

FROM

The Falling Woman

BY RICHARD FARRELL

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PANEL
INVESTIGATING POINTER AIRLINES FLIGHT 795
(FIRST SESSION):

“**C**ould you state your name for the record?”

“My name is Charles Radford.”

“And your involvement with the investigation of Pointer 795?”

“I was an investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board.”

“In fact, sir, you were the lead investigator for the survival factors working group. Isn’t that correct?”

How many times, he thinks, do I need to answer that question this week?

He reaches for the glass of water in front of him and glances down at his notes. Sixteen congressmen stare back at him from the stage. Behind them, pages, interns, and lackeys tussle with papers and phones. For the third day in a row, Radford has crossed the National Mall, checked his reports, sworn the oath, and sat stock-still in uncomfortable chairs waiting to testify. Three days of note scribbling, of listening to others, sidebars with attorneys, frantic calls home, and second-guessing. The entire Go Team—including Lucy Masterson, Shep Ellsworth, even Ulrich and the director herself, Carol Wilson—have gone before him. Now it is his turn. At his back, cameras record every move, every word.

“Need we remind you that almost twelve months ago, a commercial airliner exploded over southwestern Kansas? Need we remind you that 123 people died, or at least that was the initial assumption from your agency? Need we remind you that this country has waited for a definitive answer?”

Terrorism, a bomb, a missile, a meteor, a short circuit in the plane's wiring, a lightning strike?"

"No," Radford says. "I'm well aware of what happened to Pointer 795. I've spent countless hours sifting through debris fields, maintenance records, and logbooks. I've waded into ponds to extract bodies. I've interviewed orphans and widows. I'd say I'm well acquainted."

"But you have no answers."

"I don't deal in answers," Radford says. "My job was to ask the right questions."

"For the record, sir, how many aircraft accidents have you investigated in your career?"

Radford shrugs. He knows the number but refuses to make this any easier.

"Would you classify the investigation of Pointer 795 as standard, as routine?"

"In the beginning," he says, "there was only havoc, devastation, and raw loss. Any solution seemed impossible. I needed to figure out which questions to ask."

"So, is that a yes, sir?"

"Events gathered in reverse," he says. "A chain of a thousand invisible mistakes had to be pumped back through time. Complex decisions teased apart, examined, challenged, abandoned, and reexamined. A forgotten switch closed. A valve not pressurized. A checklist item skipped. It's always about asking the right questions."

He knows he is rambling. Is he losing his grip on reality? He reaches again for the water and tries to organize his thoughts. So many others have sat here before him, men and women in positions of great power as well as the meek like him. Even this conference room, located in the bowels of the Rayburn House Office Building, imposes its will, with its bone-white ceiling, its sticky chairs and sweating pitchers of water. On the wall is a framed painting of the Great Seal of the United States. The American eagle—wings outstretched, talons clutching thirteen arrows in the left, an olive branch in the right—stares down at him along with the congressmen.

"Mr. Radford, what we're concerned about is where the investigation deviated from protocol. Why were you reassigned?"

“Sequences accrued,” he says.

He knows they have no right to be doing this, no reason to challenge his expertise. He knows he has done nothing wrong. He simply followed the evidence. About the rest, about the way the rest unfolded, about that he has no regrets. The contradictions, the impossible contradictions of this investigation, these were not his fault.

“Sir, the investigation quickly went off track. Why did this happen?”

“The job demands you filter out assumptions,” he says. “You gather the millions of scattered pieces and reassemble fragments into questions. If you ask the right questions, the rest will follow. To get from chaos to order, you have to trust cause and effect. This is how the work begins. Hours and days and weeks pass. Some pieces lost forever. The wreckage must be rebuilt, one rivet at a time.”

He pauses and looks up at the eagle on the wall.

“Three babies were aboard that flight,” he says. “Each body deserved a name, a next of kin to grieve it. That was my primary responsibility.”

“Let’s concentrate on the bodies. How many had you identified before you were reassigned?”

Why does he still hate uncertainty? Why is it still so hard to talk about? These congressmen don’t understand his work.

“The short history of human aviation,” he says, “is barely more than a century old. Flying used to be incredibly dangerous.”

“Mr. Radford, we’d like to stay on track.”

“You demand answers,” he says. “You expect nothing to ever go wrong. But your need for certainty is an illusion. You take it for granted because you fail to see the miracles anymore.”

He’s trying to explain why the sky is inside him. If they mined down into his soul, they would find wings. The sky runs through him, into places of himself he still hasn’t mapped. A calling, perhaps, the way a priest is called, or like the passion of great lovers. Since the winter day when two brothers from Ohio closed their bicycle shop and fashioned together a rickety kite frame made from spruce wood and Roebling wire rope, thousands of others have been likewise called, and followed a path into the air. A coin flip and a steady Atlantic breeze changed history. What followed was more than just another invention. The airplane expanded human imagination, took us into

places that we'd only dreamed about since we first stood erect and told stories. Radford has been more faithful to the sky than to anyone or anything he's ever loved. He has never doubted this love, not once, not since he was ten years old. But what has he been chasing all these years? For the first time in his life, he's not sure.

"Sir, refusal to answer this committee is serious violation of federal law."

"What a crock of shit."

"What was that, sir?"

"Do any of you," Radford says, "understand the first thing about flying?"

"You're walking a fine line here."

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't ask for any of this."

"Do you need a moment to gather yourself, Mr. Radford? We need a full accounting of the events."

Radford reaches yet again for his water, but the glass is empty.

"We need you to take us back to that day, sir. To the events that followed. A year has passed since Pointer 795 exploded. Why have millions of taxpayer dollars been spent on an investigation that has gone nowhere? Don't we deserve answers? Mr. Radford. Don't we deserve the truth?"

"You're asking the wrong questions," he says.

"What questions should we be asking?"

"My father was a stonemason," he says. "In many ways, that has been my work too. I reassemble fragments. I work brick by brick. Process is all that matters. I worry only about where the next brick will go. That's how you get to the end."

"What happened with Pointer 795? Why did the plane explode over Kansas? How did this investigation go so wrong?"

"I had obligations," he says. "I had a responsibility to follow the evidence, wherever it took me."

"And where did it take you, sir?"

"The hardest part is letting go of what you've been taught."

"Mr. Radford, what about the Falling Woman?"

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