" and "Nelson has a Napoleon Complex!"

Paul had never given it serious attention. With one glaring exception early in his airline career, he had never had a problem with any captain.

In commercial aviation, strict adherence to standardized procedures kept a pilot's personality in the margins. You flew by the book, read the checklists right, never took chances. This was A to B flying, not combat. Most important was to work together, to catch each other's mistakes, to communicate openly. In the airline industry, they called it "CRM," for "Crew Resource Management" — a fancy name for teamwork.

Still unable to get past the cleaner, Paul left his flight bag against the side of the jetway and went down the service steps to the ramp. He'd do his walk-around, and then introduce himself to Nelson.

Rounding the nose, he came upon a mechanic who yelled into his ear over the ramp noise, "YOU FLYING WITH THIS IDIOT?"

Paul nodded.

"GOOD FUCKING LUCK!" the mechanic shouted, shaking his head with obvious disgust.

Now Paul was seriously concerned.

Damn—one day of reserve availability left and he gets snagged for a trip. And why? Because the captain's a frigging asshole. For this he was missing Cathy's ultrasound.

Paul did a methodical walk-around of the jet, an MD-80, inspecting the fuselage and wings and tires, gazing up at the airliner's tall T-tail, unconsciously checking dozens of things that would register in his mind only by exception. As he walked, he tried to shake off the dark clouds gathering above his head.

He comforted himself with the thought that at least this trouble was work-related . . . it had nothing to do with his family. He told himself that going upstairs expecting trouble would only make things worse. Better that he approach Nelson with a positive attitude.

It was the professional thing to do.

Besides, he only had to fly four legs with this joker: a turn to O'Hare, a Philly turn, and he was done. How hard could that be? He reminded himself it could be worse; he could've been stuck in St. Louis for the night. As it was, if they stayed on schedule, he'd get into St. Louis early enough to catch USAir's 4:15 flight back to Pittsburgh. He'd be home in time to take the girls out for dinner.

He'd see the ultrasound images of the baby then. With any luck it would be a boy, and odds around the Allison household would improve to even—two boys versus two girls. Or as they said in fighter-pilot speak: a "2 v 2". Buoyed by the prospect of good news when he got home, Allison bounded up the service stairs two at a time, the dark clouds abated.

Inside the jetway, he found his flight bag had been moved. He glanced into the galley. No sign of it there. Maybe the cleaner put it up in the cockpit for him. Stepping inside the door, he saw three flight attendants huddled in the last row of first class. He went back to introduce himself. The three women seemed unusually subdued, as if they were shell-shocked. They said nothing about Nelson, but looked at him with what could only be described as pity.

Paul went forward to the cockpit. At the door, he caught sight of a shock of sandy blond hair jutting a few inches above the captain's seat back. Captain Nelson was either slouching or very short.

Paul saw his flight bag resting on his seat. He cleared his throat. Nelson turned at the sound. "Hey cap'n, nice to meet you," Paul said, extending his right hand. "Paul Allison. I'm your new first officer."

"Gary Nelson."

They shook. Nelson had a soft grip. His face was round and as pale as the moon. He had odd, yellowish-hazel eyes with dark flecks at the perimeter of the iris. Nelson looked way too young to be a captain at TWA. He wasn't slouching; just short.

Nelson jerked his head in the direction of Paul's flight bag. "You shouldn't leave your bag sitting in the jetway," he scolded in a voice that sounded like it came from a tin horn imbedded somewhere deep in his nasal cavity. "Someone might tamper with it."

Paul refrained from the several smart aleck replies that came to mind. What was he supposed to do, walk around carrying the thirty-five-pound bag in his hand? He gazed at Nelson, trying to think of something polite to say.

"Thanks for bringing my bag up to the cockpit," he said.

Nelson ignored the peace offering. "Did you do the walk-around?"

"Yep."

"Airplane okay?"

"Looked good."

"Everything in limits?"

Again, Paul was tempted to give a smart-alecky reply, something on the order of, "Yeah, just as designed . . . the pointy end's up front, there's a wing on each side, four wheels underneath, two engines in back, one tail, and one flaming asshole in the left front seat . . ."

Instead he said, "Everything looked okay, boss."

He should've been a diplomat.

"What was the wear on the left outboard brake?"

Paul squinted. "You mean the brake wear pin?"

"Yes."

Paul was flabbergasted. No captain had ever asked him a question like that after his pre-flight inspection. If a pilot said the exterior of the jet was OK, then it was OK. *Period.*

"I know it's okay," he reported, "but I couldn't tell you exactly how far the wear pin is sticking out. An eighth of an inch, maybe more."

"Why don't you go back down and check it again?"

Paul's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

Captain Nelson lifted his eyebrows and nodded, his bland expression suggesting this was a perfectly legitimate request.

"If it matters that much to you, maybe you should go down and check it yourself," Paul said in a quiet voice.

"It's your job. It says so in the flight operations manual."

"I know what my job is," Paul snapped.

"Then why don't you back out and do it right this time?"

Paul's eyes narrowed. He felt his heart banging against his ribs. He realized his hands were clenched into fists. It was all he could do to keep from putting one through Nelson's pasty face.

Not a very professional response.

Instead, he stormed out of the cockpit and down the service stairs. He marched across the ramp to the left landing gear, where he observed that the brake wear pins protruded exactly 3/16th of an inch. Before he returned to the cockpit to report this critical finding to the captain, he stopped and

paced the ramp at the base of the stairs, trying to get a grip on himself. His temper had gotten him into serious trouble more than once in his life.

He was furious—mainly at himself for not listening to Cathy last night and calling off sick. If he called in sick now, operations would be forced to cancel the flight. A full plane-load of passengers bound for Chicago would be stranded. That wasn't right.

He took a deep breath. He told himself he'd just have to suck it up, even if it took every last ounce of self-control he possessed to get through the day without punching out the captain.

The last time he did that, it got him fired and made the headlines in every newspaper in the country.

## 2

The probe reminded Sam of one of those weird shower wands she'd encountered on their trip to Europe last summer. But the head of this wand didn't have any holes in it, and instead of a hose for water, it had a thick wire that went to the ultrasound machine, which sat on a wheeled stand with the monitor, next to her mother's bed.

"It's cold, mom," Sam warned her mother as she handed the wand back to the nurse.

"That's right, honey, but it will warm up once we rub it over your mom's tummy," the nurse said.

The nurse — officially an "ultrasound technician," but she wore a white smock and looked like a nurse — said Samantha would be able to see her baby brother (she just *knew* it would be a brother) on the monitor. The nurse was nice and didn't mind Sam being in the room at all, which was a huge relief to Samantha. She *really* wanted to see this and had begged her mom to let her out of school early to come along; when she grew up she planned to be a doctor.

Now the nurse lifted up the pea-green hospital gown from her mom's tummy and rubbed some goo on it. Mom's stomach was getting big these days . . . not watermelon big, but enough to have a five-month-old baby inside.

It is cold, thought Cathy Allison as the transducer came into contact with her flesh. She shuddered slightly and looked down at the hillock that had once been her flat stomach. Her skin was taut and the lubricant glistened, reflecting the light of a bulb from across the room. Other than the one lamp, the room was as dim as a confessional. The glow of the television monitor flickered on her daughter's face.

Cathy let her head fall back and closed her eyes, trying to stay composed while Barbara, the technician, fiddled with the settings on her control console. Cathy mused about her due date, April 4th, and wondered if she could keep her vow to be back in a swimsuit by the 4th of July.

*Such vanity.*

But when she carried Sam ten years before, she had gained fifty pounds, and it had taken her almost a year to lose it. She wasn't going to let that happen again. This time she was happy and eating sensibly . . . when she was pregnant with Sam, she had been profoundly unhappy and had over-eaten out of despair.

And this time, after the delivery, she planned on breast feeding. That would help take off the weight. The sad truth was that after Samantha was born, the thought of breast-feeding had repulsed her.

Loving her daughter the way she did now, Cathy often wished she could go back in time and shake sense into that unhappy twenty-year old, tell her she was blessed, that she carried a precious child in her body, and that in time, she would come to love it.

But ten years ago she saw things quite differently . . . the object in her womb had shredded the carefully woven fabric of her life, ending her plan for a career in the Air Force and her dreams of flying.

She'd carried Sam out of obligation, not love, burdened by a terrible secret . . . she had been raped.

It had happened on a night in late-May of her junior year, in the foothills north of the Academy, walking through the forest alone, on her way to a bonfire party celebrating the selection of the new members of the cadet parachuting team – an elite squad to which she had belonged.

At first she didn't know her rapist's identity, but later, when she figured it out, she conceived a plan meant to let him know she knew it was him, scare him off the team and get him to quit the academy – but her plan went horribly awry, and the ensuing accident left him crippled for life.

Worse, her botched revenge came with a price: it made it impossible to reveal the crime that had been done to her and the cadet who had done it. For three months she kept the pregnancy secret, and in every hour of every day and even in her dreams, she agonized over having an abortion.

It wasn't until she could no longer hide her pregnancy that she finally told her squadron's air officer, Captain Kiley. From Kiley she had gone up the chain of command, all the way to the Commandant of Cadets, never revealing that she'd been raped, enduring reactions that varied from condemnation to sympathy.

By the time she reached the Commandant, she realized her choice was really quite simple: either she could have an abortion and come back in a month, or resign. The Academy did not tolerate lying, stealing or cheating . . . nor allow pregnant cadets.

So she went home to Pittsburgh to make her choice. In the end, she kept the baby because she feared she would be forever tormented by her Catholic guilt.

Reluctantly, she mailed her resignation and carried the baby to term, but she didn't know if Samantha was a boy or girl until her birth, and then named her on a whim after her father, Samuel.

This time everything that had been wrong about Sam's birth was right, this time there were no secrets and no shame, no lies about who was the father. This time she wanted the baby, and Paul wanted the child as much as she.

Cathy felt the transducer warming as it traveled over her stomach. She imagined she could feel its beam penetrating her uterus. She prayed, *"Dear God, please let our baby be healthy, let it have all its fingers and toes and let it be a boy. Please let it be a boy for Paul; we'll name him after his best friend Danny, and with his birth, my life and our marriage will be healed and made whole for all time . . ."*

"Mom, you're crying . . . is something wrong?"

Cathy wiped the tears leaking from the corners of her eyes and turned to Sam. "It's because I'm so happy, sweetheart. Nothing's wrong; it doesn't hurt a bit."

"There. You can see the baby now," Barbara announced.

Cathy turned her head to look at the monitor and for the first time saw the ghostly image of her child: two arms and two legs, thank God, the legs crossed like a pretzel and one

fist pressed against its face, probably sucking its thumb. She could make out the tiny heart pumping, fluttering like a baby bird's. Try as she might, nothing she saw on the screen suggested either boy or girl.

"Can you tell?" Sam demanded. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Are you sure you want to know, Mrs. Allison?"

"We want to know, we want to know!" Mother and daughter blurted out in unison.

"Well then . . ." Barbara paused for effect, "It's a boy."

Sam shrieked. "*A boy!* That's so cool! How can you tell?"

"See here? This funny shape just below his tummy?"

Barbara pointed to a splotch on the screen.

Sam nodded.

"That's a penis," Barbara explained with a broad smile.

"Honey, you're going to have a baby brother."

“Parking check complete.”

“Parking *checklist* complete,” Captain Nelson corrected.

Paul clipped the checklist on his yoke and turned to face Nelson. “We need to talk,” he said between gritted teeth.

Nelson looked at him blandly, his face utterly devoid of emotion. It astounded Paul that he could maintain such Spock-like composure while inciting his flying partner to the brink of homicide.

Andy Howard had understated the case; Gary Nelson was more than just an asshole, he was a menace to aviation. Ten minutes in the cockpit with him and all you could think of was strangling the bastard—not exactly a state of mind conducive to safe flying.

“What’s to talk about?” said Nelson.

Paul opened his mouth but no words came out. His grievances were so numerous he didn’t know where to begin. Nelson’s petty tyranny had started with the preflight brake wear pin episode and continued through every phase of operations, from engine start to the parking checklist.

If Paul reported the altimeter setting was 30.01 inches, Nelson said to check again, he heard 30.02. If Paul touched a switch or knob on the overhead panel—even if it was only to adjust the cabin temperature in response to a call from the back—Nelson chastised him for not asking permission first.

So much for working together; so much for teamwork.

As for the unending criticism, Paul shuddered to think of the black hole of insecurity that drove Nelson to fault every single action a fellow pilot took. It was infuriating.

On the return leg to St. Louis, which Paul flew, Nelson had called out his final approach airspeed plus and minus *one knot*, which was an absurdity. The airspeed indicator was a round gauge with a needle pointer. No one, not even Chuck Yeager himself, could read the needle to the knot, let alone fly it that accurately.

Even with Nelson's carping, Paul had made a glorious landing, one of those exceedingly rare (for him) landings when the wheels spin up at touchdown and the aircraft settles down on its landing gear so smoothly you honestly cannot tell when flight ends and landing roll begins.

As he took control approaching the second high-speed taxiway, Nelson snidely remarked that if Paul hadn't held it off so long, they would have made the first turn-off.

Paul was still riled. The remark was sour grapes, pure and simple. He was a breath away from telling Nelson off, walking off the jet, and heading up to the chief pilot's office to add his name to the list of pilots who refused to fly with Captain Gary Nelson.

Only loyalty to the company and its customers—if he bailed out on the trip now, two oversold flights would be canceled—kept Paul from packing up his flight bag and storming off the jet.

But he had to say *something*, or he couldn't continue the trip. He'd blow up at Nelson at the wrong moment, or even worse—mentally disengage and let the man fly solo. Either option was unacceptable. Both compromised safety. The people in the back deserved better.

"Listen, Gary . . ." Paul began, trying to maintain his composure, ". . . I don't know if you realize it or not, but your incessant criticism and unwillingness to let me do my job is compromising safety."

"What do you mean?" Nelson protested innocently, as if this came as utter surprise. "I fly by the book."

"Nowhere in the book does it say you're supposed to call out airspeed plus or minus one knot," Paul sputtered.

"Details matter," Nelson said smugly.

Paul took a deep breath. "They do, but calling out one knot airspeed deviations is an insult to your fellow pilot. You can't read the airspeed gauge that accurately, Gary."

"Well, I *can* see one knot, so I call it that way."

Paul ignored Nelson's asinine remark. "And when your fellow pilot makes a great landing, it's considered good form to acknowledge it."

"But you missed the first high-speed turn-off."

"The second turn-off is closer to the gates. Why wear out the brakes to make the first exit? . . . Especially since you seem so concerned about brake wear."

"The book says you're supposed to land on-speed in the first thousand feet."

Paul felt his blood pressure rising. That wasn't exactly what the book said, but he wasn't going to argue the point. The fact was, no reasonable pilot would fault a smooth-as-glass landing 1500 feet down a dry, 10,000-foot-long runway.

"Let's start over," Paul said, his voice quavering with fury. "Here's the deal, Gary—since you can maintain air-speed to the knot and I can't, why don't you fly the rest of the legs and I'll just yank the gear for you. But one more chicken-shit remark—"

"Now listen here—"

"No, you listen!" Paul cut him off. "Just one more word from you and I'm getting off the trip. That will be two co-pilots who bailed out on you in one day, and I think the chief pilot will want to know why. I'll send him to the bathroom stalls down in ops where he can read about 'Lord Nelson' for himself . . . I'll tell him you're such a tyrant that it's unsafe for *anyone* to fly with you . . . is that what you want?"

Nelson finally showed some emotion, his cheeks flushing bright pink. He snarled, "I supposed you think just because you were the big hero who brought down AST, you can throw your weight around and do whatever you want!"

Paul groaned inwardly, wishing he'd never heard the name AST. Atlantic Seaboard Transit was a start-up carrier based in Pittsburgh that he'd flown for earlier in his airline career. A year ago this past December he'd been involved in an episode that led to its demise.

The incident occurred in a snowstorm at Washington National, involving a deranged AST captain who insisted on

attempting to take off when one wing was still covered with snow and ice. Paul's mutiny and the subsequent evacuation of the passengers onto the runway made the evening news on all the major networks.

The story was in the papers for months afterwards. CSPAN carried the National Transportation Safety Board hearing live. All the major networks and newspapers gave the story major coverage. His fifteen minutes of fame.

A whistleblower watching the coverage subsequently came forward with damning evidence that AST's entire fleet of 737-300s had a major structural defect. The DOT grounded AST and then pulled its Air Carrier Certificate. Paul was vindicated—but out of a job.

While AST was already forgotten, just another failed start-up airline in the deregulation era, the incident was still remembered by many airline pilots, a satisfying victory for air safety . . . a rare occasion where a lone pilot, putting everything on the line, brought about the grounding of an unsafe operation.

After the hearing, Paul began interviewing with major airlines and landed a job at TWA. While he started at the same pay rates as any other new hire, he found the incident served to establish his credibility with most captains.

Obviously not Gary Nelson.

Paul maintained a granite expression and slowly shook his head. "Look, what happened at AST was an exception. We would've been killed if I hadn't done what I did. I have as much respect for captain's authority as anyone, maybe even more, being ex-military. Hell, I went to the Air Force Academy, where they *really* drill it into you."

Paul saw the wheels turning behind Nelson's eyes and instantly he regretted mentioning the Academy.

"Should've guessed you're a Zoomie," Nelson sneered. "No wonder you got an attitude. You ring-knockers are all alike—you think you're better than the rest of us."

Paul didn't even wear his class ring, and he had reached the end of his rope. He released his lap belt and turned in his seat to face Nelson squarely.

"Look Nelson," he seethed, "The only reason I'm here is the guy before me couldn't stand flying with you. If you weren't such a prick, right now I'd be in Pittsburgh with my wife, where I belong. Instead, I'm stuck here with you. So don't make it any harder than it already is, or I'm outta here— you got it?"

Paul climbed out of his seat with cell phone in hand, glowering at Nelson, who looked up at him wide-eyed. "I'm going out on the jetway and see if my wife has left a message . . . while I'm gone, why don't you decide if you want to work with me or not."

Nelson was speechless.

Paul grabbed his coat and donned it. "To tell you the truth," he continued, "I'd just as soon just get off the trip, have a little chat with the chief pilot, and then catch the next flight back to Pittsburgh."

Nelson's mouth opened and closed like a fish.

"One other thing," Paul said as he grabbed his hat and opened the cockpit door, "Since you're so good at it, why don't you do the walk-around this time?"

Paul left Nelson staring bug-eyed into space with mouth agape, his pasty moon face turned beet red.

"Mom, can we call Dad now?"

Cathy glanced in disapproval at her daughter, clad in nothing but a sweater and short skirt. Samantha and her skimpy clothing. The girl would go outside in underwear if Cathy let her. When she had picked her up at school on the way to the appointment, Sam had forgotten her coat in the classroom and there was no time to go back for it. "If you'd remembered your coat we could, young lady. But it's too cold to stand in this parking garage and make a call."

"Mommm –"

"Don't 'mom' me, Samantha. It's freezing. You can wait until we get to the restaurant."

Cathy shivered in her coat and picked up the pace as they walked towards the Volvo wagon. She noted it was drizzling outside; thank goodness she'd found a covered spot below the roof of the garage. Sam loped along at her side, seemingly untouched by the cold.

"Why couldn't we call Dad from the lobby?"

Cathy frowned. "I told you already, Samantha. The lobby is considered inside the hospital."

"What, somebody might die if we make a call?"

"Maybe they would, Sam."

"Dad said the new phones hardly put out any power."

"Samantha, I don't know! But someone at the hospital thinks it might interfere with the medical equipment."

"Well, can we call Dad when we get inside the car?"

Cathy almost snapped. She knew she was irritable from hunger – she hadn't eaten since early morning. "Sam, it can wait until we sit down in the restaurant. Anyway, Daddy is up in the air right now and he won't be able to check for messages until later on."

Cathy had risen early this morning with Paul to see him off on another of his oh-dark-thirty departures. Toast and decaf coffee at five with Paul, then a few mushy spoonfuls of

leftover cereal after she put Sam on the bus for school. Now she was famished, and she had to pee again, despite having gone right after the examination.

Cathy considered going back, but they were almost to the car. She spied the wagon with its squared-off rear end and tapered nose, parked next to a van. Paul said he liked the Volvo's lines. Cathy liked all the extra safety features—especially the driver's side airbag.

But as crash resistant as the vehicle was, she still insisted Sam sit in the back. "You can sit in front when you turn ten," she promised when her daughter complained about being treated like a baby.

"Samantha, don't even ask . . ." Cathy warned with a fierce look as they arrived at the vehicle. She opened the doors and they buckled in. It took five tortuous minutes to go up and then wind their way back down the seemingly endless levels of the parking garage.

Cathy hated multi-story parking garages—their low ceilings made her feel claustrophobic. With every turn, she felt increasingly dizzy, and that made her need to urinate even worse. Finally they reached ground level and the exit.

Out of the garage, she turned right on James Street and headed down to East North Street, which led to an on-ramp to I-279. From there it was five minutes north to McKnight Boulevard, then only a few more minutes to any one of a dozen restaurants, all of which had a bathroom.

She could make it that far.

Not an unnecessary word had been spoken in the cockpit since the confrontation on the ground in St. Louis. Nelson flew the airplane, making occasional inputs to the autopilot via knobs on the glareshield-mounted mode control panel. Paul worked the radios and took instructions from Cleveland Center.

They cruised at Flight Level 330 and Mach 0.76, their groundspeed just over 500 knots. Their route of flight took them down Jet Route 80, an airway that stretched across Pennsylvania on a west-to-east line, passing a little south of Pittsburgh. In thirty minutes, they'd start their descent into Philly.

Cruising on autopilot: the phase of flight when pilots chatted to stave off boredom. *Not today.*

Paul stared out his windscreen and took advantage of the silence to let his mind wander. Today his thoughts inevitably turned to the outcome of Cathy's ultrasound. Ahead and to the left, somewhere under the clouds, was Pittsburgh. North of downtown Pittsburgh, on the north side of the Allegheny River, was Allegheny General, where by now Cathy knew the sex of their unborn child.

Statistically, fighter pilots fathered girls. In Paul's F-16 squadron, seventy percent of the children were girls—an astounding statistical anomaly. Most attributed it to the fact that fighter pilots pulled high G's—the theory being that high G-forces killed off male sperm. The wives claimed it proved that women are indeed the stronger sex. Paul was inclined to believe the theory.

Apparently, high-G parachute opening shocks did the same thing, because he had impregnated Cathy with Sam while jumping with the *Wings of Blue*, the cadet parachuting team at the Air Force Academy, ten years before.

*Ten years . . .* amazing that ten years had passed since he had graduated. Ten years gone by in the blink of an eye.

Never would he have guessed those years would lead him to the right seat of an MD-80, life as an airline pilot.

Flying airliners had never been on his life list of things to do. All he had ever wanted to fly was fighters. But at the Academy, he had gotten involved with the parachuting team, and that had led to an assignment out of pilot training flying a classified variant of the Lockheed C-130 “Hercules” transport—one configured for special operations.

After three very interesting and occasionally dangerous years of clandestine operations, he had been rewarded with an assignment flying his beloved *Viper*, officially known as the F-16 Fighting Falcon.

Then a mid-air during a training exercise nearly cost him his life. His brush with death had served as a wake-up call, spurring him to reconsider what he was doing with his life . . . For seven years after graduating from the Academy, he and Cathy had been estranged. It began the summer after his graduation, at the U.S. Parachuting Nationals, when Cathy accidentally rolled his Porsche while driving back to the hotel. She had her seatbelt on and escaped unhurt, but the car was totaled.

They had gotten into an ugly quarrel afterward. Then Cathy made the U.S. Parachute Team and he didn’t. When she traveled to Europe that summer to compete, the long separation turned their rift into a break-up.

He hadn’t even known she was pregnant until the fall, one month into pilot training at Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi, when he was astounded to learn from friends on the team back at the Academy that Cathy had resigned and gone home to Pittsburgh to have a baby.

Not a call, not a letter—nothing to suggest she expected anything from him. She wouldn’t take his calls. His letters were returned unopened. It wasn’t until the baby was born that she finally sent him a card with a picture of Sam.

Over the years that followed, Cathy slowly warmed to idea of Paul visiting their daughter. He came when he could,

but with the demands of his assignments, it was rarely more than two or three times a year.

It hurt him to know that Samantha was growing up without her father around, but asking Cathy to join him and give up the support of her family in Pittsburgh was out of the question.

Neither was ready to make that level of commitment in any case; they had barely been boyfriend-girlfriend when Cathy became pregnant. He had been too immature – with a fiery temper that made him say things he later regretted. They'd never had a chance to form a loving relationship. And on his sporadic visits, his focus had been Samantha, not romancing Cathy.

And so it went for seven years, Cathy raising Sam on her own, he trying to put them out of his mind by working sixteen-hour days, six and seven days a week, volunteering for every mission and additional duty the squadron had to offer. When he wasn't working, he was with the bachelors, drinking hard and trying to get laid – 'manly' diversions for which he found little enthusiasm.

Over time, some family men in the squadron befriended him and took him home for dinner. It wasn't long before their wives had adopted him, and soon he had found his true calling: squadron babysitter.

Friday nights found him watching *The Sound of Music* with the kids while their mom and dad enjoyed a night out. The hardest part was when he put their children to bed. He'd wonder about *his* daughter; who tucked her in bed?

Flying like a maniac helped him forget. It was only after the mid-air when he lay in the hospital, grateful to be alive, that he began seriously reconsidering his priorities in life. When his own father died, hadn't he sworn on his grave to be a better father to his children than the one he'd known?

These thoughts crystallized one morning a few months after the accident, when he went to the base personnel office to drop off his "dream sheet" – the form indicating what he wanted to do on his next assignment. Trying to move out

from behind the steering wheel of his vehicle, something held him to the seat. It was as if an angel grabbed him by the shoulders and restrained him.

Paul would never forget that crystal moment of insight, brilliant light shining in, seemingly from every direction. At first he thought he was having a stroke, or suffering an undiagnosed brain injury after the ejection. But the moment passed . . . and when it did, he knew what he had to do.

Calmly, he crumpled his dream sheet and walked inside the base personnel building. The airman at the front desk looked at him inquisitively. Paul asked for directions to the separations office. He was getting out of the Air Force.

From that moment to this, in only three years.

Paul smiled and craned his neck to look down on the thick layer of clouds that blanketed Pittsburgh, somewhere to the north of their position. Hidden under those clouds were Cathy and Sam, and with them, the newest member of the Allison family.

That song about grace had it right.

There had been a minor fender-bender at the intersection of James Street and East North Street. Two sedans with crumpled front bumpers blocked the middle of the intersection. A police officer directed traffic onto East North Street, away from I-279.

At Cedar Avenue, Cathy turned south, planning to turn left onto East Ohio and double back to the I-279 ramp. But the turn lane was clogged. In frustration, she gunned the Volvo through the intersection. She would turn left at Avery Street. Before she got there, she saw signs under the maze of elevated concrete pointing to I-279. She decided to head down Cedar and see if there was an on-ramp.

Approaching the freeway, Cathy saw with relief a sign for I-279 North. Then, as she passed under the westbound lanes, she spotted a brightly illuminated sign indicating the restricted HOV lane was open to northbound traffic.

Paul made fun of the HOV lanes. He said they were some highway engineer's "wet dream" and too inaccessible, but the gate was up, and so with a sigh of relief Cathy turned left into the lane.

She squeezed against her bladder and told herself she could make it – only ten minutes to a bathroom.

*Think about something other than having to pee,* Cathy told herself as she followed the sweeping curve of the road. As the road straightened going in a northbound direction, she glanced in the rearview mirror at Sam. Sam had her headset on and was lost in her own world.

Behind her, Cathy caught a glimpse of the Pittsburgh skyline, a sight that always brought a thrill – ever since she was a little girl and Dad would take her to Pirate's games.

She had been in one of those buildings only yesterday – the twenty-first floor of an older brick high-rise in the heart of the city, at the office of her therapist, Doctor Myron Selig.

Like her, Selig was a baseball fan, and they had hit it off from the start. The great thing about Selig was he didn't just sit there silently and listen, turning everything back on her, every observation posed as a question, the way her previous therapist had. Dr. Myron was confident enough of his grasp of practical life to sometimes suggest action.

Cathy liked that. That is, until the session in which he had listened to the story of her rape, and suggested she needed to tell Paul the truth about Sam.

Easy for him to say. But this lie went back over ten years, starting the year she left the Academy to have Sam. She had told Paul that *he* had gotten her pregnant. How could he ever forgive her that? She had wrestled with the issue ever since. A month ago, Doctor Selig had said something that made her doubt her position.

"Cathy," he said, "you're pregnant with his child now. You know he loves you enough to have left the Air Force and join you here. You know he loves you and Samantha dearly . . . The person most tormented by this secret is you. Tell Paul the truth and you'll set yourself free. Lying to him was wrong, but if he's half the man you think he is, he'll forgive you and you can both let go and enjoy a wonderful future together."

Cathy knew Doctor Selig was right, except he didn't know Paul . . . Paul would want to know who raped her, and if she told him who it was, he would want revenge. Even though her rapist was crippled, a paraplegic for life, karmic punishment so terrible that she couldn't imagine a worse sentence, even so, Paul would find Mark Gold and kill him with his bare hands.

She knew things about Paul that Doctor Selig didn't—especially his temper. She had once witnessed him go nearly insane after catching a classmate bullying some fourth-class cadets . . . he'd hung the offending cadet by his ankles out the window of his sixth-floor dorm room until the cadet peed in his pants while begging for mercy.

She also knew Paul had killed a boy in high school—there were extenuating circumstances and he had gotten off with a

suspended sentence for involuntary manslaughter – but she feared if she told Paul that Mark Gold had raped her, he would take matters into his own hands – even if it meant going to jail. Living with her secret was better than living without her husband.

“How do you know he would do that?” Doctor Selig said when she finally revealed her fears about Paul in their session yesterday. “How do you know he hasn’t changed? Maybe Paul would *feel* like killing Mr. Gold, but that doesn’t mean he would actually *do* it. You’re a different person now, Cathy – he is too. People grow, they change; give him a chance to do the right thing. You don’t know what Paul will do, but I guarantee you – if you keep this lie to yourself, it will poison your relationship.”

Cathy thought about Doctor Selig’s advice all morning as she knitted. And then, when she saw her baby on the monitor, when she saw that he was a boy, and gave him the name she and Paul had chosen, *Daniel*, after Paul’s best friend and best man at their wedding . . . after that she knew she could tell Paul the truth. In their unborn son, she saw the reason why Paul could forgive her for lying, the reason he would never kill again.

Sam’s voice broke through Cathy’s reverie: “Mom, since there’s no other cars, can we call Daddy on the cell phone?”

Cathy looked back at Sam, who leaned forward in her seat with her headset off. “Sure Sam, why not,” she replied and reached for her bag to pull out the metallic-silver phone.

Cathy held the phone in her right hand and pressed the #2 button, which Paul had programmed to dial his own cell phone. She listened to it ring, then Paul’s voice came on. “Hello, you’ve reached four one two . . .”

“It’s the machine, Sam. You want to leave a message?”

“Sure!”

“Let me say hello, then I’ll hand you the phone.”

Cathy glanced over her right shoulder and saw that Sam had released her seatbelt and leaned against the front seat.

"Sam, you put your seatbelt on NOW or you're not going to talk to your father!" she commanded.

Chastened, Sam sat back and refastened her seatbelt.

Cathy put her ear to the phone and heard the end of Paul's greeting, then the beep. "Hi Paul, it's Cathy," she huffed, shooting darts in the rearview mirror at Sam, who sat contritely with seatbelt fastened. Cathy relaxed. "We're on our way home," she said, a smile breaking out across her face. "Sam and I have some news for you . . . here's Sam."

She reached back to hand the cell phone to Sam.

When Sam reached forward to take the phone, it slipped through her fingers and fell to the footwell.

Cathy glimpsed the phone lying between Sam's feet, then returned her eyes to the road ahead. The road made a gentle sweep to the left . . . as she rounded the corner, she was stunned to see a large truck less than a hundred yards away, barreling straight towards them.

"*Oh my God!*" she gasped out loud, swerving violently. The Volvo slammed against the right-side barrier. Cathy heard the grinding sound of metal against concrete. Then to her dismay, she saw the truck veer in the same direction. It was only seconds away.

"*Sam, hold on!*" Cathy shouted as she threw the wheel back hard to the left. She heard Sam scream.

Simultaneously, as if in a bad dream, Cathy watched the truck mirror her turn and swerve directly into her path. With horrible certainty, she knew there was no way to avoid a collision. She slammed on the brakes and felt her bladder release with fear.

The two vehicles slammed head-on into each other at a combined speed of ninety-five miles per hour. The resultant concussion rattled windows for miles around.

The truck was a heavy-duty utility vehicle belonging to Drinkard Paving Co, on its way to a job in the Strip District. The driver, a 25-year-old employee named Randy Snyder, had consumed three beers at lunch. Snyder, who was not wearing his seatbelt, was ejected through the windshield. He

smashed headfirst into the concrete barrier dividing HOV lanes from regular traffic. The impact crushed his skull and he died instantly.

His passenger, Tyler Griffin, had not been drinking but was unsuccessful in convincing his partner to let him drive. Griffin wore his seatbelt and would've walked away with only minor injuries, but an unsecured steel asphalt tamper in the back of the truck shot forward like a guided missile and smashed through the rear window of the cab, striking a glancing blow to his head and slamming into his left hand, which he had braced against the dashboard.

Tyler's skull was fractured and his left hand crushed—nearly severed at the wrist. When he regained his senses, tendrils of smoke curled around the cab. Coughing and clutching his left arm, Tyler kicked open his door, crawled out, and fell to the pavement.

Seconds later, fire erupted in the pool of tar that formed on the pavement below the truck's ruptured tank, instantly creating a toxic smoke cloud enveloping both vehicles.

Incredibly, Tyler staggered into the choking smoke to the crumpled wagon in an attempt to rescue its occupants. The driver's door was jammed, but he managed to open the left-side passenger door and pulled Samantha Allison from the vehicle. He dragged her to safety, then collapsed and passed out on the pavement.

Of this heroic act, Tyler would remember nothing.

Samantha was not so lucky. She remained conscious long enough to see her mother's head and shoulders licked by flames, to see her torso buffeted by waves of superheated air, enveloped in roiling smoke before her form disappeared in the inferno that engulfed both vehicles.

Only then did she slip mercifully into unconsciousness. But the gruesome sight Samantha witnessed that day would haunt her for the rest of her life.

At the gate in Philadelphia, Paul told Nelson he would be happy to do the walk-around. Paul was in a better mood now, primarily because Nelson had been on his best behavior — meaning he hadn't opened his mouth except to respond to the checklist.

Nelson's landing on Runway Nine Right had been a real cruncher, the kind that keeps a pilot in the cockpit until all the passengers have gotten off. Paul left Nelson hiding in his seat and departed the flight deck to go downstairs.

At the bottom of the service stairs, a pilot waited for Paul. Paul wondered if the pilot was a commuter who hoped to jumpseat on the flight back to St. Louis.

The pilot was a TWA captain, with four stripes on the sleeves. As he drew nearer, Paul saw from the special border on his ID badge that this was a check airman — one of the company pilots who trained and evaluated their peers.

Paul's spirits plunged. The last thing he needed today was a checkride. Or worse, what if Nelson had dropped a dime on him while he was out of the cockpit in St. Louis, and the chief pilot had sent a goon to put him in his place?

"You Paul Allison?" the check airman shouted over the din as he extended a hand to Paul.

Nodding yes, Paul took his hand, glimpsing the pilot's name from his badge. James Kimbel's grip was firm as they shook hands.

"We need to talk!" Kimbel yelled as he released Paul's hand. He gestured to the operations door, ten yards away. Paul nodded and dutifully followed Kimbel across the ramp to the door, dreading the tongue-lashing to follow.

Inside, they removed their flight caps and earplugs. Kimbel's piercing gray eyes magnified his grim expression. He leaned against a battered steel desk and told Paul to sit down, gesturing to a couch shoved against the cinder-block wall. Paul sat on the couch with a wary posture.

The room was tiny and airless, and suddenly Paul found it hard to breathe. His palms were sweaty. Now he regretted his little confrontation with Nelson, which could possibly cost him his job. He was still in his first year at TWA, and still on probation. It didn't take much to can a new-hire pilot.

How would he explain it to Cathy? "Gee, honey, I lost my temper at work today and I'm out of a job—again."

What timing . . . especially with a baby on the way.

"You're flying with Gary Nelson, right?" Kimbel began, looking down at a notepad and then back up at Paul.

"I'm afraid so," Paul acknowledged.

"Well, I got called out to give Nelson a no-notice checkride, at the request of the chief pilot at St. Louis. The first officer who was on this trip before you told him Nelson's unsafe to fly with . . . Obviously, this isn't the first time."

Paul's spirits soared. "Yeah, that was Andy Howard," he said gratefully, thinking he owed Andy a beer. "I talked to him on the jetway this morning."

Kimbel nodded, still looking grave.

"What's this about?" Paul asked, disconcerted.

Kimbel expression was pained. "Well, like I said—I was sent here to give Nelson a checkride . . . but a few minutes ago I got a call from crew tracking in St. Louis . . . Paul, they just got a call for you from a hospital in Pittsburgh."

Kimbel swallowed hard. "Partner, apparently your wife and daughter were in a car accident. You need to go home ASAP. I already checked, USAir has a flight to Pittsburgh in a half hour—you can ride the jumpseat and get home."

Paul looked at Kimbel in disbelief. "No, someone's got it wrong," he insisted. "Yes, my wife went to Allegheny General today, but it was for a scheduled appointment. She's pregnant. She was getting an ultrasound."

Kimbel looked at him hopefully. "You sure?"

"I'm sure . . . absolutely," Paul replied, trying to ignore the icy grip of panic that suddenly clutched his heart.

"Yeah—I'm positive the appointment was this morning. At eleven-thirty, I think," Paul said.

Kimbel looked at his pad and frowned. "The message says your daughter was taken to Children's Hospital . . ." He shook his head and muttered, "Maybe someone got it all wrong."

"Children's Hospital?" Paul repeated in dismay. "What about my wife? Did they say anything about Cathy?"

"No, they didn't." Kimbel cleared his throat. "Look, partner, why don't you phone home and see if you can get in touch with your wife? . . . I'll call a supervisor at crew tracking and make sure I got the message straight. There's a pay phone out in the hall."

"Don't need it," Paul said, punching the autodial on his phone. He looked up at Kimbel as he put it to his ear. "She said she'd call just as soon as she had results."

The two men gazed silently at each other as Paul waited for his greeting message to play. When it did, he keyed in his security code and put the receiver to his ear. An artificial voice reported he had one new message. Paul punched the pound key and listened.

"Hi Paul, it's Cathy," the message began, and at the sound of Cathy's voice Paul's body sagged with relief.

"We're on our way home," the message continued. "Sam and I have some news for you . . . here's Sam."

In the dark, anguished days following his wife's death, Paul Allison listened to that message dozens of times, knowing he should delete it but unable, incapable of erasing his wife's last words, no matter how macabre their context.

The message was one minute and fifty-five seconds long: "Hi Paul, it's Cathy," it began, his wife sounding tense. There was a pause, then she informed him, "We're on our way home."

At this point her tone changed, becoming more upbeat, sounding almost lilting as she said, "Sam and I have some news for you . . ."

A pause, then, ". . . here's Sam."

The next sound was a thump, like the phone had banged against a hard object, or been dropped.

There was a pause of five seconds.

Then Cathy shouted, "*Oh my God!*"

This anguished cry was followed by the sound of what had to be the impact of the Volvo against the concrete Jersey barrier, which investigators later determined occurred eighty-five yards prior to the point of vehicular impact.

Cathy had so little time to react.

On the tape, the grinding sound of sheet metal scraping on concrete sounded like someone rubbing a nail file over the mouthpiece.

Paul would begin trembling at this point in message, his hands already clammy and damp. It felt as if he were in the car with them.

"*Sam, hold on!*" Cathy shrieked.

A brief silence, then the worst part of the recording: the sound of Sam screaming, the jarring bang of the impact, a hissing sound, some thumps, more hissing . . . and then the phone went dead.

Paul always listened to the last part of the message with his eyes closed, imagining he was there in the front seat with

Cathy, holding her against his chest, comforting her, his tears shielding her from the flames until help arrived.

The morning of the funeral, he lay in bed with the phone propped against his ear and played the message over and over until his friend Sandy Fuller's knocks on the bedroom door shamed him into hanging up.

He knew it had become an obsession; but he couldn't help himself. In his crushing grief, his only comfort was the sound of Cathy's voice and the fleeting promise it held:

*"Sam and I have some news for you . . ."*

He clung to those words like a drowning man; he would hear Cathy's voice and pretend nothing had happened, that he lived in a world in which goodness was rewarded, evil punished, and bad things didn't happen to good people.

No religious platitudes could satisfy his towering rage at the God who had done this, killed Cathy in such a savage, appalling way. What kind of God would allow that?

In time, his rage turned into numb apathy. For days, it was all he could do to get out of bed. When Sam finally came home from the hospital, he found it almost impossible to send her off to school. Many days she didn't go. She would stay home and they'd sit on the couch in the family room, watch cartoons in the morning, then soaps in the afternoon. They subsisted on a diet of cold cereal and milk, grilled cheese sandwiches and soup.

This might have gone on indefinitely if not for the letter that arrived in the mail one day. It was from Pete Gatewood, a teammate on the cadet parachuting team.

Pete was a "fast burner" and worked at the Pentagon as an aide to a four-star general. In the letter, he extended his condolences and regret for not making the funeral. Then he went on to explain that in his spare time (ask a busy man), he had taken on the task of writing the history of the Air Force Academy Parachuting Team.

The cadet jump team, presented at dozens of airshows each year as *'The Wings of Blue,'* would celebrate their 25th anniversary this year. Peter had collected letters from all the

former members and was using them to write a team history he would present at the reunion later that summer.

Cathy had sent Gatewood a letter, which Pete didn't know if Paul had ever read. It included a narrative of her first jump, written when she was a cadet, before she left the Academy to have Samantha. Paul had never seen the story, or Cathy's letter:

*Dear Peter,*

*Thank you for including me in your USAFA Parachute Team mailing; while I was only a member of the Wings of Blue for a year and a half, it will always remain a cherished experience. Donning my blue suit when I made the parachuting team was one of the proudest moments of my life.*

*This is an account of my first jump. I hope you can use it.*

*Being one of the first females at USAFA was a challenge, but for every cadet who gave me a hard time, there was another who supported me 100%. You were one of the really good guys, Peter, and I'll never forget it.*

*Good luck with the history! Here is my account:*

*I made my first jump in June of my 3<sup>rd</sup> Class year. The story begins with me riding a bus to Pine Valley Airfield. Outside the windows, Pikes Peak basked in golden morning hues. The sun's rays fell through a clutch of tall white cumulus, making heaven light: the reminder that God looks down upon us all.*

*Filing off the bus at the airfield, I looked up. The sky was the deepest blue imaginable. A faint mist hovered over the airfield. The windsock hung limp, its tail barely flicking in the cool morning breeze. "Today is the day!" I realized with a rush of adrenaline.*

*An hour later, I was in the jump plane, the parachute gear heavy on my shoulders but too thrilled to care. Wedged between the main parachute on my back and the reserve parachute on my chest, I felt snug and secure. Master Sergeant Potter had given me a pin check, clucking over me like I was his own daughter.*

*"STAND BY!" I heard my jumpmaster shout, penetrating the fog of my fear as I looked out the small rectangular opening that was the door, portal to another world.*

*My God, he exuded such confidence. Wasn't he afraid, so close to the open door? He leaned out, his lean cheeks rippling from the windblast . . . oh, how I wanted to be like him, to be master of this secret world of the sky.*

*I felt myself trembling, my muscles turned to jelly. Maybe I couldn't do this. No – if the boys could do this, then so could I.*

*"GET IN THE DOOR!"*

*"Are you kidding?" A voice shrieked in my head as I scuttled to the door and thrust my legs into the hurricane outside.*

*I looked up at my jumpmaster. "GO!" he commanded.*

*A moment's hesitation . . . I weighed all that had come before, all to come ahead. Life and death hung in the balance . . . and then something unexpected: he smiled at me. I looked into his blue eyes and there found the courage I needed, the permission granted.*

*My internal scales tipped in favor of adventure.*

*"GO!" my jumpmaster shouted a second time.*

*I launched myself out the door.*

*At first I saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. Then a blast of cold air took my breath away, a tornado clawed at my limbs. For a moment, I was paralyzed by foreign sensations, but then my training took over and I arched, spread my arms and legs, and the sky returned my embrace . . . I was flying!*

*". . . SIX THOUSAND, SEVEN THOUSAND . . ." someone shouted, ". . . ARCH THOUSAND, LOOK THOUSAND . . ." It was me shouting. I looked down, found the ripcord, and pulled it with a prayer: "Please God, make it work, let me live!"*

*A flash of the pilot chute and suspension lines playing out above me as if shot from a cannon; the green fabric of my canopy streamered for a moment and then snapped open like an umbrella in a gale. A tremendous jolt and I heard myself grunt from the sudden stop. Never had I felt such relief.*

*"Oh! Oh!" I cried out in joy.*

*I looked out at the mountains, purple and majestic, and far below, the green earth, dew glistening on grass in the morning sun. Earth, glorious Earth.*

*“Thank you God, thank you for this moment,” I exulted, “Thank you for giving me this, for all the moments but this one most of all; this will be my favorite for as long as I live . . .”*

Paul finished the letter with tears streaming down his cheeks, remembering that *he* was the one who put Cathy out on her first jump—*he* was the jumpmaster in her story.

That night he erased the message from his phone.

Then he got on his knees and thanked God for Cathy, praying that he might be even half the parent to Samantha that Cathy had been as her mother, vowing to be the father she needed and deserved.