

***PILOT IN
COMMAND***

James L. Hayhurst

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PART ONE

A Sweet Four-Day Trip

DAY ONE: PIT Crew Room

At 06:35 A.M. on the first day of the four-day trip, First Officer Paul Allison strode through the nearly deserted Pittsburgh International Airport at a brisk, ex-military 120 steps per minute, the salt-corroded wheels of his suitcase squealing like distressed chipmunks in his wake. The shrill racket gave way to abrupt silence as Allison stopped in front of a nondescript steel door marked by the tail fin decal of his employer: *AST*.

Paul punched the entry code into the five-button lockset, opened the door, hoisted his suitcase, and then made his way down the stairs, the sound of shoe leather on concrete echoing in the dark stairwell.

At ramp level, a second steel door opened into a low-ceilinged room about the size of an elementary school classroom, with dim florescent lighting and the overripe odor of a high school locker room. This was Atlantic Seaboard Transit's crew room.

A hodgepodge of worn secondhand couches and shabby armchairs filled the room, most occupied by sleeping commuters cloaked in threadbare blankets. Against the far wall, a table sagged under the weight of three obsolete computer terminals and a geriatric dot-matrix printer. A second table supported boxes of company forms, a paper cutter, and a copy machine.

Lining an adjacent wall, under grimy, opaque glass block windows, waist-high racks of hanging file folders served as employee mailboxes.

A dozen or so pilots and flight attendants milled about in varying degrees of stupor. Some checked mail, others read the bulletin board, also known as “the wailing wall,” while a few chatted in front of the vending machines. One captain sat in an armchair staring vacantly into space, while a pair of yawning three-strippers constructed “trip sheets” for their crews. An atmosphere of quiet malaise permeated the room, mostly due to the early hour and a shortage of caffeine; the vending machine that dispensed coffee had been broken for weeks.

At precisely 0640 hours, Paul sat down at an open computer terminal, worked through a log-on script and signed in, letting a scheduler at AST’s Operations Center know he had arrived. Typing in his assigned trip number, the four-day pairing sprang to life on the screen. Trip #12589 was unlike any he had ever flown at AST. It was almost too good to be true.

On the first day, the trip flew from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia, Philly to West Palm Beach, West Palm to Baltimore, and then terminated at New York’s LaGuardia airport, arriving at 5:40 P.M. Only four legs, no long sits, a mere twelve-hour duty day.

Amazing.

On day two, they departed LaGuardia at 6:40 A.M., bound for AST’s main hub, Pittsburgh. A short 45 minutes turn on the ground at PIT, and then a long non-stop to Los Angeles. AST had begun service to San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco only a few months before. They arrived in LAX at 1:40 P.M. local, ending

an easy ten-hour day. Then came the best part of the trip: a 22-hour layover on the West Coast!

For the first time since he'd joined AST, Paul felt like a real airline pilot—a flight across the Rockies, a layover in L.A. with time to burn. Hopefully, he'd have an adventurous crew and they'd do something fun together, like go to the beach, see a movie, or head down to the Santa Monica Pier.

The third day they flew from L.A. to Indianapolis to Columbus, Ohio. That was it, only two legs, a 6+34 duty day, the shortest he had ever seen on an AST pairing. The layover at Columbus was ten hours, with an early wake-up for a 7:00 A.M. departure.

Day four wasn't too bad, either—a downhill glide to the finish line: Columbus to Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh to Hartford, Hartford to Washington, D.C., then home to “the Burgh” by 3:00 P.M. A major league trip!

Paul noted the captain's name under the pairing: C/O Donald von Kallstadt. An odd name for a pilot; it sounded more like an eighteenth-century baron.

Below the captain's name was his own, then the names of four flight attendants. Paul was delighted to see that the lead flight attendant was Rachel Park—now Rachel Park-Owens.

He hadn't seen Rachel since June, when she and her then-fiancé, Blake Owens, came to his house for a backyard barbeque. Blake, a check airman, had given Paul his IOE—Initial Operating Experience—line training on the Boeing 737-300 in January.

He and Blake hit it off, sharing common military flying backgrounds and the coincidence of wedding dates set only a day apart in August.

Judging from her hyphenated last name, Rachel and Blake had wed in August as planned. As for him and Cathy, he anticipated an awkward moment when Rachel asked him about their derailed engagement.

Things were improving, though; since returning from his three-month “temporary duty” at AST’s new LaGuardia base, Cathy had begun allowing him visits with their daughter, Samantha. She had even fixed him up with a plate of leftover turkey dinner when he got back from his Thanksgiving trip—a hopeful sign that they could still work things out.

Paul scanned the names of the other flight attendants: Dawn Foote, Frances Delarossa, and Gary Wurst. Paul was sure he had flown with Dawn. He didn’t recognize Delarossa’s name and was positive he had never flown with Wurst—who would be the first male flight attendant he had flown with at AST.

Paul tabbed over to the PRINT field and hit Enter, holding his breath that the unreliable printer would pick up the job. Just as he heard the printer’s reassuring staccato, two pleasantly warm and feminine hands covered his eyes. “Guess who?” a sultry voice flirted.

“Hmmm, let me see. That sounds like the voice of the fairest flight attendant of them all, a sky goddess extraordinaire, the woman of my dreams . . .”

“Nice try, buster, but you’re not getting any extra food.” Rachel Park-Owens uncovered Paul’s eyes. He rose from his chair, pushed it aside and turned to face her, blustering with feigned shock, “Rachel, I didn’t know it was you.”

“Like hell you didn’t!”

They hugged.

As they separated, Rachel took Paul's hands and looked at him with mournful eyes. "I heard about you and Cathy. I'm so sorry, Paul."

Paul didn't try to hide his remorse. He shrugged. "Well, she's letting me spend time with Sam now, and we're talking at the door, so all is not lost."

Rachel squeezed Paul's hands. "Well, Blake and I think you two make a great couple. I hope it works out and you get back together soon."

"Me too."

Looking like she wanted to ask more but knowing this was not the time, Rachel released Paul's hands. "So how did a junior birdman like you rate a sweet four-day like this?"

"A little birdie told me you were on the trip, so I kneecapped the first officer," Paul deadpanned.

"Unlucky for him . . . lucky for me," Rachel said with a wry grin. "Especially since you're my favorite co-pilot in the whole airline. Blake will be happy to know you're on the trip."

Paul faked a cough. "Now who's flattering?"

Rachel shook her head. "I mean it, Paul. Blake thinks you're the best, too."

Covering his embarrassment, Paul blew on his nails and drawled in his best John Wayne imitation, "Well, little lady, I just try to keep the painted side up and the shiny side down. Or is it the shiny side up and the painted side down? Hmmm . . . I always get that part confused."

Rachel smiled, exposing perfect teeth. For the first of what he knew would be a hundred times this trip, Paul admired the striking woman. Her jet-black hair was braided and pinned in a knot behind her head. She

had an exceptional face: high cheekbones, fashion model features and expressive hazel-green eyes that made even casual conversation feel intimate.

The dot-matrix printer rattled to a halt. Tearing off the printout Paul asked, "You know everyone?"

Rachel nodded. "Well, everyone but the captain. But I've heard about him." She rolled her eyes. "They call him Captain Krunch or The Terminator . . . among other things."

"Why is that?"

"The first for his landings, and 'The Terminator' because he sounds like Arnold—" Rachel flinched. Looking past him, she muttered under her breath, "You'll find out soon enough. He's walking this way."

Paul turned around to see Captain von Kallstadt for the first time. He walked with a rolling gait and forward-leaning posture that made his approach seem vaguely combative. He was of average height, with a barrel chest and substantial belly. He had a rugged, bulldoggish face. A thin layer of sandy-blond hair swept in a combover over his balding head.

Allison stiffened and extended his arm. "Captain Kallstadt?" he said as they grasped hands.

The captain gave a friendly yet pugnacious smile. "You can call me Captain K," he said, holding fast to Paul's hand with a powerful grip, sizing him up.

"Doing your arts and crafts, making trip sheets?" he said cordially, nodding at the printout in Paul's left hand while he continued to pump his right.

His bearing and demeanor struck Paul as former military; that or a glad-handing politician.

"Just about to."

Kallstadt finally let Paul's hand go. He stepped in, close enough for Paul to smell his tobacco breath as he said in a conspiratorial tone, "Make them extra-large for me." He tapped the glasses hanging from his neck. "Zee old peepers are not what they used to be."

Paul found it hard not to like the man. He smiled. "I'll be glad to." He turned to Rachel. "Captain K, this is your lead, Rachel Park-Owens."

Kallstadt looked Rachel up and down, his eyes raking her superbly proportioned figure. "What is it with American girls and two names? Why can't you be satisfied with one?" He stuck out his hand.

Rachel smiled thinly and accepted the captain's hand. Paul couldn't help but marvel at the similarity of Kallstadt's accent to Arnold Schwarzenegger, the famous Austrian bodybuilder and movie star. Now he understood why they called him 'The Terminator.'

"Are you former military, Captain K?" he asked.

"Austrian Air Force," Kallstadt said.

"Austrian?" Paul asked, confused.

"Yah, my father is American but my mother from the old country; she came here to find a man. She did, but it didn't work out and she took me home to grow up with family. Me, I did the opposite; I came here and married an American girl. After ten years she still couldn't spell my name, so I divorce her." He winked at Rachel and laughed alone.

Paul felt the tension flow from Rachel. Trying to restore an amicable mood he said, "I love Austria. Years ago, I visited the Military Academy at Wiener Neustadt. We even stayed in the dorms."

Kallstadt raised a brow. "What were you doing at Wiener Neustadt?"

“A summer field trip, when I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy.”

“Ah, maybe you sleep in my bed,” Kallstadt said.

“So you went there?” Paul asked.

“Yah, I spent my time there. At Maria Theresa’s, they make good officers and honest men—all except me.” Captain K laughed at his own joke.

Paul took in Rachel’s flat expression and glanced at his watch. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, captain, I’ll get started on the trip sheets.”

“Remember, extra-large,” Captain K said with a friendly wink. He pulled a cigar from his jacket and clamped it jauntily between his molars. “Time for breakfast. I see you at the plane.” He chortled and added, “Don’t leave without me.”

“Not likely.”

Paul returned to his ‘arts and crafts,’ thinking that Captain K might have rubbed Rachel the wrong way, but all-in-all, he seemed like an OK guy.

DAY ONE: PIT - PHL

It didn't take long for Paul Allison to discover that his new flying partner was anything but 'OK.' His first clue came as they taxied to the takeoff end of Pittsburgh's Runway 27 Right.

With takeoff preparations incomplete and the checklist yet to be read, Captain Kallstadt switched the radio over to the tower frequency and informed the controllers he was ready to go.

From the right seat, Paul looked over at his captain with a quizzical expression. They had eight items to do on the checklist. But before he could say a word, Tower gave them clearance for immediate takeoff, adding "Traffic on three mile final."

In ATC speak this meant, "I'm doing you a favor, so get your butt in gear or the poor smuck on final is screwed."

At this point, prudence dictated that the captain decline the invitation to takeoff and instead bring his flying machine to a stop short of the runway. Next, he would set the parking brake and say, "Before Takeoff checklist, please."

This did not happen. In response to the proffered takeoff clearance, Captain K pushed up the throttles and cranked the nose wheel tiller hard left, throwing the sixty-ton Boeing around a careening 180-degree turn and onto Runway 27R.

Through the cockpit door, Paul heard cups and glassware clatter in the galley. Rachel and her partner Dawn shrieked as they fell to the floor. Then, adding to the incredulity of the moment, as they rolled down the runway, Captain Kallstadt turned to face him, grinned, removed his hand from the throttles, and in his thick accent announced, "Your airplane."

Stunned by this breach of protocol, Paul seized the controls and assessed the situation.

It was a fair day, light winds, and the runway long and dry. They were already rolling at sixty knots. The flaps were set at five, the engines spooled up—Paul concluded that he could either safely stop or go. Stop or go . . . which should he do?

None of the incomplete items on the checklist were killers: the departure wasn't briefed, but he had flown it dozens of times; the flight controls hadn't been checked, but they should be OK; the ignition switches were off, but the engines ran fine without them; the Master Caution hadn't been checked, but there were no warnings; the autobrakes were off, but he could manually brake the jet to a stop.

Eighty knots.

The captain wanted to go, not stop. Paul pushed the throttles to the takeoff setting—he had decided to go. He heard Rachel and Dawn scrambling to get in their jumpseats behind him and he winced; they were totally unprepared for the takeoff.

At 130 knots, Kallstadt called "rotate." Paul eased the yoke back, raising the nose to a 10-degree attitude. The nosewheel broke ground, and a few seconds later, the mains followed. They were flying. Paul called for

the gear up, and then at one thousand feet called for climb thrust and flaps to one.

“AST 621, nice work getting off quickly, contact departure control now on one-two-four decimal seven-five.”

Paul realized he had a death grip on the wheel and forced himself to relax his hands. He took several deep breaths and told himself to push his outrage to the back of his mind. There would be time to discuss the takeoff while cruising to Philadelphia.

He stewed about what he was going to say all the way up to cruise altitude. Leveling at twenty-seven thousand feet – Flight Level 270 – and already a third of the way to Philly, he selected the autopilot on. Now he was composed. He would be diplomatic but firm.

Before he could open his mouth, Captain K spoke first, “I know I rush you a little on takeoff, but there was an airplane on short final; Tower wanted us to go right away.”

Paul had never heard such a revisionist spin put on a self-generated crisis. He sputtered, “I thought you were making the takeoff.”

“No, I like to see how my first officer performs on the first leg. So far you do okay, but you rotate too slowly. You must do it crisply” – Kallstadt mimicked pulling back on the yoke aggressively – “so that the wings generate lift immediately.”

Paul stared at Captain Kallstadt in disbelief. In one breathtaking verbal sweep, the captain had stood the incident on its head and turned it into a criticism of his flying technique.

How did he reply? He didn’t know where to begin. For one thing, Kallstadt was wrong about the

rate of rotation on takeoff: the book said to rotate to a 10-degree nose-high attitude at two to three degrees per second. In deference to Boeing's engineers, Paul rotated to the recommended pitch attitude – but at the slower rate, to ensure the jet was ready to fly when the wheels broke ground. This fell under the hallowed aviation axiom: "*Speed is Life.*"

That wasn't the point! The point was the takeoff was botched before it started. They never should've taken the runway until all the before takeoff checklist items were completed, the flight attendants notified over the P.A., and most important: established who in hell was going to fly!

Common practice was the captain flew the first leg, so the first officer could observe how the aircraft commander liked his jet flown. It made it easier all around. In a year of airline flying, Paul had *never* flown the first takeoff of a trip, let alone unexpectedly informed by the captain that it was his takeoff while the takeoff roll was underway.

Paul recalled a one-hour instructional module on "Cockpit Resource Management" taught in ground school. They had learned polite ways to bring errors to the captain's attention, and if ignored, phrases of escalating forcefulness, a language copilots derisively called "CRM speak." But none of the scenarios came close to the insanity he had just experienced.

Before Paul could reply, Dawn Foote stepped into the cockpit, rapped her knuckles on the passageway and cleared her throat. "Rachel wants to know if either of you has a Band-Aid," she said, glaring.

"Did she cut her finger?" Captain K said with an innocent expression.

“No—she skinned her knees when she fell down on takeoff!” Dawn snapped. “Next time, maybe you could try giving us a warning!”

“Next time be in your seats when we get to the runway,” Captain K retorted.

Dawn looked at them indignantly.

Paul mouthed a silent *“sorry.”*

“I would like coffee now—two sugars please,” Captain K said to Dawn, ending the discussion.

“You’ll have to talk to Rachel about that,” Dawn huffed. She turned on her heels and marched out of the cockpit.

Kallstadt grinned wryly at Paul, “These girls, they have no sense of humor. Next time you remember to make the takeoff announcement, okay?” He pressed the flight attendant call button, shaking his head. “Now I must make apologies to get my coffee.”

DAY ONE: PHL - PBI, PBI - BWI, BWI - LGA

In the manner of subordinates who try to get along with a prickly, unconventional boss, Paul and the cabin crew spent the rest of the day adapting to the peculiarities of Captain Kallstadt. Rachel and her cabin team did their passenger safety briefing on pushback and were in their jumpseats before the jet had rolled a foot under its own power.

For his part, Paul took nothing for granted and did all required checklist items on his own, reading them aloud for the sake of the voice recorder, in a manner of speech that he had heard other first officers refer to as "Talking to Mr. Window."

Kallstadt was not alone at AST in his attitude that the checklist was the responsibility of the first officer, although the Flight Operations Manual was explicit that both pilots verify all checklist items together. While Paul had flown with other captains who were lax in checklist discipline, Captain K was the first in a year of flying who disregarded it entirely.

Nevertheless, once he knew what to expect, Paul found the man pleasant enough to fly with. They made their way down to West Palm Beach and back up the eastern seaboard without incident, chatting about various topics while in cruise flight.

With little prompting, Kallstadt revealed that he was proud of his Austrian heritage. His mother was Viennese, his father a New York investment banker.

They divorced when he was young. He grew up in Austria, but then returned to attend a military prep school in New York. Then back to Austria, attending the military academy in Wiener Neustadt.

He explained his crack about Maria Theresa— as Empress of Austria, she had reformed the army and founded the Theresia Military Academy. Captain K was a proud graduate, although curiously evasive about his flying in the Austrian Air Force.

For his part, Paul repeated that he had attended the U.S. Air Force Academy.

With this revelation, Kallstadt reached across the cockpit, slapped Paul's shoulder and said, "So you see— we are same, both academy men," to which Paul forced a smile, thinking he'd never flown with anyone with whom he had so little in common.

That evening in the lobby of a LaGuardia Ramada, Gary and the girls declined Captain K's invitation to dinner. Having already agreed to eat with the captain, Paul rode a cab with him into Queens to Kallstadt's favorite Italian restaurant. The dining room was nearly deserted. They sat across from each other in a booth and ate mediocre pasta in silence, having run out of things to discuss.

When Kallstadt broke out a cigar after dinner and started puffing blue clouds of smoke that wafted into his face, Paul had to fight to keep from gagging. At the motel, parting ways outside their rooms, Paul vowed to himself he would never eat another meal with the captain— even if it meant feigning illness and locking himself in his room.

DAY TWO: LGA - PIT

The second day of the trip dawned with bright promise. While Paul had crossed the continent dozens of times in military aircraft, today would be the first time he flew an airliner west of the Mississippi River, let alone to the West Coast. It might sound corny, but he looked forward to the sight of the amber plains of the Midwest sliding under the nose, and anticipated a quiet thrill when purple mountains first smudged the distant Colorado horizon.

Dressed and ready early, Paul made his way down to the lobby, where he found Rachel and Gary sipping coffee. Paul poured himself a cup and joined them. Gary couldn't resist crowing about the great little diner where he and the girls had eaten last night.

They felt sorry for him—stuck alone with Captain K at dinner last night—but there was nothing they could do, given that he had previously agreed to dine with the captain.

“On the way to L.A., don't commit doing anything with him, okay?” Rachel instructed. “I'll call you from my room when we get there and let you know what we're doing.”

Paul gave a chagrined nod and sipped his coffee.

“By the way,” Rachel said, “I talked to Blake last night and told him about what happened yesterday on that first takeoff at PIT.”

Paul groaned. “You know I'm sorry about that.”

“Never mind that, I know it wasn’t your fault,” Rachel reassured him. “But Blake did say you should watch Captain K like a hawk.”

“I have been.”

“He said that I should tell you his other nickname, the one besides ‘The Terminator’ – the one all the other first officers call him behind his back. Do you know it?”

Paul shrugged. “You mean, Captain Krunch?”

“No, no that. He said they call him –” she pulled out her trip sheet to read the name she had penned on the back, “Captain Queeg.”

“You don’t say.”

Rachel nodded. “That mean anything to you?”

Paul felt his coffee burning a hole in his stomach. “Yeah, it does.”

“Blake says Humphrey Bogart played Captain Queeg in the movie.”

Paul recalled Bogart in the role of a psychotic navy captain but found himself drawing a blank on the name of the movie. “Did Blake mention the name?”

“No, just that you’d probably get the reference.”

“Yeah, I get it all right.”

Rachel put her hand on Paul’s arm. “Blake said to tell you that if you reach your limit and call off the trip, that you wouldn’t be the first. But promise me you’ll tell me if you do. Blake said he doesn’t want me flying with Captain K unless you’re in the cockpit.”

Paul couldn’t imagine things getting that bad – Captain K was lazy and impetuous, but he wasn’t a Captain Queeg. Now that he had the man figured out, it was just a matter of staying ahead of him, running the checklist on his own, and having his private chats with “Mr. Window.” Even so, he looked her in the eye and

said, "I promise you, Rachel. If I decide to get off the trip, I won't leave without you."

She squeezed his arm. "Thank you."

Paul flew the first leg to Pittsburgh, which passed uneventfully. To his surprise, Captain K even grunted responses to the checklist. Not the correct responses — but the occasional "yah" and "okay." The burning in Paul's stomach subsided and he wondered if the other first officers weren't being a little overly dramatic.

In Pittsburgh, Paul ran down to Operations, a cramped room where a printer churned out flight plans along with weather and airman notices for the flight. Studying the upper level wind charts, he saw that they would be bucking strong headwinds out to L.A. He made a mental note to run some calculations for the fuel burn. It was a long way from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles in the medium-ranged Boeing 737-300.

Paul had one final task at Ops before he returned to the plane. At AST, it was unwritten practice for the first officer to sign the captain's name on a tear sheet at the bottom of the flight plan and drop it in a box. Ted Wyzinski, the check airman who had instructed Paul on his first trip had explained this procedure; Blake Owens confirmed it on the second. Paul tore off the bottom of the flight plan, scribbled *Donald Kallstadt* on the signature line, and dropped the sheet in the company mailbox on his way out the door.

Back at the gate, passengers were boarding. Squeezing past them, Paul nodded to Rachel and dropped the flight plan on the center pedestal in the cockpit. He started the alignment of the twin inertial navigation systems, and then raced outside to do a walk-around. At the bottom of the service stairs, Paul found the ramp

dotted with thin patches of ice. He could see his breath. It was the first really cold morning in weeks. Maybe winter was coming, after all.

When Paul returned to the cockpit, Captain K was still AWOL. Probably smoking one of his cigars. Paul went to work programming the flight plan and winds into the flight management computer. With the FMC programmed correctly, once airborne they could press a single button and the autopilot would follow their assigned route all the way out to LAX.

When he had finished the five-minute programming task, Paul broke out his flight manual. He flipped to the planning and performance section, plugged in the headwinds and did a calculation of the fuel burn. Cross-checking the flight plan, he saw that they were barely legal to fly non-stop to LAX and land with minimum reserve fuel.

Just as he put the dog-eared manual away, the fueler stepped into the cockpit, reeking of kerosene. He handed Paul the fuel slip. "You might want to hang around a few minutes," Paul told him, "in case the captain wants to add more gas."

The fueler nodded and left the cockpit. Moments later, Paul saw him climb into the cab of his truck and tuck the bill of his cap over his eyes.

Paul turned his gaze forward. With nothing to do but sit and wait, he realized he was sweating—he had been going non-stop since their arrival forty-five minutes before.

Leave it to AST to schedule a quick turn on a West Coast flight. He reviewed the checklist one more time, confirming he had done all the pre-departure tasks. Wondering if Captain K would show sometime before

departure, he leaned back in his seat and stared out the cockpit window.

And then it suddenly came to him, the name of the movie: *The Caine Mutiny*.

DAY TWO: PIT - LAX

Over Denver, it became obvious they weren't going to make it all the way to LAX with legal reserves. They had been battling headwinds 50 knots in excess of the forecast all the way from level-off. Now their fuel was 2000 pounds below the projections on the flight plan.

If they didn't stop for fuel in Las Vegas, they'd find themselves approaching LAX with 3500 pounds of fuel in the tanks – barely 35 minutes flying time.

If the headwind stayed at 140 knots, they'd land with even less fuel. If anything happened on arrival – traffic congestion, deterioration of weather, runway closure – they would land with minimum fuel. With a go-around for any reason, they'd be landing on fumes.

"I think we should stop for fuel in Las Vegas," Paul announced after figuring the fuel burn for the tenth time since his manual calculation at PIT.

Captain K frowned. "You worry too much, Allison. The weather is good, two-thousand-foot ceiling and four miles visibility; the FMC says we will land with four-thousand pounds of fuel. We are fine."

"Only if it stays VFR," Paul said. "If the vis goes down even a little, ATC will start doing instrument approaches and traffic will back up. We haven't put an approach into the FMC yet – that will add 600 pounds to the burn, which brings us down to 3400 pounds on

landing. If we shoot an approach and miss, we don't have fuel to make it to an alternate."

Paul had argued the same logic on the ground at Pittsburgh when Captain K showed up at the cockpit three minutes prior to departure with the gate agent on his heels. He listened to Paul's recommendation that they put on more fuel with half an ear while he glanced at their flight plan and briefly checked the weather. He then looked at his watch and said, "It will take too much time to get more fuel. We go now."

"But I have the truck standing by," Paul pointed out, glancing out his window to confirm the fueler hadn't abandoned them.

"If LAX goes kaput, there are plenty airports close," Captain K pointed out. He ticked them off on his fingers, "Burbank, Ontario, Long Beach, Orange County . . . don't be a worrywart, Allison."

At the time, Paul wondered if the likelihood of a departure delay charged to his own late arrival at the gate had weighed in Captain K's decision, but now he thought it was simple obstinacy, old-world Teutonic mentality: *The captain is always right!*

If it wasn't his idea, Captain Krunch wasn't doing it. He'd made his decision at the gate in Pittsburgh, and once made, he wasn't going to let his first officer prove him wrong.

Paul shrugged in frustration. "You're the captain."
Asshole.

The next hour passed by in 60 painful one-minute increments as the Boeing chugged into the headwind at 360 knots, feeling like a car crawling at 45 mph on the freeway with the parking brake set.

The Rockies were magnificent, dusted white with snow, but Paul found it impossible to enjoy the view. Captain K was right; he was a worrywart when it came to fuel.

Years before in Air Force pilot training, Paul's first instructor pilot, Lieutenant Bill Noble, had impressed upon him three cardinal rules of aviation: 1. Don't run out of gas. 2. Don't run into other airplanes. 3. Don't run into the ground.

Of course, Lt. Noble elaborated on each rule; for instance, in the case of rule three, making a distinction between a crash into terra firma and the necessity of a controlled return to earth. The beauty of the rules was their simplicity. You could do a lot of dumb stuff in aviation and get away with it, but violate any of the "big three" and you'd soon be talking to an accident board or your maker.

Paul had flirted with the rules on occasion, each time swearing "never again." His singular violation of rule two—a mid-air with a German F-4 fighter on a training flight—had proven nearly catastrophic.

Exceeding Noble's grim promise, Paul had found himself in conversation with both a representative of his maker and the officers of an Air Force accident board. The two pilots in the F-4 were not so lucky.

Flying fighters, you had to flirt with the rules. When you took off, you were typically only an hour away from minimum fuel. The inherent nature of the mission put you in proximity to fast-moving aircraft and the unforgiving ground.

That's why they put ejection seats in fighters.

Flying airliners, Paul couldn't see how it was ever necessary to flirt with breaking any of the cardinal rules, especially the first: *don't run out of gas*.

He glanced at his watch. It had been exactly one hour since they passed Denver. Their fuel situation was getting worse. With Las Vegas thirty miles off the nose, he decided to make another stab at reasoning with Captain K.

"There's Las Vegas," he said, nodding towards the sprawling patchwork of civilization at twelve o'clock, the broad boulevards and huge casinos little more than scratches and dimples when viewed from high altitude.

Las Vegas was more impressive when viewed at night. In daylight, the most prominent landmarks were Lake Mead, passing under the left side of the nose, and snow-capped Charleston Peak, which stood out ahead at one o'clock, rising to almost one third of their altitude.

Captain K grunted once in acknowledgment of his co-pilot's observation.

Paul continued, "We could drop in, get some gas, and be on our way in thirty minutes. We'd only be an hour late into L.A."

Captain K ignored him.

Paul reached across the cockpit and tapped the fuel gauges, which showed a total of 5600 pounds. "Boss," he said, appealing to Kallstadt's rank, "we keep bucking this wind and we're going to start down with 3800 pounds. I'm not comfortable with that."

Captain Kallstadt didn't respond to his co-pilot's "statement of elevated concern" (CRM-speak for "*I think this is really stupid*"), but instead extended his right hand to the data-link unit (with the impenetrable

acronym "ACARS") and tapped through menus on the touch screen. On the weather request page, he typed in L-A-X and then hit SEND.

A few moments later, *MSG* flashed at the bottom of the screen.

Captain K touched the screen and the latest LAX weather came up: 2000 overcast, visibility three miles. "Still okay," he proclaimed with a dismissive glance.

Paul visualized McCarran Field below them, with ideal weather and the promise of a quick gas-and-go. It would be easy to circle down to land and get some extra fuel. It would cost them an hour delay. He knew he was irritating Kallstadt, but his own growing sense of frustration compelled him to give it one more try.

"Captain, if the visibility at LAX was better than three miles or forecast to improve, I'd be okay with continuing, but as it is, if the vis drops at all, approach control will go to instrument approaches. I don't think it's wise to continue with our fuel state . . . I strongly recommend we stop here and get some gas."

Kallstadt glared at Paul. "How many times have you flown into LAX, Allison?"

"This is the first time," Paul admitted. He had flown C-130s into Ontario and had flown the F-16 in joint exercises with the Navy at Miramar in San Diego, but this was, in fact, his first time flying an airliner into Los Angeles International.

"Then save your recommendations. I have flown this trip three times already in November, and I tell you, we are okay with the gas."

Paul took a deep breath and tried another tack. "Well, maybe we can try a lower altitude and get out of this headwind."

“We will only burn more fuel at a lower altitude; we stay here at three-five-oh.”

Paul shrugged. Either he was right and Kallstadt wrong, or vice versa. They’d find out soon enough.

Soon enough came 35 minutes later, when passing 18,000 feet, SoCal Approach informed AST Flight 93 to expect thirty minutes holding due to arrival delays. They had 3500 pounds of fuel – thirty-five minutes flying time. They didn’t have fuel to hold for five minutes, let alone thirty. Paul turned to Kallstadt.

“What do you want to do, captain?”

Dumbshit.

Captain K said nothing, staring straight ahead. Paul gazed at his profile, thinking the captain’s flattop com-
bover would be a perfect place to balance a large bowl of “I told you so.” He wanted to gloat, but the severity of their situation didn’t allow him the luxury. They were in a serious bind.

“AST 93, ready to copy holding instructions?”

“Captain?”

Kallstadt continued staring silently, ignoring his predicament.

Paul keyed the mike, “Ahhh, SoCal . . . AST 93 needs a delay vector while we determine available holding fuel. We may need to divert if that’s a firm holding time.”

The SoCal controller was busy: “Alaska 59, standby your holding instructions at Paradise VOR—break—AST 93, turn left heading two-one-zero and continue descent to 12,000 . . .”

Paul repeated the instructions while pointing to the altitude window on the mode control panel (MCP), a panel of knobs and pushbuttons under the glareshield

that were used to control the autothrottle and autopilots. All Captain K had to do was spin the numbers in the window down to 12,000 feet and turn the heading knob to 210 degrees. The autopilot would do the rest.

Captain Kallstadt appeared frozen, his hands on the control yoke, steering nothing since the autopilot was doing the steering. With his arm still stretched out, pointing to the required spot on the panel, Paul raised his voice and said sharply, "Captain!"

Kallstadt turned his gaze to Paul and asked, "What did he say?"

"He said, left 210 and down to 12,000."

Kallstadt reached under the glare shield and turned the knobs to comply with approach control's instructions.

"We don't have enough fuel to hold for 30 minutes," Paul advised, trying to keep the bile rising in his throat from contaminating his voice, "we should declare minimum fuel or see if they'll give us priority handling, or we need to go somewhere else."

SoCal clarified the situation: "AST 93, that holding time is firm; the weather at LAX is down to two miles with light rain and the arrival runways are backed up. State your intentions."

"Roger, stand-by one," Paul replied. The absurdity of the pilot to his left earning four times his salary briefly crossed his mind. "Intentions, Captain?"

After a painfully long delay Captain K muttered, "Tell him we go to another airport."

Paul spat out, "Which airport?" He ticked them off on his fingers as Kallstadt had earlier, "Burbank, Long Beach, Ontario or Orange County?"

It was hard not to enjoy watching Kallstadt squirm. He was breathing heavily, his brow beaded with sweat. "Ahhh . . . which one is the best?" he asked, almost pleaded.

Paul felt like throttling the captain's neck. He keyed his mike, "SoCal Approach, looks like we will have to divert. Can you recommend any airports?"

The controller replied impatiently, "Ah, AST 93, I'm too busy to check weather at this time. For now, turn further left to a heading of one-eight-zero."

"One-eighty the heading and we'll call you back," Paul squeezed in his read-back before SoCal began rattling instructions to a Delta flight.

Paul monitored Kallstadt as he dialed in the new heading, then he tapped out weather requests on the ACARS touch screen, first BUR, then ONT, then SNA, skipping Long Beach because he knew it would have the same weather as LAX. Burbank came back with even worse weather than LAX. Ontario had five miles visibility and a 3000-foot overcast. Orange County was about the same.

"Our best bet is Ontario," Paul reported. "Shall I tell approach we want to divert there?"

Captain K cleared his throat. "First we must talk to Dispatch."

Paul stared at Kallstadt, unbelieving. The time to confer with their dispatcher had long since passed. They needed to get the jet on the ground, *now*, and beg the dispatcher's forgiveness from a landline.

"Captain, we don't have time!" Paul said as he pointed to the fuel gauges, now registering 3200 pounds, a little over 30 minutes fuel. "We need to get

this thing on the ground, now! Ontario and Orange County have the same weather . . .”

Paul paused in mid-sentence and typed ONT, then SNA on the flight management computer display to get a comparison of the distances.

“Orange County is off the nose, five miles closer, but Ontario weather is more stable, away from the coast. I recommend we land at Ontario.”

Kallstadt watched cross-cockpit as the bearings and distances to ONT and SNA popped up on Paul’s display. His eyes fixated on the closer distance to SNA and he uttered, “We go to Orange County.”

For an instant, Paul considered objecting. From their altitude of 12,000 feet, they needed room to get down and configured to land. If they made a slow turn back toward Ontario, they could use the turn to lose altitude. Not to mention, being inland, Ontario wasn’t affected by coastal weather, while Orange County most certainly was.

Balancing these considerations was Kallstadt’s near-paralyzed mental state. The man had finally made a decision – perhaps it was best that Paul go along and make his decision work. They were running out of fuel and options by the minute. At this point, *any* decision was a good decision.

Paul keyed the mike. “Approach, AST 93 has decided to divert to Orange County. We’ll need priority handling for low fuel.”

DAY TWO: SNA

Statistically, no phase of flight is more dangerous than the descent and approach to landing. Below 10,000 feet, airline pilots cease idle chatter, while flight attendants refrain from disturbing the cockpit. Like a surgical operating room, it becomes “sterile” to minimize distractions so that the pilots can focus on the task at hand.

With the stress of a last-minute diversion into an unfamiliar airport magnified by their low fuel status, Paul shifted into the intense state of focus he normally reserved for air combat. Not surprisingly, he didn’t notice when Rachel stepped into the cockpit and said, “You boys want any snacks before we throw them away, or are you saving your appetites for later?”

Captain Kallstadt, who was now following Paul’s lead and had only the simple task of complying with the controller’s instructions via the autopilot, turned to Rachel and snapped, “Don’t you see we are busy?”

Rachel stared at him in slack-jawed disbelief, and then looked to Paul, who was busy flipping through pages of a binder. She blurted out, “How soon are we landing?”

Paul turned in his seat, catching Rachel’s eye. “We’re diverting into Orange County,” he said evenly, sounding calmer than he felt. “We’ll be on the ground in ten minutes.”

Rachel spun on her heels, slamming the door on the way out. A moment later, Paul heard her voice ring out several octaves higher than normal over the loudspeakers as she made the arrival announcement. Meanwhile, he continued a frantic search through his West Coast Jeppesen binder for an Orange County chart titled “LDA RWY 18R.”

Moments before, when they had announced their diversion to Orange County, SoCal approach told them the ILS (Instrument Landing System) approach to Runway 18R was out of service. The “LDA 18R” was the substitute approach into John Wayne Airport.

Lacking precision glideslope guidance, LDA’s (Localizer-type Directional Approaches) were more difficult and required precise flight path control. You had to step down to successively lower altitudes at prescribed distances from the runway as depicted on the chart—known to pilots as an “approach plate.”

Painfully aware that their low fuel status made it imperative they fly this approach right the first time, and sensing Kallstadt wasn’t getting the jet down quickly enough, Paul was nearly at his wit’s end as he searched without success for the essential chart.

The charts weren’t behind the “O” tab—“O” for Orange County. They weren’t behind the “J” tab—“J” for John Wayne Airport. This was absurd; the charts had to be somewhere in the book! Then it dawned on him: the “S” tab, S for Santa Ana—SNA. *Of course!*

Paul snatched the precious sheet of paper from the binder and scanned the approach, taking quick glances at his instruments to determine position and altitude relative to the airport. His instincts were right—they were higher than a kite.

“Boss, we got to get down!” he said. He reached across the cockpit and spun the captain’s course knob to 181, then tuned his receiver to the localizer signal: 108.3. He did the same on his own control heads and listened to the audio to identify the localizer signal. The dots and dashes were correct: I-O-J-W.

With both nav receivers correctly tuned, Paul saw their mileage from end of the runway: 13.9 miles, while they were at a sky-high altitude of 6900 feet.

Meanwhile, their descent was only 2000 feet per minute – not enough by half to get them down in time. *Higher than a kite!*

“Boss, the speedbrakes!”

Captain K extended the speedbrakes. Paul felt their rumble, but it was obvious speedbrakes alone wouldn’t get the job done. The situation called for either a “procedure turn” to lose their excess altitude, or the “Dumb Marine” solution: drop the landing gear.

“Boss – you gotta drop the gear or we’re not gonna make it down,” Paul said and reached his left hand to the wheel-like knob at the end of long Boeing gear lever. “Okay?”

Kallstadt’s gaze was fixated on the instrument panel, oblivious to Paul’s voice.

“Captain, we need to drop the landing gear!” Paul shouted, wanting desperately to take control from Kallstadt and fly the damn plane himself.

Captain K gave him a furtive nod.

Paul slapped the handle down. Immediately, he felt the heavy vibration of the gear through the floor. Their descent rate increased to 3000 feet per minute, their air-speed pegged at 250 knots . . . they still weren’t losing enough altitude per flying mile.

They passed over “Effie”—the initial approach fix—hopelessly high and fast. Even with their low fuel state, their only option was to break off the approach, do a circling maneuver to lose excess altitude before continuing in toward the airport.

Watching on the radarscope, their controller came to the same conclusion. “AST 93, you wanna do a three-sixty?”

Paul turned to Captain K to confirm he accepted the controller’s invitation, but just then, Kallstadt clicked the autopilot off, filling the cockpit with the cyclical wail of autopilot aural warning: “Waaaa, waaaa, waaaa.”

Over the wail of the autopilot siren, Kallstadt shouted, “Flaps One!”

Paul checked the airspeed: 250 knots. If he moved the flap lever, it would overspeed the flaps, limited to extension below 230 knots.

“Waaaa, waaaa, waaaa . . .” the autopilot warning wailed, making it almost impossible to think.

“Donald, we’re too fast and too high—we need to do a three-sixty and slow down!”

Kallstadt ignored him, his eyes locked straight ahead, apparently on his attitude indicator. Then Paul heard the captain key his mike and say, “AST 93 is goot. We make it down.”

Paul couldn’t believe his ears. *How* would they make it down?

“Roger AST 93,” the controller replied, his voice dripping with skepticism, “In that case, contact John Wayne Tower on one twenty-six point eight. Good luck.” *It’s your funeral.*

“Waaaa, waaaa, waaaa . . .” Paul clicked a button on his wheel, silencing the obnoxious autopilot-off wail

warning. “Flaps One!” Kallstadt shouted his earlier command.

Paul hesitated again, knowing this would only overspeed the flaps and make things worse. This time Kallstadt’s right arm shot out and moved the flap lever. As the slats and flaps moved into position, the aircraft ballooned up – putting them even higher on glidepath.

“One twenty-six point eight and thanks for your help,” Paul signed off. *And please inform the tower there’s a lunatic inbound.*

Paul changed frequencies and said, “Hello John Wayne Tower, AST 93 is six miles out on the LDA for Runway 18 Right.”

“Roger, AST 93, John Wayne Tower. Winds are two-one-zero at five knots; no reported traffic and you’re cleared to land Runway 18 Right.”

“Roger, cleared to land . . .” *Fat chance.*

Paul glanced over at Kallstadt and then said, as much for his sake as Tower’s, “Ahhh, Tower, AST is too high and will probably have to circle to land once we break out. Say your current ceiling, please.”

Tower responded, “AST 93 . . . *ahhh* . . . yeah, we noticed you’re extremely high . . . the bases are ragged, between 1,500 and 2,000 feet. Visibility currently two and a half miles.”

Paul scanned his chart. To circle visually around the traffic pattern underneath the clouds after they broke out, they needed at least 2.5 miles visibility. They were just barely legal.

“AST 93 over Tusti,” Paul said, reporting the final approach fix to the tower.

“Flaps five!” Captain K commanded.

“Overspeeding the flaps,” Paul said, reluctantly moving the lever to the detent, knowing if he didn’t, Kallstadt would only do it himself. Good thing Boeing made its planes sturdy.

“Roger AST 93, you’re cleared to land,” Tower confirmed.

Like a runaway ship steaming into a harbor at full speed toward its berth, they sailed down the localizer toward the runway. The airframe buffeted violently from their high-speed descent with the landing gear extended. Paul’s sphincter tightened as he watched the mileage tick down.

Four miles at 2750 feet . . . three miles at 2000 feet. They should break out of the clouds any moment . . . two and a half miles, 1500 feet . . . *runway in sight!*

Through the parting veil of mist, Paul picked out the runway approach lights and runway – at a steep angle he had only seen once before . . . in training, in the simulator: *simulated flameout approaches*.

He recalled the simulated flameout approaches his simulator instructor, a crusty ancient aviator named Harold Simmons had let him fly “just for fun” in the simulator – this was the same extreme angle. The only problem was they *weren’t* flamed out and this was *not* the simulator – this was real!

The fuel gauges showed 2700 pounds. They still had fuel; they had options: they could circle under the clouds, keeping the runway in sight, and land with 2200 pounds, or go around, fly the missed approach, repeat the approach, and land on fumes.

Either option was infinitely superior to landing halfway down the 5700-foot runway at 230 knots . . . skidding off the end at high speed . . . the jet would

break into pieces, and what little fuel remained would ignite and engulf the disintegrating aircraft in flames.

Fifteen agonizing seconds passed without a word of intention from the captain.

With his stomach churning, Paul announced the obvious: "Donald, we're gonna have to go around."

That, or eject.

Paul looked over. Kallstadt had a death-grip on the yoke, jaw thrust out, eyes fixated on the runway, his face white, forehead shined with sweat, huge pits under his arms.

One mile out, the altimeter swung through 700 feet. Airspeed 230 knots. They plummeted toward the earth at 2500 feet per minute. *Insanity!*

"Captain! Go around!" Paul shouted. "We can't land this!"

Now the ground proximity warning sounded: "WHOOP, WHOOP . . . SINK RATE, SINK RATE . . . PULL UP . . . WHOOP, WHOOP . . . PULL UP!"

Kallstadt appeared oblivious to the ear-splitting warning and the up-rushing runway.

Not thinking beyond self-preservation, Paul shoved the throttles forward, hauled back on the yoke, and snatched the landing gear lever up.

DAY TWO: SNA - LAX

Seeing they had initiated a go-around, Tower instructed AST 93 to fly straight ahead and contact Departure Control. Paul requested a right visual pattern due to their fuel state. Even though Paul was flying the plane, Captain K still held his control wheel in a death grip, forcing Paul to double the force of his control inputs. Climbing rapidly, Paul retarded the throttles and started a bank to the right as they rose up to the ragged cloud bottoms at 1500 feet. As Paul completed the turn, Kallstadt seemed to break out of his mental fog. "I have the aircraft," he said.

Paul made eye contact. Captain Kallstadt seemed to have regained his faculties, so Paul relinquished the controls. "You have the aircraft."

They were on a crosswind leg, 90 degrees to the runway, flying away from it. Paul waited until he thought the spacing was adequate and then called the turn to downwind.

Captain K complied. When they rolled out, Paul saw the runway was still too close. He suggested a correcting left turn to increase their spacing from the runway, giving them a little more maneuvering room for later, when they turned back toward the runway, on base leg.

When the spacing looked good, Paul called for a right turn to put them back on a parallel heading to the

runway. Again, Captain K complied without debate. For the first time, they were working as a team.

Better late than never.

Now established on downwind, with the runway on the right side of the cockpit, Kallstadt couldn't see a thing, and had to rely on Paul to keep the runway in sight and call their base turn. Peering out the cockpit side windows at the mist-obscured Runway 18R, Paul saw they needed to continue out as far as they could without losing sight of the runway, then turn base.

It would be a blind turn to base, and then again to final. Kallstadt had to fly by the seat of his pants, but Paul had reason to believe that he could, based on what he had seen the first day, flying into New York. Arriving at twilight, Captain K had flown a flawless visual approach into LaGuardia, sweeping down in an exhilarating turn over Flushing Meadow Park and Shea Stadium to land on Runway 31.

At the time, Paul concluded that Captain K had good "hands" — pilotspeak for good basic flying skills.

Why Kallstadt went brain-dead on the instrument approach was a mystery, but now, flying visually, even in marginal conditions, the captain seemed back in control. He called for gear and flaps fifteen; held his altitude and maintained a steady downwind track.

Paul found himself wondering if he was flying with a completely different pilot. *Jekyll and Hyde.*

With a few seconds to catch his breath, Paul glanced at the fuel gauges. They would land with 2200 pounds — 200 pounds above emergency fuel.

"Say something to the passengers," Captain K muttered contritely.

“Gee folks, sorry for that little scare back there. Your captain is a raving lunatic, and if I hadn’t jerked the gear on him, we’d all be dead right now, but what the heck . . . no harm, no foul. The captain seems to be okay now, and if we get this baby on the ground before we run out of gas, everything should be just swell. Oh, and by the way, if Stewardess Park-Owens hasn’t already mentioned it – we’re landing at the wrong airport! But hey, what the heck – at least it’s the right state!”

Paul picked up the public address handset from the back of the center pedestal and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, the first officer speaking. The captain asked me to advise you that due to traffic saturation at LAX, we’ve had to divert to Orange County. Our arrival caught the tower off guard, and they allowed an airplane to taxi across the runway while we were on short final, forcing us to go around. I know this can be disconcerting, but rest assured, we practice it all the time and enjoy the opportunity to exercise our visual flying skills. In any case, we are flying a right-hand circuit and will be touching down in moments – so if you would please, double-check your seatbelts for landing. Thank you.”

After that piece of fiction, the lies got easier.

The second opportunity to lie came after they landed. Turning off the runway, Tower handed them over to Ground Control. As they taxied in, the ground controller asked them if it wasn’t a little unusual for AST to use John Wayne as an alternate.

“Yeah, we prefer Long Beach,” Paul replied, “but it’s an easier bus ride to LAX from John Wayne than from Ontario, and we really like the service here.”

Second lie.

Kallstadt glanced at him as he said this, and in hindsight, Paul realized this disingenuous reply—along with the bullshit he served up to the passengers on downwind—would become the genesis of the story Captain K fabricated to justify his failures, as well as the origin of his subsequent “recovery plan.”

A half hour later, listening to Captain K talk to the Operations Center in Pittsburgh, Paul realized this was exactly the case. But it actually was cheaper to transport the passengers and crew by bus between the two airports than to reposition the jet to LAX, and there was no way in hell that AST would pay for a pricey Orange County hotel for the inbound crew, not when it already had reservations at a cheaper motel near LAX . . . so the plan actually did make sense.

Two hours later, a pair of tour buses carrying the outbound LAX passengers and aircrew finally arrived at Orange County Airport. As they queued up to take the same buses back to LAX, Paul got his third chance to lie on Kallstadt’s behalf.

It happened when the first officer of the outbound flight climbed off the bus and spotted him. Minus his flight cap, his uniform already rumpled, the three-striper stalked up, fuming over the three-hour delay. He pulled Paul aside and demanded to know the real story behind their diversion.

“Really bad headwinds,” Paul said. “You guys are going to *fly* going east.”

Deep furrows creased the first officer’s forehead as he digested this explanation. His eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you guys stop in Vegas for gas?”

Paul shrugged. “Captain thought it looked okay at the time.”

"I still don't get it," the co-pilot said. "The weather at LAX never went below two miles. Everyone was getting in."

"Well, SoCal told us to expect 30 minutes holding. We were running low on gas; so here we are." Paul figured the less said the better. Part of him wanted to scream the truth.

The three-striper shook his head in disgust. "Well, it would've been a whole lot smarter if you guys had just dropped into Vegas for gas and showed up an hour late. This puts us into Columbus at midnight."

Paul realized this crew was flying the same trip as his own, one day ahead. "Yeah, well, I'm really sorry about that. But what's to do in Columbus, anyhow?"

"I *live* in Columbus," the first officer said. "My wife was picking me up at the airport. I was going to get to see the kids and sleep in my own bed."

Paul felt three feet tall. "Sorry . . ." he said to the pilot's back as he stormed away.

Three lies, Allison . . . you're out.

Thankfully, further fabrications to the passengers were unnecessary. Paul huddled in the back of the bus with the crew, avoiding eye contact with anyone who looked like they had a question. It was a long and deathly quiet ride in rush-hour traffic up the 405.

Ironically, as they exited the bus at LAX, an elderly lady made her way over to where Paul waited for his bags and took his arm. "Young man, we all know these inconveniences are simply unavoidable at times; I just want to thank you for getting us here safely."

Paul had never felt two such totally contradictory emotions at the same time: pride in knowing that he *had* in fact saved the lady's life; and simultaneously,

profound shame at exposing his passengers to such risk in the first place.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said with cheeks burning. He gently pulled his arm free of the old woman's arm to retrieve his bags.

They taught you better at the Academy, Paul Allison.

To Rachel and his crewmembers, Paul found it far more difficult to lie. Later, at dinner—a rendezvous carefully orchestrated over the phone by Rachel to avoid any chance of Captain K joining them—Rachel, Dawn, Franny and Gary barraged him with pointed questions.

They knew too much to accept vague answers and excuses. Paul squirmed in his seat as he fudged the truth to avoid revealing the full extent of Kallstadt's incompetence . . . or just how close they had come to crashing at Orange County.

Again, the issue of a fuel stop at Las Vegas came up. Franny and Gary had already flown this trip four times and had stopped for fuel twice. Their captains said it was no big deal. Paul shrugged, "Well, I told Captain K we needed to stop several times, but he wouldn't listen."

And the go-around? What was the story on *that*?

Paul knew better than to offer the feeble "airplane on the runway" excuse he'd dished to the passengers. Instead, he fibbed, "Well, Captain K was a little fast on final. We have a rule that you have to be stabilized at approach speed by a thousand feet. We weren't, so I told him to go around . . . that's what we did."

Not exactly a lie; not exactly the truth.

Later, back in his hotel room, the call from Blake Owens came as a surprise. Hearing the voice of a pilot

he completely trusted, Paul blurted out the entire story, starting from the rushed takeoff at Pittsburgh, continuing for a quarter hour before he had exhausted himself. It felt good to finally tell the truth.

When Owens spoke, it was not the ass-chewing Paul dreaded. "Listen, Paul," Blake said, "I want you to write down everything you just said, and I want you to keep writing everything that happens. Stay on the trip. Unfortunately, you know Kallstadt as well as anyone now; just keep doing what you've been doing, keeping things safe." He paused to catch his breath, and Paul realized he had been holding his own.

"When the trip is over, you and I are going to the chief pilot. If we don't get any satisfaction there, we're going to the FAA . . . do you hear me?"

Paul felt the weight of the world lift from his shoulders. "Yeah, I hear you," he replied. "You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that. I have to tell you, I thought I was going crazy for a while there."