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Before the Fall

Written by Noah Hawley

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BEFORE THE FALL

NOAH HAWLEY

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For Kyle

BEFORE THE FALL

A PRIVATE PLANE sits on a runway in Martha's Vineyard, forward stairs deployed. It is a nine-seat OSPRY 700SL, built in 2001 in Wichita, Kansas. Whose plane it is is hard to say with real certainty. The ownership of record is a Dutch holding company with a Cayman Island mailing address, but the logo on the fuselage says GULLWING AIR. The pilot, James Melody, is British. Charlie Busch, the first officer, is from Odessa, Texas. The flight attendant, Emma Lightner, was born in Mannheim, Germany, to an American air force lieutenant and his teenage wife. They moved to San Diego when she was nine.

Everyone has their path. The choices they've made. How any two people end up in the same place at the same time is a mystery. You get on an elevator with a dozen strangers. You ride a bus, wait in line for the bathroom. It happens every day. To try to predict the places we'll go and the people we'll meet would be pointless.

A soft halogen glow emanates from the louvered forward hatch. Nothing like the harsh fluorescent glare you find in commercial planes. Two weeks from now, in a *New York Magazine* interview, Scott Burroughs will say that the thing that surprised him most about his first trip on a private jet was not the legroom or the full bar, but how personalized the decor felt, as if, at a certain income level, air travel is just another form of staying home.

It is a balmy night on the Vineyard, eighty-six degrees with light winds out of the southwest. The scheduled time of departure is ten p.m. For the last three hours, a heavy coastal fog has been building over the sound, tendrils of dense white creeping slowly across the floodlit tarmac.

The Bateman family, in their island Range Rover, is the first to arrive: father David, mother Maggie, and their two children, Rachel and JJ. It's late August and Maggie and the kids have been on the Vineyard for the month, with David flying out from New York on the weekends. It's hard for him to get away any more than that, though he wishes he could. David is in the entertainment business, which is what people in his line of work call television news these days. A Roman circus of information and opinions.

He is a tall man with an intimidating phone voice. Strangers, upon meeting him, are often struck by the size of his hands. His son, JJ, has fallen asleep in the car, and as the others start toward the plane David leans into the back and gently lifts JJ from the car seat, supporting his weight with one arm. The boy instinctively throws his arms around his father's neck, his face slack from slumber. The warmth of his breath sends a chill down David's spine. He can feel the bones of his son's hips in his palm, the spill of legs against his side. At four, JJ is old enough to know that people die, but still too young to realize that one day he will be one of them. David and Maggie call him their perpetual motion machine, because really it's just nonstop all day long. At three, JJ's primary means of communication was to roar like a dinosaur. Now he is the king of the interruption, questioning every word they say with seemingly endless patience until he's answered or shut down.

David kicks the car door closed with his foot, his son's weight pulling him off balance. He is holding his phone to his ear with his free hand.

"Tell him if he says a word about any of this," he says quietly, so as not to wake the boy, "we'll sue him biblically until he thinks lawyers are falling outta the sky like frogs."

At fifty-six, David wears a hard layer of fat around his frame like a bulletproof vest. He has a strong chin and a good head of hair. In the 1990s David built a name for himself running political campaigns—governors, senators, and one two-term president—but he retired in 2000 to run a lobbying firm on K Street. Two years later, an aging billionaire approached him with the idea of starting a twenty-four-hour news network. Thirteen years and thirteen billion in corporate revenue later, David has a top-floor office with bomb-resistant glass and access to the corporate jet.

He doesn't get to see the kids enough. David and Maggie both agree on this, though they fight about it regularly. Which is to say, she raises the issue and he gets defensive, even though, at heart, he feels the same. But then isn't that what marriage is, two people fighting for land rights to the same six inches?

Now, on the tarmac, a gust of wind blows up. David, still on the phone, glances over at Maggie and smiles, and the smile says *I'm glad to be here with you*. It says *I love you*. But it also says, *I know I'm in the middle of another work call and I need you to give me a break about it*. It says, *What matters is that I'm here, and that we're all together.*

It is a smile of apology, but there is also some steel in it.

Maggie smiles back, but hers is more perfunctory, sadder. The truth is, she can no longer control whether she forgives him or not.

They've been married less than ten years. Maggie is thirty-six, a former preschool teacher, the pretty one boys fantasize about before they even understand what that means—a breast fixation shared by toddler and teen. Miss Maggie, as they called her, was cheerful and loving. She came in early every morning at six thirty to straighten up. She stayed late to write progress reports and work on her lesson plan. Miss Maggie was a twenty-six-year-old girl from Piedmont, California, who loved teaching. Loved it. She was the first adult any of these three-year-olds had met who took them seriously, who listened to what they had to say and made them feel grown.

Fate, if you would call it that, brought Maggie and David together

in a ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria one Thursday night in early spring 2005. The ball was a black-tie fund-raiser for an educational fund. Maggie was there with a friend. David was on the board. She was the humble beauty in a floral dress with blue finger paint smeared on the small curve inside her right knee. He was the heavyweight charm shark in a two-button suit. She wasn't the youngest woman at the party, or even the prettiest, but she was the only one with chalk in her purse, the only one who could build a papier-mâché volcano and owned a striped *Cat in the Hat* stovepipe hat she would wear to work every year on Dr. Seuss's birthday. In other words, she was everything David had ever wanted in a wife. He excused himself and made his approach, smiling a cap-toothed smile.

In retrospect, she never had a chance.

Ten years later they have two children and a town house on Gracie Square. Rachel, nine years old, goes to Brearley with a hundred other girls. Maggie, retired from teaching now, stays home with JJ, which makes her unusual among women of her station—the carefree housewives of workaholic millionaires. When she strolls her son to the park in the morning, Maggie is the only stay-at-home mother in the playground. All the other kids arrive in European-designed strollers pushed by island ladies on cell phones.

Now, on the airport runway, Maggie feels a chill run through her and pulls her summer cardigan tighter. The tendrils of fog have become a slow roiling surf, drafting with glacial patience across the tarmac.

"Are you sure it's okay to fly in this?" she asks her husband's back. He has reached the top of the stairs, where Emma Lightner, their flight attendant, wearing a trim blue skirt suit, greets him with a smile.

"It'll be fine, Mom," says Rachel, nine, walking behind her mother. "It's not like they need to see to fly a plane."

"No, I know."

"They have instruments."

Maggie gives her daughter a supportive smile. Rachel is wearing

her green backpack—*Hunger Games*, Barbies, and iPad inside—and as she walks, it bumps rhythmically against the small of her back. Such a big girl. Even at nine there are signs of the woman she'll become. A professor who waits patiently as you figure out your own mistakes. The smartest person in the room, in other words, but not a show-off, never a show-off, with a good heart and musical laughter. The question is, are these qualities she was born with, or qualities seeded inside her by what happened? The true crime of her youth? Somewhere online the entire saga is recorded in words and pictures—archived news footage on YouTube, hundreds of man-hours of beat reporting all stored in the great collective memory of ones and zeros. A *New Yorker* writer wanted to do a book last year, but David quashed it quietly. Rachel is only a child, after all. Sometimes, when Maggie thinks about what could have gone wrong, she worries her heart will crack.

Instinctively, she glances over at the Range Rover, where Gil is radioing the advance team. Gil is their shadow, a big Israeli who never takes off his jacket. He is what people in their income bracket call *domestic security*. Six foot two, 190 pounds. There is a reason he never takes off his jacket, a reason that doesn't get discussed in polite circles. This is Gil's fourth year with the Bateman family. Before Gil there was Misha, and before Misha came the strike team of humorless men in suits, the ones with automatic weapons in the trunk of their car. In her schoolteacher days, Maggie would have scoffed at this kind of military intrusion into family life. She would have called it narcissistic to think that money made you a target for violence. But that was before the events of July 2008, before her daughter's kidnapping and the agonizing three days it took to get her back.

On the jet's stairs, Rachel spins and gives a mock royal wave to the empty runway. She is wearing blue fleece over her dress, her hair in a bowed ponytail. Any evidence that Rachel has been damaged by those three days remains mostly hidden—a fear of small spaces, a certain trepidation around strange men. But then Rachel has always been

a happy kid, a bubbly trickster with a sly smile, and though she can't understand how, Maggie is thankful every day that her kid hasn't lost that.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bateman," says Emma as Maggie reaches the top of the airplane stairs.

"Hi, thanks," says Maggie reflexively. She feels the usual need to apologize for their wealth, not her husband's necessarily, but her own, the sheer implausibility of it. She was a preschool teacher not so long ago, living in a six-story walk-up with two mean girls, like Cinderella.

"Is Scott here yet?" she asks.

"No, ma'am. You're the first to arrive. I've pulled a bottle of pinot gris. Would you like a glass?"

"Not right now. Thanks."

Inside, the jet is a statement of subdued luxury, contoured walls ribbed with sleek ash paneling. The seats are gray leather and laid out casually in pairs, as if to suggest you might enjoy the flight more with a partner. The cabin has a moneyed hush, like the inside of a presidential library. Though she's flown this way many times, Maggie still can't get over the indulgence of it. An entire airplane just for them.

David lays their son in his seat, covers him with a blanket. He is on another call already, this one clearly serious. Maggie can tell by the grim set of David's jaw. Below him the boy stirs in his seat but doesn't wake.

Rachel stops by the cockpit to talk to the pilots. It is something she does everywhere she goes, seeks out the local authority and grills them for information. Maggie spots Gil at the cockpit door, keeping the nine-year-old in sight. He carries, in addition to a handgun, a Taser and plastic handcuffs. He is the quietest man Maggie has ever met.

Phone to his ear, David gives his wife's shoulder a squeeze.

"Excited to get back?" he asks, covering the mouthpiece with his other hand.

"Mixed," she says. "It's so nice out here."

"You could stay. I mean, we have that thing next weekend, but otherwise, why not?"

"No," she says. "The kids have school, and I've got the museum board thing on Thursday."

She smiles at him.

"I didn't sleep that well," she says. "I'm just tired."

David's eyes go to something over Maggie's shoulder. He frowns.

Maggie turns. Ben and Sarah Kipling stand at the top of the stairs. They're a wealthy couple, more David's friends than hers. All the same, Sarah squeals when she sees Maggie.

"Darling," she says, throwing open her arms.

Sarah gives Maggie a hug, the flight attendant standing awkwardly behind them, holding a tray of drinks.

"I love your dress," says Sarah.

Ben maneuvers past his wife and charges David, shaking his hand vigorously. He is a partner at one of the big four Wall Street firms, a blue-eyed shark in a tailored blue button-down shirt and a pair of belted white shorts.

"Did you see the fucking game?" he says. "How does he not catch that ball?"

"Don't get me started," says David.

"I mean, I could have caught that fucking ball and I've got French toast hands."

The two men stand toe-to-toe, mock posturing, two big bucks locking horns for the sheer love of battle.

"He lost it in the lights," David tells him, then feels his phone buzz. He looks at it, frowns, types a reply. Ben glances quickly over his shoulder, his expression sobering. The women are busy chatting. He leans in closer.

"We need to talk, buddy."

David shakes him off, still typing.

"Not now."

"I've been calling you," Kipling says. He starts to say more, but Emma is there with drinks.

"Glenlivet on the rocks, if I'm not mistaken," she says, handing Ben a glass.

"You're a doll," Ben says, and knocks back half the scotch in one gulp.

"Just water for me," David says as she lifts a glass of vodka from the tray.

"Of course," she says, smiling. "I'll be right back."

A few feet away, Sarah Kipling has already run out of small talk. She gives Maggie's arm a squeeze.

"How are you," she says, earnestly, and for the second time.

"No, I'm good," says Maggie. "I just—travel days, you know. I'll be happy when we're home."

"I know. I mean, I love the beach, but honestly? I get so bored. How many sunsets can you watch and not want to just, I don't know, go to Barneys?"

Maggie glances nervously at the open hatch. Sarah catches the look.

"Waiting for someone?"

"No. I mean, I think we'll be one more, but—"

Her daughter saves her from having to say more.

"Mom," says Rachel from her seat. "Don't forget, tomorrow is Tamara's party. We still have to get a gift."

"Okay," says Maggie, distracted. "Let's go to Dragonfly in the morning."

Looking past her daughter, Maggie sees David and Ben huddled together, talking. David doesn't look happy. She could ask him about it later, but her husband has been so standoffish lately, and the last thing she wants is a fight.

The flight attendant glides past her and hands David his water.

"Lime?" she says.

David shakes his head. Ben rubs his bald spot nervously. He glances at the cockpit.

"Are we waiting for somebody?" he says. "Let's get this show on the road."

"One more person," says Emma, looking at her list. "Scott Burroughs?"

Ben glances at David. "Who?"

David shrugs. "Maggie has a friend," he says.

"He's not a friend," Maggie says, overhearing. "I mean, the kids know him. We ran into him this morning at the market. He said he had to go to New York, so I invited him to join us. I think he's a painter."

She looks at her husband.

"I showed you some of his work."

David checks his watch.

"You told him ten o'clock?" he says.

She nods.

"Well," he says, sitting, "five more minutes and he'll have to catch the ferry like everyone else."

Through a round portal window, Maggie sees the captain standing on the tarmac examining the wing. He stares up at the smooth aluminum, then walks slowly toward the plane.

Behind her, JJ shifts in slumber, his mouth slack. Maggie rearranges the blanket over him, then gives his forehead a kiss. He always looks so worried when he sleeps, she thinks.

Over the chair back she sees the captain reenter the plane. He comes over to shake hands, a man quarterback-tall with a military build.

"Gentlemen," he says, "ladies. Welcome. Should be a short flight. Some light winds, but otherwise the ride'll be pretty smooth."

"I saw you outside the plane," says Maggie.

"Routine visual inspection," he tells her. "I do it before every flight. The plane looks good."

"What about the fog?" asks Maggie.

Her daughter rolls her eyes.

"Fog isn't a factor with a sophisticated piece of machinery like this," the pilot tells them. "A few hundred feet above sea level and we're past it."

"I'm gonna eat some of this cheese then," says Ben. "Should we put on some music maybe? Or the TV? I think Boston's playing the White Sox."

Emma goes to find the game on the in-flight entertainment system, and there is a long moment of settling in as they take their seats and stow their belongings. Up front, the pilots run through their pre-flight instrument check.

David's phone buzzes again. He checks it, frowns.

"All right," says David, getting antsy. "I think that's all the time we've got for the painter."

He nods to Emma, who crosses to close the main cabin door. In the cockpit, as if by telepathy, the pilot starts the engines. The front door is almost closed when they hear a man's voice yell, "*Wait!*"

The plane shakes as their final passenger climbs the gangway stairs. Despite herself, Maggie feels herself flush, a thrum of anticipation starting in her belly. And then he is there, Scott Burroughs, mid-forties, looking flushed and out of breath. His hair is shaggy and starting to gray, but his face is smooth. There are worn gouache splotches on his white Keds, faded white and summer blue. He has a dirty green duffel bag over one shoulder. In his bearing there is still the flush of youth, but the lines around his eyes are deep and earned.

"Sorry," he says. "The cab took forever. I ended up taking a bus."

"Well, you made it," says David nodding to the copilot to close the door. "That's what matters."

"Can I take your bag, sir?" says Emma.

"What?" says Scott, startled momentarily by the stealthy way she has moved next to him. "No. I got it."

She points him to an empty seat. As he walks to it, he takes in the interior of the plane for the first time.

"Well, hell," he says.

"Ben Kipling," says Ben, rising to shake Scott's hand.

"Yeah," says Scott, "Scott Burroughs."

He sees Maggie.

"Hey," he says, giving her a wide, warm grin. "Thanks again for this."

Maggie smiles back, flushed.

"It's nothing," she says. "We had room."

Scott falls into a seat next to Sarah. Before he even has his seat belt on, Emma is handing him a glass of wine.

"Oh," he says. "No, thank you. I don't—some water maybe?"

Emma smiles, withdraws.

Scott looks over at Sarah.

"You could get used to this, huh?"

"Truer words have never been spoken," says Kipling.

The engines surge, and Maggie feels the plane start to move. Captain Melody's voice comes over the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please prepare for takeoff," he says.

Maggie looks over at her two kids, Rachel sitting with one leg folded under her, scrolling through songs on her phone, and little JJ hunched in slumber, slack-faced with childish oblivion.

As she does at a thousand random moments out of every day, Maggie feels a swell of motherly love, ballooning and desperate. They are her life, these children. Her identity. She reaches once more to readjust her son's blanket, and as she does there is that moment of weightlessness as the plane's wheels leave the ground. This act of impossible hope, this routine suspension of the physical laws that hold men down, inspires and terrifies her. Flying. They are flying. And as they rise up through the foggy white, talking and laughing, serenaded by the songs of 1950s crooners and the white noise of the long at bat, none of them has any idea that sixteen minutes from now their plane will crash into the sea.