

TwinStar

A Novel

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Middle Fork Press

Preview Edition

TwinStar

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Middle Fork Press

A Note Before Chapter One

Plots fade. Characters don't.

When I pulled out a manuscript I'd written thirty years ago, I thought: not bad. Action. Momentum. A strong male protagonist at the center of everything. The kind of book that moves.

I wrote three words on a sticky note: Literary. Romantic. Thriller. Then I went back in.

The first pass was a disaster. I was still writing from the same angle — male gaze, male logic, male consequence. The women in the story were competent and credible, but they were there to react. To witness. To complete the picture around him.

I have a hard-earned lifelong insight: women are more interesting than men.

Not more sympathetic. More interesting. They read the room. They track the subtext. They carry the weight of other people's inner lives alongside their own, and they do it without announcing it. A woman in a scene is processing four things simultaneously — what is being said, what is being withheld, what it means for her, and what she's going to do about it. That is the architecture of a novel.

So I rebuilt it around them.

TwinStar is the first book in a five-book series. Each is a standalone. All are linked. And all follow GW Canyon — a man who believes he is the protagonist — through the eyes of the women who actually understand what's happening.

You may not expect to like it. That's the same skepticism that the women in GW Canyon's world carry. And that's the right place to start.

Glitch

The perception of speed changes when you're close enough to feel it. At altitude, seven hundred knots over eastern New Mexico looked serene—a patchwork of irrigated circles sliding past beneath the TwinStar's wings. But as Flight 721 dropped lower, Captain Hollis Gehrke watched that same landscape lose its definition, fields dissolving into a smear of motion that pulled at the corners of his vision.

His brain accelerated the way it had in other emergencies, trauma time sharpening the edges of everything. The cockpit's panoramic glass display flickered with status changes he didn't command—power shifts, altitude corrections, trim adjustments—like a speed-chess board playing itself. His hands gripped the yoke out of instinct, but it was as responsive as a mannequin's. The real movement, the real decisions, were happening somewhere else.

The iPad sat in his lap, mirroring the cockpit with unnerving precision. Every time he jabbed a command—autopilot mode, throttle hold, anything—the screen acknowledged it for a heartbeat... then reverted, almost smug.

“Stick, damn you,” he whispered.

The command stuck. Then fell away again.

Across the flight deck, warning indicators bloomed: starboard emergency hatch open, then forward cabin hatch ajar. Hollis tilted his head, listening for the hiss of lost pressure, the change in air density, anything. Nothing. The ghost was lying. Another script running beneath his own.

Behind the reinforced cockpit door came muffled pounding—frantic voices, fists striking metal—but those were sounds he could afford to ignore. His breath came through flared nostrils, controlled and silent. A knot seized in his left calf, a bolt of pain that shot up into his hamstring. The cramp forced him to shift just enough to break the body-lock he'd fallen into.

A brief image broke through—sunlight on a Montana riffle, a dry fly bobbing along a seam. He exhaled, steadying himself.

The ground-avoidance warning hasn't triggered. There's time.

He dropped his gaze to the iPad, ready to try again, ready to push against the invisible player on the other side of the board.

The screen went black.

—

The elliptical had forty minutes on the clock and she was twenty-two in, the kind of rhythm where the body stops negotiating and just runs. Her phone sat face-up in the cup holder — a habit, not anxiety. She glanced at it the way she glanced at everything: automatically, without urgency.

The first ping stopped her eyes.

CCS anomaly. Flight 721. She read it once, processed it, kept her cadence. The onboard monitoring architecture flagged micro-glitches the way a smoke detector flagged burnt toast. Part of the job was knowing the difference.

The second ping came before she'd finished deciding.

Resolved. System nominal.

Ninety seconds between them. Maybe less.

She looked at the two notifications on the sweat-damp screen and felt something she didn't have a name for yet — not alarm, just a small shift in the quality of her attention, the way a sound in another room will pull focus before the brain has identified what made it.

Transient. Watchdog catching up to a state change. She'd written the protocol herself.

She stopped the machine.

Stood there for a moment, heart rate still elevated, one hand on the grip, the fan coasting down to silence around her. The gym was empty except for a facilities guy running a mop along the far wall. He didn't look up. She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

She closed both notifications. Still time before the top of the hour. She moved to the kettlebells.

In the mirror she watched herself lift — the working of her own engineering, tendon and breath and timing. The TwinStar's flight architecture was cleaner than this. Triple redundancy, intelligent workarounds, every failure path mapped and

answered. She'd built a system more reliable than the body in the glass.

Her phone buzzed again. She set the weight down before she looked.

She took the stairs back to her office instead of the elevator.

She didn't know why.

Toni

Charles Hunter had been promising Toni a trip like this since she was nine.

Not this trip specifically — he hadn't known about the Alcatraz shoot until four months ago, when the agency landed the credit card campaign and his creative director said, somewhat offhandedly, that they'd be working with Cassandra Veil. Charles had set down his coffee and said nothing for a moment. Then he'd called Ming from the parking garage.

"Cass Veil. The one with the book."

"Roo and Walter?"

"That's the one."

A pause. He could hear Ming switching her phone to the other ear, already moving toward the next thing on her list. "Charles. She's almost twelve."

"And she knows every word of that book."

A pause. Longer. "Don't make it weird. I don't want to disappoint her."

"I won't make it weird."

He made it exactly weird enough. Three days in San Francisco — the shoot on Alcatraz, a suite at the Fairmont, Ghirardelli with Toni until her teeth hurt. And then Cassandra Veil, in person, crouching to Toni's eye level in the prison yard while the crew reset lights and the bay wind moved through the grass, asking her what grade she was in and what she wanted to be when she grew up. Toni had said orthopedic surgeon, just like her mother, without hesitating, and Cassandra had laughed — not performed surprise but actual delight — and said, "That is the best answer anyone has ever given me."

Dinner followed. A place in North Beach where the host seated them without ceremony but the room noticed anyway. Charles watched his daughter sit across from a woman whose face was on billboards and say, with complete composure, that she thought chapter four was the most important one. Cassandra's daughter, close to Toni's age, was back home in Sydney. Cassandra leaned forward, part mom, part sleepover confidant. "Why chapter four?" And Toni had told her. Cass bit her lip.

Charles took one photograph. Just one. Toni wasn't looking at the camera. He texted Ming. Heart emojis flooded back.

At the gate the next morning, Toni had the book open in her lap, the inscription page. Cassandra Veil had written in a looping, flowery cursive, the kind of handwriting that suggested someone who still believed penmanship meant something. More than a sentence. Charles had read it once over Toni's shoulder and not read it again. It was between them.

Toni's legs swung on the lounge seat, her finger moving along the bottom line without reading it. She already had it.

Charles stretched his legs and watched the jetway. His shoes needed resoling. Who resoles shoes anymore? He vaguely remembered his dad did. He'd been meaning to deal with that for two months. Ming would notice before he did — she always noticed — and say nothing, which was somehow worse than if she said something.

Toni looked up from the book. "Dad."

"Yeah."

"Thank you for this trip."

He looked at her — her serious dark eyes, the most beautiful inheritance from the Asian side of the family, Ming's jaw, something around the mouth that was entirely her own.

"You're easy to take places," he said.

She returned to the book. Her finger found the last line of the inscription again.

The gate agent began the boarding call. Charles folded his laptop and stood. Toni closed the book carefully — not with reverence exactly, but with the same care she gave her doll collection — and slid it into her bag.

They joined the line. Charles rested his hand briefly on her shoulder.

The jetway door opened.

Fly Fishing

A white contrail drifted across a Colorado sky so sharply it looked etched into the blue. GW Canyon lay back on his elbows above the stream, watching the line flex gently around hidden eddies. Up there, people moved at a different tempo — meetings, deadlines, days broken into blocks. Down here, time loosened its grip, slipping past at the speed of water.

Below him, sunlight angled into the current just right, turning it almost transparent. A trout held behind a rock in the seam, shifting inches left, inches right, conserving energy. Every few seconds it rose, inspected a passing meal, then settled back with a single, economical flick. GW watched the fish the way he watched markets and systems — not with impatience, but with attention.

A rod length upstream, Davey moved between stones one foot at a time, testing each placement before committing his weight. He cast again. Clean loop. Soft landing. The fly drifted into position.

The trout rose, committed this time, silver flashing as it broke the surface.

Davey's wrist twitched. The line came tight. The fish surged downstream, but Davey pinched the line, eased the tension, and guided it alongside his boot. He knelt into the current and slid the net beneath it.

"Twelve-inch brown," Davey murmured, proud but quiet, as if the fish deserved respect.

He rotated the barbless hook free and held the trout in the water for a heartbeat before releasing it. The fish vanished into the shadow of a fallen fir.

"Nice fish," GW said.

"Thanks, Dad. Told you he was a brown."

"Looked more like ten inches."

Davey grinned. "Easy twelve."

—

Watching his son fish always pulled GW in two directions at once. Davey had his mother's eyes. Jenny's smile, too, when he wasn't paying attention. That crooked lift at the corner of the mouth that had undone him the first night he noticed it across a

crowded dining table in Las Vegas.

He remembered almost nothing about the dinner itself. A product manager droning on. Margins. Timelines. What stuck was Jenny Carpenter sitting opposite him — calm in the noise, listening more than she spoke. When she did speak, it was direct, grounded.

Someone asked what AeroSoft was really about. GW launched into a familiar explanation — architecture, scalability, growth curves. Jenny waited until he finished, then tilted her head.

“That all sounds impressive,” she said. “But what problem does it solve for the people who use it?”

The table didn’t go quiet out of discomfort. It went still.

That question stayed with him.

They talked after the meeting. Again at breakfast the next morning. By the time GW flew back to Colorado, he knew — without drama, without acceleration — that this wasn’t a passing encounter.

—

The relationship unfolded across terminals and time zones. Flights to Chicago. Flights back to Denver. Conferences became excuses. With success came the luxury of shortening the distance, and GW spent freely when it came to seeing her.

Jenny fit into his life without revolving around it. She had her own work, her own sense of direction. When she moved to Colorado, it wasn’t to disappear into his shadow. She built a consulting practice, worked with nonprofits, took on projects that mattered to her.

They married quietly in Billings. No spectacle. No performance. Just family, a few friends, and the shared sense that they were choosing something durable.

When Davey was born, everything recalibrated. Jenny anchored the household without narrowing it. She listened first. Corrected second. The kind of mother who made space without surrendering authority.

They bought the small log place in Lake Creek as a weekend escape and never quite admitted permanence when it became home. The real dream was a foundation staked out one-hundred feet away. That would be permanent. GW scaled back travel

— two, maybe three trips to Boulder a week. Some evenings she'd stand at the kitchen window with a glass of wine, watching the last light leave the aspens, and GW would catch her expression — not happiness exactly, but something more durable. He never interrupted it.

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“Three for you, four for me,” GW said now, stepping down to the water's edge. “Not bad for skipping math class.”

“It was worth it,” Davey said. “Thanks for letting me come.”

They crossed the meadow toward the old red Jeep. The cooler was heavy — sandwiches, sodas, yogurt, cherry peppers.

“Maria thinks we're feeding a construction crew,” GW said.

“She must've known I was coming,” Davey said. “I'm starving.”

They ate on a poncho in the grass, comfortable with the gaps between sentences. Davey talked about an article he was writing for the school paper — game reviews, app testing, finding his own angles.

When they finished, Davey stretched out on his back, watching the contrail dissolve into thin cloud. The breeze carried the first hint of fall.

GW lay back too.

The call had come a year earlier. Jeff Lewis. Sheriff now. A boyhood friend. An accident on Highway 6. A drunk construction worker crossing the center line.

The driver lived. Jenny didn't make it to the hospital.

Rage had come first. Smoldering and unsympathetic. They'd planned a hike that day. GW had been pulled into a client fire drill. Jenny's voice smiled into the phone. She'd make other plans.

“It's okay,” she'd said. “Go do what you do. I'll be home before dinner.”

How do you tell a fourteen-year-old boy that the center of his world is gone?

The emotional scar tissue slowly thickened, but there were moments and nights when GW replayed the phone call. The meeting was routine and forgettable. Now the priorities seemed all wrong.

Davey's breathing slowed beside him, steady and untroubled. GW watched the aspens glow pale on the ridge, the Flattops rising beyond them, flat and indifferent.

It had been the hardest year of his life. The ache wasn't gone. It never would be. But lying there, listening to water and breath, it felt — just barely — like something he could learn to carry.

Pre-flight

The fish tank glowed in the half-dark, tetras and gouramis drifting between plastic reeds. Above the desk, their digital twins wandered the same slow loops across the forty-inch monitor. The apartment held no other sound but the hum of filters and the soft, rhythmic tap of keys.

The man entered a command sequence without looking down. The screensaver dissolved into a download window, progress bars filling with quiet precision. When the last line resolved, he tapped once. The virtual fish returned. Nothing visibly disturbed.

He picked up his phone.

Her profile was where he'd left it. The Costa Rica photo — Heidi Mesmer on the bow of a dive boat, mask pushed up on her forehead, the water behind her an impossible green. He'd looked at it enough times to know the bay. Playa Ocotal. He'd read about the visibility there, thirty meters on a good day. He'd thought about what it would be like to hand her a fin, to surface together in that water, to find a place for dinner afterward where the tables were outside and the beer was cold.

They'd worked together at Crescent for eight months before she'd suggested a drink. One thing led to another. She'd been warm about it — that was the word he kept returning to. Warm. There was one evening, just one. Where the dial turned to hot. The pitcher of margaritas loosened the bolts. Her place. Then back to warm. I really like you. I just think we're better as friends. He'd nodded and said he understood.

He still thought about Playa Ocotal. She just didn't know it yet.

He set the phone down and opened the small tin beside the tank. The real fish broke formation, rising in hungry spirals. He watched them feed, his attention settling on the simple certainty of their world.

Something chimed behind him. He didn't turn.

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The carp surfaced as Hollis Gehrke crossed the complex lot toward his Mustang, it glided lazy and slow, and in his mind it became a trout rising through cold Montana

water. Five more years. A log house outside Hamilton. Mornings with mist off the river instead of terminal announcements. Maybe Linda in the passenger seat. The thought surprised him enough to make him smile.

He'd learned to fly in his father's Piper Pacer, standing on the seat to see over the panel. Damp earth and avgas. The moment the wheels lifted and the ground slid away. Twenty-eight years later the feeling hadn't changed — just compressed into a smaller, more private space.

Gehrke pulled into the employee lot as the first shuttle was loading. He'd timed it well — late enough that the terminal wouldn't be frantic, early enough to walk the aircraft before the crew arrived.

Today's route was routine. San Francisco to Dallas, then Orlando. Back home Thursday. Monterey with Linda on Friday.

Inside the terminal, Gehrke checked the crew board and felt the familiar lift when he saw St. Cyr's name.

"Morning, Captain," she said when they met in the pilot lounge, already scrolling through weather data on her tablet.

"Morning, Sarah. How many times did they ask if you were cabin crew today?"

"Only twice. One apologized. That was new."

They filed the flight plan and walked the jetway together. A couple of waiting passengers glanced up — one smiled at Hollis, another hesitated, eyes moving to Sarah as if recalibrating.

Sarah leaned in slightly. "If anyone asks — I'm flying. You're just here for the charm."

Hollis smiled. "That explains a lot."

The cockpit door closed behind them. Sarah moved through her checks, already synced to the aircraft's rhythm. Hollis set his hand briefly on the console.

Flying still made sense. Even when everything else felt slightly out of trim.

Fish Lover

Diana Winston knew the drill. Pre-Clear if the line held, power port at the gate, carry-on only. Travel had stopped being interesting somewhere in her second decade of it. What remained was the craft of moving through it without friction.

She took a seat near a power port with a wide view of the waiting area, spinner parked at her knee. Reading a room was the old sales reflex, never fully switched off. You learned the floor before you worked it.

She'd read people by status once — the watch, the shoes, who carried their own bag and who waited for it to be carried. Those signals had flattened years ago. Now she read attention. Who drew it. Who'd stopped.

Two seats down, a young woman in a sundress and a Dodgers cap drew it without trying — her companion, the man at the power port, the gate agent who looked up when he didn't need to. Diana had owned a dress like that once, and the airport that came with it, twenty years and three children ago. She watched a man's glance travel toward the sundress and pass over her on the way, the way a hand moves over a coat it isn't reaching for. Fifty-four. Somewhere in the last year the looking had thinned out, and she'd been surprised to find she could use the quiet. You see a room better once it forgets to watch you.

She woke her phone and opened the brokerage app — the small daily ritual, the number that meant Chet could walk out of his classroom at sixty, that meant the camper and the cooler town and the years that were finally going to be theirs. The figure had held overnight. She let it sit for a breath, then closed it.

Across from her, a man in his mid-twenties sat with a worn camouflage backpack between his boots. Cargo pants, scuffed boots. He drew a phone from a thigh pocket and tapped with one thumb, lifting it close, narrowing the world to the screen. Something in how he held himself — too contained for a man just waiting — registered and didn't resolve. She filed it.

She opened her iPad to clear messages before boarding. A diagram from a regional manager. She pinched to zoom.

The screen hesitated — a beat too long — then went black before snapping back to life.

Odd. She'd reboot it on the plane.

When she looked up, the man with the camouflage backpack was gone.

The fish lover had parked at the far end of Row F.

Heat waves were already forming off the asphalt as he stepped through the terminal doors and scanned the lot. No one close enough to matter. He reached into the right pocket of his cargo pants and withdrew a device no larger than a garage door opener. He pressed a button.

As he walked, cars blinked and unlocked in sequence, lights winking briefly before yielding. When he reached his Oldsmobile Alero, new enough to work, old enough to be immune. He tossed the camouflage backpack onto the passenger seat and climbed in. Before starting the engine, he looked once more up the row and pressed another button. The lights flashed again. Every door relocked.

At the exit booth, he slowed just enough to appear ordinary. Instead of inserting the ticket, he raised the device and tapped it once.

The display changed to THANK YOU.

The gate arm lifted.

He smiled, briefly.

He would never steal a car. But free parking? That didn't hurt anyone.

Another Week, Another Flight

The gate agent lifted the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're ready to begin boarding Sierra West flight 721 nonstop to Dallas–Fort Worth. At this time, we invite families with small children and those needing assistance. First Class and Elevation members will follow shortly."

That was Diana's cue. She stood, slid the briefcase handle over the spinner's grip, and brought up the boarding pass on her phone. The scanner beeped. The gate agent's eyes rose and fell. "Have a nice flight, Ms. Winston."

She'd dressed for the day, not the photograph — good travel slacks, flats she could stand in through a delay, a soft blazer she could sleep in and still look like herself at the other end. At thirty she'd have done it in heels and regretted them by Denver. She'd made that trade years ago without regret. She stowed the spinner, slid into 2A, and buckled in, the belt settling over the small stubborn curve at her middle she'd stopped arguing with most mornings. She accepted a paper cup of orange juice, set it on the armrest shelf, and woke her iPad.

First class was a quarter full. She knew better than to assume it would stay that way.

Passengers funneled in, bags knocking elbows. One man appeared carrying a rack of Texas longhorns nearly five feet wide. The flight attendants intercepted him, voices low and firm, and after a negotiation the horns vanished into an already crammed closet.

"The things they let people carry on these days."

The man lowering into 2B was somewhere in his sixties, broad, pink from the concourse, a folded sports coat over his arm and a paper boarding pass in his shirt pocket. Reading glasses pushed up into thin gray hair. A wedding band worn soft. He had the leaning ease of a man who'd made his living being liked.

"Ridiculous," Diana agreed, and left it there.

She ran the math she always ran on a seatmate — the wrong one could turn ninety minutes into an endurance test — and filed him as harmless, talkative, a manageable cost. Once, a man dropping into the seat beside her had been a different kind of arithmetic; she'd done that math young and single across a hundred

terminals, and it had occasionally come out fun. This was simpler now. She preferred it.

He buckled in, tested the recline an inch, and turned his openness on her like a porch light. "Coming or going?"

"Going home." She let a beat close around it. "Fort Worth."

"Whereabouts? I'm out past Weatherford myself." He put out a wide hand. "Craig Galey."

"Diana Winston." Brief, professional.

"And what takes you to San Francisco, Diana Winston?"

"Software. A couple of days with the West Coast accounts."

"Software." He said it the way men his age said it, a frontier they'd watched from the porch. "Don't suppose I'd know it."

"D-Systems. The product's called Filex."

He laughed, delighted. "We run on Filex. Whole warehouse. My ops manager swears by it." He looked at her again, revising — not the way the concourse had failed to look at her all morning, but the way a man revises a person upward. "Well. Small world at thirty thousand feet."

"It usually is," Diana said, kindly, and turned a few degrees toward the window to let the conversation find its own shore.

Back in coach, a man and a girl of about eleven worked down the aisle, the girl holding a book against her chest the way other children held a stuffed animal. Diana watched her settle into the window seat, slide the book into the seat pocket, and press her forehead to the glass. Three of her own had been that age once — that age when a child is certain of exactly one thing in the world. The father dropped into the aisle seat and said something that made the girl smile without turning from the window.

A flight attendant asked everyone to take their seats and the safety video began. Diana gave Galey the small closing smile that ended things and turned to the window as the plane eased back from the gate.

They were fourth for departure, a United 737 idling ahead. The cockpit voice came on, calm and practiced, asking the cabin crew to take their seats.

“Sierra 721, you’re cleared for takeoff runway two-eight left. Climb to five thousand, turn heading one-four-zero. Good day.”

“Cleared for takeoff two-eight left, Sierra 721,” St. Cyr replied from the right seat.

Gehrke advanced the throttles. The engines rose into a clean whine, and the TwinStar surged forward. At one-ninety-five knots, St. Cyr called flaps and Gehrke eased back on the yoke. The aircraft lifted smoothly, climbing steeply before the cockpit filled with data demanding full attention.

Fifteen minutes later they leveled at twenty-five thousand feet and switched from departure control to Oakland Center.

“Well,” Gehrke said, “time to say hello.”

He keyed the cabin mic. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Hollis Gehrke welcoming you aboard Sierra West 721 to Dallas–Fort Worth. Flight time today is ninety minutes, and we may arrive a few minutes early with a tailwind. We’re cruising at twenty-five thousand feet, and the seatbelt sign is off. We expect a smooth ride, but keeping your belt fastened is always a good idea. Sit back and enjoy the flight.”

“Efficient,” St. Cyr said. “No geology lecture today?”

“Depends if the view cooperates.”

Diana had meant to work and slept instead, the climb-vibration pulling her under the way it had on a thousand flights. She woke as the cabin settled into meal service, that soft choreography of carts and low voices.

She connected the iPad to the onboard Wi-Fi and started triaging email. They were just past the midpoint when the screen changed on its own.

A splash video — the TwinStar soaring above cloud tops.

She hadn’t touched it.

Galey leaned over. “Did you open something?”

“No.” She tapped the screen.

Across the cabin, a teenager in row twenty-four lifted his head as the same video died on his tablet. In 29A, the woman in the Dodgers cap stopped

mid-sentence; her companion went on staring out the window.

"Some Sierra West thing," she said, not believing it, and tapped again.

The promotional video dissolved into a live cockpit display — altitude, speed, heading, all updating in real time.

Galey leaned closer. She tilted the screen so he could see.

Another tap.

"Like a flight simulator," she said.

She smiled when she said it. The unease stayed a beat longer than the smile did.

Surprise

“What the hell?” St. Cyr said sharply.

Gehrke looked over. “What?”

“My flight status display blinked. Just went dark and came back.” She frowned.

“It was fast enough I’m not even sure it happened.”

Gehrke glanced at his own panel. Everything looked normal. “Could be a momentary voltage hiccup. These displays are touchy.”

He pressed the voice-command button. “Flight status.”

There was a brief pause. The main display refreshed.

“Flight status nominal,” the system replied.

St. Cyr exhaled. “Maybe I imagined it.”

“Let’s log it mentally,” Gehrke said. “If it repeats, we dig.”

—

At Sierra West’s Flight Operations Center outside Los Angeles, the same blink registered very differently on a flight monitor’s screen.

A warning animation pulsed on a secondary monitor, flagging a brief interruption in Flight 721’s telemetry stream. The technician on duty leaned forward, scanning the trace. Interruptions weren’t uncommon—solar interference, atmospheric noise, even bird strikes could create momentary dropouts.

She ran a diagnostic, watched the signal stabilize, and saw the indicator return to five green bars.

She opened the log window and recorded the event: time, duration, resolved. NTE. Non-threatening event.

—

“This is something,” Diana murmured. “The model matches our flight plan. Down to the waypoints.”

Galey glanced up from his magazine. “How’re we doing up there, Captain?”

“Smooth. Autopilot’s flying us.” She tapped the screen, the live readout — altitude, heading, the horizon holding level. “Let’s see what manual looks like.”

She toggled the on-screen control. The aircraft gave a bump — nothing alarming, just enough to feel in the seat.

Galey chuckled. "Maybe put it back?"

She didn't answer. She was watching the display now, her finger easing left. A second later it came up through the floor and into her hips — or she thought it did. She held still. Closed her eyes for the length of a breath. Opened them.

She slid her finger right, back toward the centerline. This time there was nothing to doubt. The airplane moved when she moved her finger.

Something cold went down the backs of her arms. She set the iPad flat on the tray as if it had warmed, then picked it up again, because setting it down felt worse. Her mouth had gone dry around a thought she hadn't finished — that the cockpit was forward of her, two pilots behind that door, and the airplane was answering her instead.

She scanned the cabin. A flight attendant restocking a cart. A man asleep with his mouth open. The smell of the meal, the hum of the engines, ninety people reading and dozing inside a machine that had just done what her hand told it to. No alarm. No reaction.

Beside her, Galey had gone back to his magazine.

—

"Okay," Gehrke said carefully. "That wasn't right."

St. Cyr nodded. "I felt it."

She entered the disengage sequence. The system ignored it.

"Autopilot disengage," Gehrke said aloud.

Nothing.

St. Cyr tried again, fingers moving faster now. "Hollis, I'm locked out."

Gehrke switched to the private channel. "Flight Ops, this is Sierra 721. Are you seeing anything abnormal?"

"Negative, 721," the technician replied. "All systems nominal. Autopilot shows engaged."

"We experienced uncommanded pitch," Gehrke said. "Attempted disengage. No response."

“Stand by,” she said. “Routing you to Tech Ops.”

A new voice joined the channel. “TwinStar Tech Ops. This is Dale Foster. Try entering override sequence seven-four-six-four-six-six.”

Gehrke entered the code, reading it back as he did.

He waited.

“No change,” he said. “Still locked.”

There was a pause.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Foster said.

“We’re holding our vector,” Gehrke replied evenly. “Plenty of sky. Figure it out.”

“Copy,” Foster said. “Stand by. I’m escalating.”

Remote Control

Diana's breathing had gone shallow and quick. She pressed her lips together and pushed the air out through her nose, slow, the way she'd taught herself before walking into a room that could go either way.

She needed one thing: whether she could hold it up. Not left, not right. Up. If the plane started down, up was the only number that would matter.

She moved her finger forward from center — a small input, she thought, careful — toward the top edge.

The response was immediate.

The aircraft surged, not violently but decisively, a wave lifting under the floor. Her stomach pressed down into the seat. Too much. She'd asked too much.

The first-class cart broke loose and slammed back against the lavatory bulkhead. Dishes clattered. Behind her a woman cried out. A flight attendant went down across a passenger's lap, coffee flowering up the seatback. A cup burst against the wall.

Diana brought her finger to center and held it, both hands locked, the tablet a live wire she could not set down.

"Did you do that?" Galey had a hand braced on the seatback ahead of him, the color gone out of his face. "Diana. Did you do that?"

"Yes." Her voice came out level because she made it. "I think I'm flying the plane."

"Then put it down — turn it off —"

"No." The certainty arrived ahead of the reasoning, the way it always had. "If I let go, I don't know what it does. It might do nothing. It might do that." She didn't look at the cart. "I'm going to keep it exactly here. Ring your call button. Don't stop until the captain is standing in this aisle."

Galey rang it. Then held it down with his thumb as if it were the only job left to him in the world.

Gehrke came through the forward curtain in his jacket and cap, and the cabin's panic bent toward him the way it does toward a uniform.

He took the mic. "Ladies and gentlemen, we likely hit a patch of clear-air turbulence. We'll help anyone who needs it. Please stay seated with your belts fastened while I take a look."

He started down the aisle.

Galey's arm shot out. "Captain — here —"

"Sir, if you're not hurt, stay seated." Gehrke kept moving.

"Captain." Diana didn't raise her voice and didn't move her hands, and something in it — a woman holding dead still in a cabin full of motion — stopped him. "Don't make me let go of this to get your attention. Look at my hands. Then look at your aircraft."

He looked. Two hands flat on a tablet, a live cockpit readout glowing under her thumbs. He looked at her face. Whatever he found there brought him back two steps.

"Talk."

"I touched the controls on this screen a few minutes ago. The plane answered. I thought it was a simulation." She let that land. "It isn't. Right now I'm the reason we're level. And I've been afraid to hand it to anyone, because the handoff is the dangerous part."

Gehrke crouched into the seat beside her — Galey had already pressed himself back to make the room. The captain's eyes moved over the screen with the speed of a man matching it against twenty-eight years of instruments.

"Show me. Small."

"Watch the horizon." Diana eased one finger down a hair. The line on the screen dipped. Under them the floor tipped the same degree, and came back when she returned it.

"Oh hell," Gehrke said, very quietly.

"I'm going to give it to you," she said. "When I lift my hands, have yours ready over the same place. We don't want a gap."

He set his hands above hers. "On you."

"Now." She drew her fingers off the glass; his came down in the same motion. The readout never jumped. The handoff held.

Her hands started shaking the instant they were empty — now that shaking was allowed.

Gehrke exhaled and stood, the tablet flat in both palms, careful as a man carrying water.

“Stay in that seat,” he told her. “Both of you. You did right.”

He went forward.

—

Back in his seat, Gehrke repeated tapping several virtual switches on the controller display.

St. Cyr was on with Albuquerque Center and Ops. The autopilot indicator glowed steadily, insisting everything was fine.

“So,” St. Cyr said. “What did you find?”

Gehrke raised a hand, keyed the mic. “Ops, this is Captain Gehrke. Minor cabin damage. But we have a larger issue.”

Silence. He tried again. Nothing. St. Cyr switched frequencies. Still no response. They sat, watching the mountains below slide past the cockpit windows into the flatlands beyond.

Gehrke slid his finger right on the iPad.

The aircraft answered immediately, banking a few degrees.

“This thing flies the plane,” Gehrke said.

St. Cyr worked the cockpit displays, hands moving fast, controlled. Nothing responded. Every system insisted it was operating normally.

Gehrke adjusted the virtual throttle with millimeter movements, testing cause and effect. Each change registered through the airframe. His shoulder burned from the tension of holding still.

A red icon flashed.

“Battery,” he said.

Ten percent.

St. Cyr was already reaching into her bag. “I’ve got a cable.”

She plugged it in. No change.

“Try another.”

Passengers had plenty. St. Cyr returned with two more cables. Different ports. Same result.

Seven percent.

Gehrke didn't look away from the screen. "Maybe at zero we get control back."

St. Cyr nodded. "Fucking hope so."

They scanned below. Eastern New Mexico flattened out into long, empty stretches. US 60 cut a clean line toward Clovis.

"No turns," Gehrke said. "We take what's ahead."

Belly landing. No gear. Minimal control. It was ugly but survivable — if timed perfectly.

Four percent.

They talked fast and efficiently, with no wasted words. Delay the announcement. Avoid panic.

Two percent.

Gehrke summoned the lead flight attendant. She stepped into the cockpit as the screen dimmed.

The iPad went black.

The engines spooled down.

The cockpit lights died.

You have been reading a preview of

TwinStar

*TwinStar is a standalone novel
and the first charm in the GW Canyon Series.
No prior book required.*

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