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FALLING

T.J. NEWMAN **A NOVEL**

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FALLING

T. J. NEWMAN

AVID READER PRESS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For my parents, Ken and Denise Newman

What hath God wrought!

—Numbers 23:23

WHEN THE SHOE DROPPED INTO her lap the foot was still in it.

She flung it into the air with a shriek. The bloodied mass hung in weightless suspension before being sucked out of the massive hole in the side of the aircraft. On the floor next to her seat, a flight attendant crawled up the aisle screaming for the passengers to put their oxygen masks on.

From the back of the airplane, Bill observed it all.

The passenger with the shoe clearly couldn't hear what the young flight attendant was yelling. She probably hadn't heard a thing since the explosion. Thin lines of blood trickled out of both ears.

The blast had thrown the flight attendant's body into the air and then back down, her head of curly brown hair hitting the floor with a thwack. She lay motionless for a second before the plane went into a steep nosedive. Sliding down the aisle, the flight attendant grabbed at the metal rungs beneath the passenger seats. Clutching on to one, her arms shook as she tried to pull herself up against the plane's downward pitch. As she flipped onto her side, her feet floated and dangled in the air. Debris flew all around the plane; paper and clothing, a laptop, a soda can. A baby's blanket. It was like the inside of a tornado.

Bill followed her gaze down the plane—and saw sky.

Sunlight shone in on them from a wide opening that had been the overwing emergency exit not thirty seconds ago. The other flight attendant had just stopped there to collect trash.

Bill had watched the older, redheaded flight attendant smile, take the empty cup in her gloved hand, drop it in the plastic bag—and then in one explosive moment she was gone. The whole row was gone. The side of the aircraft was gone. Bill widened his stance as the plane yawed left to right, seemingly unable to keep a straight path. *Of course, the rudder*, he thought. The whole tail was probably damaged.

A crack came from above the brunette flight attendant's head as several overhead bins burst open. Luggage tumbled out, tossed violently about the cabin. A large pink suitcase with wheels shot forward, sucked toward the opening. It hit the side of the fuselage as it went out, a chunk of the aircraft's skin ripped off with it. Exposed frames and stringers created a lattice of human

engineering against the heavens. Beyond the whipping wires hissing orange and yellow sparks, clouds dotted the view. Bill squinted against the sun.

The plane leveled off enough that the flight attendant on the floor could get to her knees. Bill watched her struggle against a body that wouldn't cooperate. She managed to pull her leg forward only to find her femur sticking out of her thigh. She blinked at the bloody wound a few times and then kept crawling.

"Masks!" she screamed, dragging herself up the aisle toward the back of the plane, her voice barely audible above the deafening roar of wind. She looked over to a man grabbing at the oxygen masks. He caught one and went to put it over his face but a gust ripped it out of his fingers, plastic and elastic straps flailing.

Gray fog choked the cabin in a swirling haze of debris and chaos. A metal water bottle went flying through the air, smacking into the crawling flight attendant's face. Blood began to pour from her nose.

"He's been shot! My husband! Help!"

Bill looked to the woman pounding her fists against her husband's lifeless torso. Two small circles in his forehead streamed red over his eyes and down his cheeks. The flight attendant brushed the curls out of her face as she pulled herself up on the armrests for a closer look.

They weren't bullets. They were rivets from the plane.

The plane vibrated violently and the floor began to buckle. Bill could feel everything shifting beneath him. He wondered if the airframe would hold. He wondered how much time they had.

The flight attendant continued on, placing her hand in a dark spot on the carpet at the same moment Bill smelled the urine. The flight attendant looked up at the man in the aisle seat. He stared off in a state of shock, the puddle spreading at his feet.

"Ice," someone moaned.

The flight attendant turned. Bill watched the passenger on the other side of the aisle extend her hands to the young woman, holding out a fleshy chunk of something. The flight attendant recoiled. Looking up, the passenger's chin and neck were painted crimson.

"Ice," she repeated, a wave of blood gushing out of her mouth.

It was her tongue.

Bill glanced over his shoulder to the back wall, watching the cord of the interphone thrash in the wind as the flight attendant crawled toward it. He looked to the other side of the galley. The third flight attendant lay crumpled on the floor, a toppled carton of juice next to her. Bill turned his head to the side, watching the glugs of orange mix with the pool of red around her body.

The brunette dragged herself at last to the end of the aisle, packets of sugar and mini creamers crunching against her uniform. She reached a hand forward but yanked it back.

A pair of black dress shoes blocked her path.

The flight attendant looked up. Lying at Bill's feet, broken and bloodied, her jaw hung open but no words came. Bill's tie flapped in the wind. The sound of the engines screamed at them both, willing something, anything, to happen.

"But... if you're..." the flight attendant stammered, looking up at Bill, betrayal written across her face. "Who has control of the plane, Captain Hoffman?"

Bill inhaled sharply as though to speak, but couldn't.

He looked down the plane to the closed cockpit door.

He was supposed to be on the other side.

Bill leapt over the flight attendant, sprinting down the aisle toward the front of the aircraft. He ran as fast as he could, but the door seemed to move farther away the faster he ran. All around him, people cried out, begging him to stop and help them. He kept running. The door kept moving farther and farther away. He closed his eyes.

His body slammed into the door without warning, his skull bashing against the impenetrable surface. His hands cradled his head as he stumbled backward. Woozy, he tried to think of how he could breach the sealed cockpit, but not a single idea came to mind. He pounded on the door until his fists went numb.

Hyperventilating, he stepped back to kick at it when he heard a click.

The door unlocked and cracked open. Bill rushed inside.

Buttons flashed red and amber warnings on nearly every surface in the cockpit. A loud, incessant alarm screeched, the shrill noise intensifying in the tiny space. He sat down in his seat on the left, the captain's seat.

He struggled to focus on the display in front of him as the plane's thrashing tossed the numbers about. Red followed him everywhere he looked. Every

button, every knob, every display was screaming at him.

Through the window, the approaching ground loomed closer and closer.

Get to work, Bill ordered himself.

His hands stretched out in front of him.

Frozen.

Dammit, you're the captain. You need to make a decision. You're running out of time.

The alarms got louder. A robotic voice repeatedly commanded him to pull up.

“What about asymmetrical thrust?”

Bill turned his head. From the copilot's seat his ten-year-old son, Scott, shrugged. He was wearing his solar system pajamas. His feet didn't touch the ground.

“You could give that a try,” the boy added.

Bill looked back to his hands. His fingers refused to move. They just hung in the air.

“Fine, then. Do it the hard way. Dive and use speed to keep a straight line.”

He turned again to see his wife now reclined in the chair. Arms crossed, she gave him that smirk. The one she used when they both knew she was right. God, she was gorgeous.

Sweat dripped down his neck as he struggled to move and take action. But he remained paralyzed in fear. Terrified he would make the wrong call.

Carrie tucked her hair behind one ear as she leaned over, placing a hand on her husband's knee.

“Bill. It's time.”

• • •

He gasped for air as his body shot upright. Moonlight poured through the crack in the curtains to streak across the king-size bed. He scanned the room for the flashing warnings. He listened for the alarms, but heard only a neighbor's dog barking outside.

Bill dropped his head in his hands with an exhale.

“Same one?” Carrie asked from the other side of the bed.

He nodded in the dark.

CHAPTER ONE

GIVING THE DUVET A SHAKE, Carrie smoothed the creases with her hand. A whiff of fresh-cut grass drew her glance to the open window. The neighbor across the street mopped his face with the bottom of his shirt before closing the trash can full of lawn clippings with a clunk. Dragging it into the backyard, he gave a wave to a passing car, the loud music fading as it drove on. Behind her, in the bathroom, the shower shut off.

Carrie left the room.

“Mom, can I go outside?”

Scott stood at the bottom of the stairs holding a remote control car.

“Where’s your—” Carrie said, making her way downstairs.

The baby crawled into the room, blowing wet raspberries as she went. Reaching her brother’s feet, Elise grabbed onto his shorts and pulled herself up to a stand, her little body jerking subtly as she tried to find balance.

“Okay, did you bring your dishes to the sink?”

“Yup.”

“Then you can, but only for ten minutes. Come back before your dad leaves, okay?”

The boy nodded and ran for the door.

“Nope,” Carrie called after him, placing Elise on her hip. “Shoes.”

The “whoops” baby ten years after the first kid had been overwhelming in the beginning. But as the family of three learned how to be four, Bill and Carrie realized the age gap meant big brother could do little things like watch-the-baby-while-I-get-dressed-and-make-the-bed. Things became more manageable after that.

Carrie was wiping the remnants of sweet potato and avocado off the high chair when she heard the front door open.

“Mom?” Scott hollered, a pinched alarm to his tone.

Hurrying around the corner, she found Scott staring up at a man she didn't know. The stranger on the front porch wore a startled look, his hand frozen on its way to the doorbell.

"Hi," Carrie said, shifting the baby to her other hip as she moved to place herself subtly between her son and the man. "Can I help you?"

"I'm with CalCom," the man said. "You called about your internet?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, opening the door wider. "Of course, come in." Carrie cringed at her initial reaction, hoping the man hadn't noticed. "Sorry. I've never had a repairman come on time, let alone early. Scott!" she yelled, her son pivoting at the end of the drive. "Ten minutes."

Nodding, the boy ran off.

"I'm Carrie," she said, closing the door.

The technician set his equipment bag down in the entryway and Carrie watched him take in the living room. High ceilings and a staircase to the second floor. Tasteful furniture and fresh flowers on the coffee table. On the mantel, family photos over the years, the most recent taken on the beach at sunset. Scott was a mini-me of Carrie, their same chocolatey-brown hair blowing in the sea breeze, their green eyes squinted with wide smiles. Bill, nearly a foot taller than Carrie, held a then-newborn Elise in his arms, her lily-white baby skin a contrast to his Southern California tan. The repairman turned with a small smile.

"Sam," he said.

"Sam," she said, returning the smile. "Can I get you something to drink before you get started? I was just about to make myself a cup of tea."

"Tea would be great, actually. Thanks."

She led him into the other room, bright, natural light filling the kitchen that opened into the toy-dotted family room.

"Thanks for coming on a Saturday." Carrie sat the baby back in the high chair. Pounding her fists on the table, Elise giggled through a sparsely toothed grin. "This was the only appointment I could get for weeks."

"Yeah, we're pretty busy. How long has your internet been out?"

"Day before yesterday?" she said, filling a tea kettle with water. "English breakfast or green?"

"English breakfast, thanks."

“Is it normal,” Carrie asked, watching the stove’s pilot light ignite to a full flame, “for our house to be the only one having issues? I asked a few neighbors who also have CalCom and theirs is fine.”

Sam shrugged. “That’s normal. Might be your router, maybe the wiring. I’ll run diagnostics.”

From the front room, heavy footsteps made their way down the stairs. Carrie knew the next sounds well: a suitcase and messenger bag set by the door, followed by hard-soled shoes crossing the entryway. In a handful of strides, he was in the kitchen, polished black dress shoes, crisply ironed pants, suit coat, and tie. Wings above his breast pocket displayed the Coastal Airways insignia, BILL HOFFMAN engraved boldly below. A matching pair adorned the front of the gold-trimmed hat he laid softly on the counter. His entrance felt oddly dramatic and Carrie noticed how much of a contrast his aura of authority made to the rest of the house. She’d never noticed it before; it wasn’t like he came to dinner in uniform. And it was probably only because there was another person in the room, a man who didn’t know him, didn’t know their family. But for whatever reason, today, it was conspicuous.

Bill placed his hands in his pockets with a polite nod to the technician before settling his attention on Carrie.

Lips pursed, arms crossed, she stared back.

“Sam, would you mind...”

“Yeah, I’ll, uh, get set up,” Sam said to Carrie, leaving the couple alone.

The clock on the wall ticked the seconds. Baby Elise banged a drool-covered teething ring on the tray before it slipped out of her fingers, falling to the floor. Bill crossed the kitchen and picked it up, rinsing it off in the sink and drying it with a dish towel before returning it to his daughter’s eager hands. Behind Carrie the tea kettle began a soft whistle.

“I’ll FaceTime when I get to the hotel to hear how the game—”

“New York, right?” Carrie cut him off.

Bill nodded. “New York tonight, Portland tom—”

“There’s a team pizza party after the game. With the three-hour time difference, you’ll be asleep before we get home.”

“Okay. Then first thing—”

“We’re getting together with my sister and the kids tomorrow morning,” she said, and shrugged. “So, we’ll see.”

Bill straightened with a deep inhale, the four gold stripes on his epaulets rising with his shoulders. “You know I had to say yes. If it’d been anyone else asking I wouldn’t have.”

Carrie stared at the floor. The kettle began to screech and she shut off the burner. The noise gradually softened until it was only the clock making noise again.

Bill checked his watch, cursing under his breath. Giving a kiss to the top of his daughter’s head, he said, “I’m gonna be late.”

“You’ve never been late,” Carrie replied.

He put on his hat. “I’ll call after I check in. Where’s Scott?”

“Outside. Playing. He’s coming back any minute to say goodbye.”

It was a test and she knew Bill knew it. Carrie stared at him from the other side of the unspoken line she’d drawn. He glanced at the clock.

“We’ll talk before I take off,” Bill said, leaving the room.

Carrie watched him go.

The front door opened and closed a few moments later and a hush settled over the house. Crossing to the sink, Carrie watched the leaves on the oak tree in the backyard flutter in the breeze. Distantly, Bill’s car started up and drove off.

Behind her, a throat cleared. Wiping her face hastily, she turned.

“Sorry about that,” she said to Sam with an embarrassed eye roll. “Anyway. You said English breakfast.” Tearing open the tea bag, she dropped it in a mug. Steam rose from the kettle as she poured the hot water. “Do you need milk or sugar?”

When he didn’t reply, she looked back.

He seemed surprised by her reaction. He had probably imagined she would scream. Maybe drop the cup. Start to cry, who knows. *Some* kind of drama he surely expected. When a woman, at home, in her own kitchen, turns to find a man she’s known for a mere handful of minutes pointing a gun at her, a big reaction would seem natural. Carrie had felt her eyes widen reflexively, like her brain needed to take in more of the scene to confirm that this was actually happening.

He narrowed his eyes, as if to say, *Really?*

Carrie’s heartbeat pounded in her ears while a cool numbness trickled down from the top of her spine to the back of her knees. Her whole body, her whole

existence, felt reduced to nothing but a buzzing sensation.

But that was for her to know. She ignored the gun and focused on him instead, and gave him nothing.

Puckering and cooing, baby Elise threw her teething ring back to the floor with a squeal. Sam took a step toward the baby. Carrie felt her nostrils flare involuntarily.

“Sam,” Carrie said calmly, slowly. “I don’t know what you want. But it’s yours. Anything. I will do anything. Just please”—her voice cracked—“please don’t hurt my children.”

The front door opened and closed with a slam. Panic seized her throat and Carrie drew breath to yell. Sam cocked the gun.

“Mom, did Dad leave?” Scott called from the other room. “His car’s not here, can I keep playing?”

“Tell him to come in here,” Sam said.

Carrie bit her bottom lip.

“Mom?” Scott repeated with childish impatience.

“In here,” Carrie said, and closed her eyes. “Come here real quick, Scott.”

“Mom, can I stay outside? You said I could go—” Scott froze when he saw the gun. He looked at his mom and back at the weapon and back at his mom.

“Scott,” Carrie said, and motioned for him. The boy never took his eyes off the firearm as he crossed the kitchen to her, where she deliberately tucked him in behind her.

“Your children may be just fine,” Sam said. “Or they may not. But that’s not up to me.”

Carrie’s nostrils flared again. “Who is it up to?”

Sam smiled.

• • •

Bill could feel people watching him.

It was the uniform. It had that effect. He stood a little taller.

Bill was many things but the consensus seemed to be that he was first and foremost *nice*. Teachers and coaches growing up, girls he dated, his friends’ parents. Everyone knew Bill as the nice guy. Not that he minded. He *was* nice. But when he put on the uniform, something changed. *Nice* wasn’t the default description. It still made the list. But it wasn’t the only word on it.

Passengers' heads popped up as he bypassed the never-ending line for security at Los Angeles International Airport, but it only took a peek at that hat and tie to dissolve indignation into curiosity. People didn't dress like that anymore. It harkened back to a time when air travel was a rare privilege, a major event. Purposefully unchanged, the uniform kept a certain antiquated mystique alive. It elicited respect. Trust. It proclaimed a sense of duty.

Bill approached the lone TSA agent seated at a small podium set discreetly off to the side of passenger security. Scanning the barcode on the back of his badge, the machine beeped and the computer went to work.

"Morning," Bill said, handing the woman his passport.

"It's still morning?" she said, studying the information printed next to his picture. Comparing it to the information on his badge, she slid the passport under a blue light, holograms and hidden print appearing in the document's blank space. Glancing up, she verified that the face in front of her matched the one on the IDs.

"I guess it's not technically morning," Bill said. "Just morning for me."

"Well, it's my Friday. So the day needs to hurry up."

Bill's badge photo and information popped up on the computer screen. After triple-checking all three forms of identification, she handed back the passport.

"Safe flight, Mr. Hoffman."

Leaving the crew security checkpoint, he walked past the passengers tugging their shoes back on and returning liquids and laptops to their carry-on bags. On his last trip, Bill flew with a flight attendant who refused to retire simply because she didn't want to give up her crew security clearance. She turned up her nose at the thought of having to travel like a mere mortal; waiting in line, liquid restrictions, limited to two carry-ons—which would be searched every single time, not just occasionally at random. Watching a man in his socks being patted down, Bill had to admit she had a point.

Claiming privacy at an unoccupied gate, Bill dialed home as promised. Watching a catering truck outside on the tarmac down below dodge about while rampers in neon vests loaded and unloaded bags from the cargo hold, he listened to the other end of the line ring over and over. An aircraft taxied out to the runway and in the distance, another took off.

He and Carrie didn't fight often. Which was why when they did they were so bad at it. She had every right to be upset. Today was Scott's Little League season opener and Bill had promised him he would be there. He made sure he didn't have a trip on his line for the day of the game and the two days before and after. But when the chief pilot calls to ask you to fly a trip as a personal favor, you don't say no. You can't say no. Bill was the third-most senior pilot flying. When he was a new hire, no one was sure the company was even going to make it. Startup airlines almost never do. But he stuck it out nonetheless. And now, nearly twenty-five years later, the airline was a total success with both passengers and shareholders. Coastal was his baby. So when your boss says the operation needs you? You say yes. No isn't even an option.

He had told Carrie as much. But he didn't tell her that Scott's game hadn't crossed his mind when O'Malley asked if he was available. Or that even if it had, it wouldn't have made a difference.

The phone rang and rang before finally, "Hi! You've reached Carrie. I can't come..." Ending the call, he saw a family photo appear on the phone's home screen before he pocketed it.

Catching a glimpse of his reflection in the window, Bill surveyed his dark, full hair. A betraying gray salted his temples. His eyes, a vibrant, deep blue.

• • •

Bill slapped the bell in the middle of the coffee table.

"Eyes. My eyes."

"Final answer? This is for the win."

"She said they're like night swimming. When you can't see the bottom. But it's exciting. So, yes. My eyes. Final answer."

Carrie's jaw dropped.

Bill leaned forward. He could smell the beer on his own breath. "I overheard you say that to a friend on the phone once. I never told you, though. I love you so much, baby." He blew Carrie a kiss.

The wives cheered, the husbands ribbed.

"All right, Carrie," the party host said. "His eyes.' Was that your answer for what your favorite part about your husband is?"

Her cheeks turned pink. With a giggle she held up a piece of paper, her answer scribbled out: His butt.

The room erupted. Bill laughed hardest of all.

• • •

He adjusted his tie. *I'm a good man*, he reminded himself without wavering. His mind flashed to the image of Carrie's look of disappointment as he walked out of the kitchen. He blinked, glancing away to follow a plane as it took off.

CHAPTER TWO

STEPPING OFF THE JET BRIDGE stairs onto the tarmac, bill squinted under his hand's attempt to shield the sun. Fall leaves and frosty mornings covered most of the country, but in Los Angeles endless summer reigned.

The walk around: the standard aircraft inspection done before every flight. Look the aircraft up and down, check for irregularities, visible signs of a compromised airframe, or any other mechanical issues. To most pilots, it was just another FAA regulation. To Bill, it was church. Placing a hand on the engine's cowling, he closed his eyes. Fingers spreading with a slow inhale and exhale, metal and flesh communed, both warm to the touch.

• • •

He would turn eighteen next month, but that day in flight school, Bill knew he'd met a more important rite of passage.

"Now, when we log a flight plan, do you know why we write 'souls on board' instead of 'people on board'?" his instructor had asked.

Bill shook his head.

"We say it that way so that if we crash," he explained, "they know exactly how many bodies they're looking for. Avoids the confusion of different titles like passengers, crew, infants. Just how many bodies, son. That's all they need to know. Oh!" He snapped his fingers. "And sometimes we carry dead bodies in the cargo hold so they need to know not to count them. So now, after you log in the souls..."

Bill couldn't sleep that night. Lying on his back, watching the ceiling fan spin, he listened to his younger brother snoring softly from across the room. Cream-colored curtains and a warm Illinois summer breeze flirted through the open window, making wavy shadows dance on the wall.

With darkness still painting the room, he dressed and slipped out of the house, riding his bike alongside the cornfields to the town's tiny airfield. Two planes sat on the tarmac; the air traffic control tower, empty and quiet, loomed in the distance. The planes were small single-engine pistons, the types of planes he was learning on. The types of planes he would outgrow, trading them in for bigger engines, greater loads, heavier aircraft. Bill leaned against the fence for a long time staring them down.

Or were they sizing him up? As the stars faded and dawn began to break with pink and orange streaks, it felt as though the questioning had turned.

Could he bear the burden of duty? Could he be the man the job demanded?

• • •

Everything looked good. Tire tread fresh, gears greasy, sensors properly positioned, no fractures, no fissures. Catching a movement from out of the corner of his eye, Bill took a few steps out from under the plane. Up in the cockpit, his copilot, Ben Miro, leaned forward with a wave, letting Bill know he'd arrived. Bill dropped his smile when the young man held his Yankees ball cap up to the window. Bill shook his head with a face of disgust. Ben kept on grinning, flashing the captain his middle finger.

Walk around completed, Bill climbed the stairs up to the jet bridge with a look back at his plane. The tail of the Airbus A320, proudly bearing the red-and-white Coastal Airways logo, filled him with pride—and then he remembered Carrie. Punching in the door's security code, he checked his phone.

No missed texts. No missed calls.

His eyes adjusted in the fluorescent lighting as the door shut behind him. Tripping over a passenger's bag, Bill apologized with a surprised chuckle while the man scowled down at him—which was impressive, considering the pilot himself was six foot four. Looking the uniform up and down as the captain stepped around him, the man returned a meager grin.

The line of passengers snaked down the jet bridge onto the plane and Bill skirted through the suitcases and strollers with an accommodating smile. At last he stepped on board with a glance toward the back of the plane through the pink-and-purple mood lighting, the hip airline's iconic nightclub atmosphere.

“I guess we’re boarding,” he said to the flight attendant standing on her tiptoes to reach into one of the carriers in her galley. Jo turned, her eyes lighting up with surprise as Bill stooped to hug the petite middle-aged woman. Her fluffy black coils tickled his cheek as a familiar vanilla scent rose up from her dark brown skin.

• • •

“It’s my signature scent,” Jo said. “Same as my mama and her mama before that. See, when a Watkins girl turns thirteen, all the women in the family gather to celebrate her. No men allowed—just the ladies. We sit in the kitchen. We talk, we cook, we just... feel the generations of female.”

It was music, the way she spoke. Bill delighted in every dragged-out vowel, hanging on to the hilly cadence and unpredictable word emphasis. He always asked about her childhood because he loved hearing her faded East Texas accent get stronger, as it always did, when she talked about her past. Bill finished his beer, indicating to the bartender they’d like another round.

“I’ll never forget Great-Grammy taking the Dr Pepper bottle out of my hand and setting it there on the kitchen counter,” Jo recalled, smiling into her wineglass like she was watching the memory play out. “Lord, that woman’s hands. She wasn’t a big woman, but those hands...”

“Anyway, she didn’t say a word, she just handed me this shiny gold box with this royal-blue bow. I knew what it was, we all did. I remember my fingers sliding that bow off so careful-like, and when I opened that box—there it was. My very own bottle of Shalimar. I smelled it. It smelled like my mama. And her mama. It smelled like what I was and who I would become.”

• • •

“I didn’t know you were on this trip,” Jo said.

“I picked it up last night. They were out of reserves so O’Malley asked me to help out.”

“Look at you on speed dial with the chief pilot,” she said, smiling all the while to the boarding guests.

“See? You understand what that means. Could you please explain it to Carrie?”