Dead Drop

A Short Story by Colin Sharp

The tray table locked into place with a satisfying click. Elias Ward pressed it once more to confirm the latch had caught. Around him, the cabin of Flight 447 hummed with the white noise of pressurized air and distant turbines. Cruising altitude. Stable. Ordinary.

Except the courier had not passed him yet.

Ward checked his watch without moving his wrist from his lap. Three minutes past the window. The galley curtain at the front of Economy Class remained drawn. No movement. No crew rotation. The handoff was supposed to happen during a beverage service, masked by the controlled chaos of carts and requests. A micro-SD card palmed during a napkin exchange. Ten seconds, maximum exposure. Clean.

But the service had not started.

Ward counted his breaths. Four in, six out. He did not turn his head. Turning drew attention. Instead, he tracked the cabin through peripheral vision and reflected motion in the darkened window beside him. Row arrangements. Passenger types. Exit routes. He had memorized the layout during boarding, but memory required updates. People moved. Contexts shifted.

A call button chimed. Row 22.

Ward felt the change immediately. Not in sound—the cabin had absorbed worse disruptions—but in posture. Three passengers in the rows ahead straightened. A woman across the aisle leaned forward. Human bodies calibrated threat instinctively. Something was wrong in 22.

A flight attendant moved past Ward's row, her pace controlled but purposeful. She disappeared behind him. Another followed. Then a third.

Ward recalculated. Medical emergency. Unplanned. The turbulence forecast for this sector would have provided the necessary distraction, but weather models were probability maps, not guarantees. The plane flew smooth. The handoff required disruption. Without it, the exchange became visible.

The cockpit notification came next. Ward heard the tone through the cabin intercom—two short pulses, not broadcast but audible in the silence between passenger conversations. Protocol for crew communication. The pilot would be informed. Decisions would cascade.

Ward adjusted his assessment. The courier, Mara Ionescu, had been rotated onto this flight specifically for the exchange. Twelve years of operational history. Flawless record. She understood timing, pressure, and consequence. If she had not initiated contact, it meant one of three things: she had been compromised, the asset had been pulled, or the operational parameters had changed mid-flight.

All three scenarios required immediate containment.

Ward stood. Movement now served a purpose—situational awareness disguised as passenger concern. He walked toward the rear lavatory, passing row 22. A man in a business shirt lay reclined, eyes closed, skin pale. The flight attendants had positioned him for better airflow. One held an oxygen bottle. Another spoke into a handset, requesting medical assistance from passengers.

Ward continued walking. In the galley, he found what he expected: no Mara. The crew member staffing the rear station was younger, unfamiliar. She offered a polite smile.

"Can I help you?"

"Restroom," Ward said.

She gestured. He entered, locked the door, and stood in the narrow space without using the facilities. Instead, he listened. Voices carried through the thin walls. Fragments of coordination. The patient was stable but unresponsive. The captain had been notified. A diversion was under discussion.

Ward exited after sixty seconds. Long enough to justify the trip. Short enough to avoid suspicion. He returned to his seat and resumed the posture of an indifferent traveler. His mind, however, had already shifted operational modes.

The exchange had failed. The package remained unaccounted for. The plane was now a closed system containing an unknown asset and a compromised courier.

If this landed at an uncontrolled airport, local authorities would board. Questions would multiply. Passengers would scatter. The micro-SD could disappear into jurisdictional chaos, replicated and disseminated before any countermeasure could deploy.

Ward could not allow that.

He pulled a notebook from his seat pocket—passenger affectation, useful cover—and sketched the cabin layout from memory. Rows, aisles, galleys, lavatories. He marked the medical emergency zone and traced probable movement patterns. Where would an opposing asset position themselves? Close enough to monitor crew activity. Far enough to avoid association. Access to carry-on storage. Preferably an aisle seat for mobility.

He began watching reactions.

Most passengers had returned to their screens or books, the initial alarm fading into resigned waiting. A few still craned their necks toward row 22, performing the theatre of concern. Ward ignored them. Genuine anxiety looked different than curiosity.

One man, however, did neither.

Passenger 17C sat three rows ahead and across the aisle. Mid-forties, European cut suit, no visible electronics. His posture was relaxed but centered. He had not turned toward the medical incident. Instead, his gaze tracked the aisle behind the responding crew members. He watched the space, not the event.

Ward noted him. Filed the observation. Continued scanning.

The captain's voice came over the intercom. Calm. Professional. They would be diverting to a regional airport due to the medical situation. Estimated landing in thirty-five minutes. Ground services would meet the aircraft.

Ward felt the cabin tilt as the plane began its descent.

Thirty-five minutes. The window was collapsing.

Turbulence hit twelve minutes later, sudden and uneven. The seatbelt sign had already illuminated, but the jolt still caught passengers mid-adjustment. Cups rattled. Overhead bins creaked. A woman two rows back gasped.

Ward watched 17C.

The man had shifted his weight three seconds before the turbulence arrived. A micro-adjustment, barely perceptible. His spine had compressed slightly, core engaged. Then the plane dropped, and he rode the motion without reaction.

Training.

Pilots felt turbulence through controls and instruments before passengers experienced it. But 17C was not in the cockpit. He had anticipated the disruption through some other input. Observation of crew behavior, perhaps. Or prior knowledge of the flight path. Either explanation suggested operational awareness.

Ward added a probability marker to his mental assessment. 17C moved from possible to likely.

But likely was not sufficient. Ward needed confirmation before acting. A false positive in this context meant either exposing himself unnecessarily or creating collateral damage that would draw more scrutiny than the original problem. Precision mattered.

He needed a controlled test.

Another call button chimed. Different row. A passenger needed assistance with an overhead bin that had come loose during the turbulence. Flight attendants were still clustered around 22, managing the medical situation. One broke away to handle the new issue.

Ward stood again. He moved toward the front lavatory, timing his approach to intersect with 17C's sightline. As he passed the man's row, he made brief eye contact—casual, the kind of involuntary glance strangers exchanged in confined spaces.

17C's gaze held for half a second longer than social protocol required. Then he looked away, toward the window.

A tell. Not definitive, but suggestive. People trained in counter-surveillance learned to manage eye contact duration. Too little suggested avoidance. Too much suggested aggression. The optimal range was narrow, and Ward had just measured 17C's response.

He continued to the lavatory. The occupied sign was lit. Ward stood in the narrow queue area, waiting. Another passenger approached from behind—a woman in her fifties, visibly anxious. Ward stepped aside to let her take position. As he did, he glanced back down the cabin.

17C had shifted in his seat. Not turned, but angled. Ward could see the man's reflection in the window. He was watching the aisle. Watching Ward.

Confirmation.

Ward returned to his seat. Twenty-three minutes to landing. The medical patient in 22 had stabilized, according to the crew announcements. A passenger physician had assisted. The diversion would proceed as planned.

Ward recalculated his options. On the ground, the plane would become an open system. Emergency services would board. Police would establish a perimeter. Passengers would disembark under supervision, but coordination between airport authorities and intelligence services required time, communication, and jurisdiction alignment. None of those resources were available at a regional airport on emergency protocols.

17C would use the chaos to his advantage. Position himself as a helpful bystander. Cooperate with authorities. Accept escort through security. Once inside a controlled space, he could leverage credentials, make calls, or simply disappear into passenger flow. The micro-SD would move with him.

Ward had no weapon. No badge. No authority that would survive scrutiny. Any overt action would create exactly the exposure the operation was designed to avoid.

He needed to force an error. Make 17C reveal himself before the authorities had time to establish their procedures.

The plane touched down with a controlled firmness that suggested the captain had practiced this approach many times. Fire trucks flanked the runway, their lights cutting through the early evening grey. The aircraft taxied to a remote stand, away from the main terminal. Standard procedure for medical emergencies.

Ward remained seated as the plane came to a full stop. Around him, passengers stirred but did not rise. The seatbelt sign stayed illuminated. The lead flight attendant made an announcement requesting everyone remain in their seats while medical personnel boarded.

Ward watched 17C.

The man had not moved. His posture suggested patience. He had folded his hands in his lap, the image of a cooperative passenger. But his eyes tracked the forward door, measuring the boarding process.

Paramedics entered first. Two of them, efficient and calm. They moved directly to row 22 with a gurney. The passenger physician—a woman in her forties wearing a Stanford Medical sweatshirt—conferred with them quietly. Ward caught fragments. Vitals. Onset. History. The language of emergency medicine, delivered with competence.

Behind the paramedics came airport police. Two officers, local jurisdiction. They spoke with the captain briefly, then positioned themselves near the exits. Standard oversight. They were not here to investigate. They were here to manage the process.

That was the problem.

Process assumed normalcy. It assumed passengers were who they claimed to be. It assumed no one aboard had an agenda beyond their declared destination. Airport police were trained for smuggling, intoxication, and aggression. They were not trained for counterintelligence.

Ward needed to change the frame.

He stood, carefully. A flight attendant immediately gestured for him to sit. He complied, but spoke loud enough for the nearby police officer to hear.

"I think someone opened my overhead bin during the turbulence. Some of my things are missing."

The officer looked over. Annoyance flashed across his face, quickly suppressed. This was not his priority. But protocol required response.

"Sir, please wait until—"

"I had prescription medication in there," Ward continued. His tone carried just enough edge to suggest anxiety without hysteria. "I need it. For a condition."

The officer sighed. He approached. "What row, sir?"

"Sixteen."

Ward had chosen the number deliberately. Far enough from 22 to avoid interference with the medical situation. Close enough to 17C to force the man into the officer's attention span.

The officer moved to row 16. Ward followed, despite the flight attendant's protest. He opened the bin. Surveyed the contents. Pointed to a small black bag.

"That's not where I left it."

The officer's patience was thinning. "Sir, bags shift during turbulence. If nothing is missing—"

"I need to check."

Ward reached for the bag. As he did, he stumbled slightly, catching himself on the seat back. The motion was clumsy but plausible. It also brought him directly into 17C's row.

"Excuse me," Ward said.

17C looked up. Neutral expression. Polite.

"No problem," the man said. His accent was flawless. Mid-Atlantic English, the kind produced by international schooling or diplomatic postings. Generic. Untraceable.

Ward met his eyes for a beat longer than necessary. Then he returned his attention to the bag, making a show of checking its contents. He zipped it closed.

"I'm sorry," he said to the officer. "I think I was mistaken. Everything's here."

The officer's expression darkened. "Then sit down. Now."

Ward complied. But the exchange had served its purpose. He had established himself as a problem passenger in the officer's mind. A neurotic, anxious traveler who created unnecessary complications. When Ward acted again, the officer's first instinct would be dismissal, not suspicion.

And more importantly, 17C had heard the interaction. He had seen Ward fumble with his bag, heard him apologize. The impression was weakness, not threat.

That impression would matter in the next phase.

The medical team removed the patient on the gurney. Dr. Kline, the physician who had assisted, followed them out to provide continuity of care. The captain made another announcement. Passengers could now disembark, but airport police would be conducting brief security checks as a precaution.

Ward understood what that meant. Passport scans. Carry-on inspections. The appearance of thoroughness without actual investigation. The police were checking boxes, not hunting threats.

17C would pass through cleanly.

Passengers began gathering their belongings. The cabin filled with the sounds of zippers and rustling fabric. Ward remained seated. He needed to see 17C's exit strategy before he committed to his own.

The man stood, retrieved a small leather messenger bag from the overhead bin, and moved toward the front exit. He waited his turn patiently. When he reached the door, he nodded to the flight attendants, thanked them for their professionalism during the emergency, and stepped onto the jetway.

Ward counted to ten. Then he stood.

The airport was small. Single terminal, limited gates. The jetway led directly into a holding area where passengers would queue for the security check. Ward could see the space through the windows as he descended. Temporary barriers had been set up. One officer scanned documents while another directed people toward ground transportation.

17C was third in line.

Ward joined the queue farther back, behind a family with young children. He watched the inspection process. Cursory. Efficient. Designed to reassure, not interrogate.

17C reached the checkpoint. He presented a passport. The officer scanned it, glanced at the screen, nodded. Asked a single question—destination?—and received an answer that satisfied protocol. The man was waved through.

Ward felt the operational window collapse further.

Once 17C cleared the checkpoint, he would enter unsecured areas. Make calls. Coordinate extraction. The micro-SD would activate its journey through intelligence networks Ward could not access or track. Years of work would dissipate into encrypted channels and cutout protocols.

He had perhaps ninety seconds.

Ward stepped out of line. Moved laterally, toward the restroom corridor adjacent to the checkpoint. A flight attendant called after him—sir, you need to wait—but he ignored her. He walked with purpose, the gait of someone responding to physical urgency.

The restroom hallway was empty. Service doors lined one side. Storage. Maintenance. Airport infrastructure. Ward tried the first handle. Locked. The second opened.

Inside was a utility closet. Cleaning supplies, mops, industrial chemicals. Nothing useful as a weapon, but weapons were not the solution here. Ward needed leverage, not violence.

He scanned the labels on the chemical bottles. Found what he needed. Grabbed two, poured a small amount of each into a trash bin, and waited.

The combination produced a sharp, astringent smell. Not dangerous in this concentration, but alarming. Institutional memory would interpret it as a hazard. Protocols would activate.

Ward stepped into the hallway holding the bin. Walked toward the checkpoint officer.

"Excuse me," he said, voice tight. "I think something's leaking in the restroom. Smells like ammonia. Strong."

The officer looked up, annoyed. Then the smell registered. His expression shifted.

"Where?"

Ward pointed. "Back there. I didn't touch anything."

The officer hesitated. Then he spoke into his radio. Requested a supervisor. Mentioned possible chemical exposure. Within thirty seconds, two more personnel arrived. They moved toward the restroom, discussing containment.

The checkpoint stalled. Passengers were redirected away from the affected corridor. Temporary confusion rippled through the holding area. People looked around, uncertain. Some moved toward alternative exits. Others waited for instruction.

17C had stopped. He stood near the exit doorway, watching the disruption. Calculating. His hand rested on the strap of his messenger bag.

Ward moved through the crowd, angling closer. He let the family with children buffer him from direct sightlines. When he reached a position two meters from 17C, he stopped.

"Terrible timing," Ward said, addressing no one in particular. "Probably just a cleaning spill."

17C glanced at him. Recognition flickered. The neurotic passenger from the plane.

"These things happen," 17C said. Polite. Dismissive.

Ward smiled. "You're probably right. Still, it makes you wonder what they store back there. I used to work in facility management. Some of those chemicals, you mix them wrong, it gets ugly fast."

The man's expression did not change. But his posture did. Minimal adjustment, barely visible. Weight shifted forward. Escape mathematics.

Ward continued. "Like the stuff they use for deicing fluid. Toxic if it concentrates. Or the solvents for hydraulic lines. One time, we had a storage leak at a regional hub. The whole wing had to evacuate. Turned out to be nothing, but procedures are procedures."

17C nodded slowly. "Procedures," he agreed.

Ward met his eyes. "Funny thing about procedures. They assume everyone follows them. But sometimes, people improvise."

The man went still.

Ward kept his tone conversational. "Like when a courier gets pulled from a flight rotation. Standard procedure says you abort. But someone improvised. Decided the operation could still run. Used the diversion as cover."

17C's hand tightened on the bag strap.

Ward spoke quietly now. "The micro-SD is in your bag. You copied it during the medical emergency, while crew attention was focused on row 22. You planned to extract through airport police, knowing they would not search a cooperative passenger. Clean exit. No exposure."

The man said nothing.

"But you made one mistake," Ward continued. "You assumed Mara was the only risk. You didn't account for handlers in the field."

17C's jaw tensed. "You're making interesting assumptions."

"Not assumptions. Observations. You watched aisles, not emergencies. You anticipated turbulence before it arrived. You tracked responders instead of patients. And when I stumbled near you, you didn't react like a civilian. You assessed."

"So did you," 17C said.

Ward nodded. "So now we have a problem. This airport is small. Security is light. You can walk out of here in five minutes. But I know what you're carrying. And I know where it goes if you leave."

"Then stop me."

Ward smiled. "Can't. No authority. No weapon. Any confrontation draws attention we both want to avoid. You know this. That's why you're still talking instead of running."

17C considered. Then he spoke, voice low. "Mara was dead before the flight took off. You were the contingency. They wanted to see how fast you adapted."

Ward felt the information land. Processed it. Continued. "Then this was never about the exchange."

"No. It was about confirmation. We needed to verify field response protocols. You just provided three hours of observable data."

"Meaning the SD is already compromised."

"Duplicated. Disseminated. Done."

Ward absorbed that. Recalculated. "Then you have no reason to leave."

17C laughed quietly. "That's where you're wrong. I have every reason. Because now you're a known quantity. Documented. Compromised. And the next operation will account for you."

The checkpoint was reorganizing. An announcement directed passengers to a secondary exit. The crowd began moving. 17C shifted with them.

Ward matched his pace. "If you walk out, I file a report. Your cover burns. Your network gets exposed."

"If I stay, same result," 17C said. "Plus I lose mobility. No. The math favors departure."

They were approaching the exit corridor now. Ground transportation visible through the glass. Ward could see taxis, shuttles. Freedom of movement.

He had one option left. High risk. High collateral. But the alternative was total loss.

Ward reached out and gripped 17C's arm. Not hard. Just enough pressure to register.

"Let go," the man said.

Ward did not. Instead, he raised his voice slightly. "Sir, I think you need medical attention. You look pale."

17C pulled back. "I'm fine."

Ward held on. Louder now. "No, really. You should sit down."

An airport employee approached. "Is there a problem?"

"He's not well," Ward said. "I think he needs help."

17C tried to disengage. Ward did not release. The employee called for assistance.

Within seconds, two security officers arrived. They separated the men. Asked questions. Ward played a concerned citizen. 17C played the confused passenger. But the disruption had served its purpose. They were both contained now. Visible. Documented.

A supervisor approached. Older. More experienced. She assessed the situation with tired eyes.

"Gentlemen, let's sort this out calmly. Sir," she addressed 17C, "do you need medical assistance?"

"No," 17C said. "This man is confused. I don't know him."

"He was on the flight," Ward said. "He looked disoriented after we landed. I was worried."

The supervisor sighed. "Sir, were you feeling ill on the plane?"

17C hesitated. Saying yes would trigger medical protocols. Saying no would contradict Ward's narrative. Either answer locked him into procedures.

He chose the tactical option. "I'm fine. There was a medical emergency earlier. Maybe he's projecting."

The supervisor looked at Ward. "Sir, are you a physician?"

"No, but—"

"Then please allow trained personnel to make medical assessments. Both of you, I need to see identification. Standard protocol after an incident."

They complied. Ward handed over his passport. 17C did the same. The supervisor scanned both, entered information into her tablet. The process bought time. Minutes. Enough for Ward to pivot.

"I apologize," Ward said. "I think I overreacted. Stressful flight."

The supervisor nodded. "Understandable. You're both cleared to go. Please proceed to ground transportation."

But Ward had already achieved his objective. The interaction was logged. 17C's identity was documented. His departure time was recorded. And most importantly, Dr. Kline had reentered the terminal behind them. Ward could see her approaching the checkpoint with her medical bag.

"Dr. Kline," Ward called.

She looked over, surprised to hear her name.

"I'm glad you're still here," Ward said. "This gentleman may need a quick evaluation. He was near the medical incident earlier. Might have been exposed to something."

Kline frowned. Approached. Professional instinct overriding confusion. "What symptoms?"

"None," 17C said firmly. "I'm perfectly—"

"Disorientation. Pale skin. Rapid breathing." Ward was inventing now, but plausibly. "Could be stress. Could be oxygen deprivation during the emergency response."

Kline looked at 17C with clinical assessment. "Sir, if you were exposed to low oxygen levels—"

"I wasn't."

"Humor me. Thirty seconds." She reached for his wrist. Pulse check.

17C pulled back. The motion was too sharp. Too trained. Kline noticed.

"Sir, I'm a physician. I'm just checking your vital signs."

The supervisor intervened. "Sir, please cooperate. It's a reasonable precaution."

17C was boxed. Refusing medical evaluation now would raise suspicion. He extended his wrist.

Kline checked his pulse. Counted silently. Then she frowned. "Your heart rate is elevated. Significantly. Are you sure you're not feeling any chest pain? Shortness of breath?"

"I'm fine."

"Your pupils are dilated," Kline continued. "And you're perspiring. Sir, I really think we should get you checked properly. The airport has a medical facility."

The supervisor nodded. "That's a good idea. Sir, let's have you sit down. I'll call for an evaluation team."

17C looked at Ward. The calculation was visible in his eyes. He understood what was happening. Ward had engineered a medical containment. No violence. No confrontation. Just procedure layered on procedure until movement became impossible.

"This is unnecessary," 17C said.

"Maybe," Ward replied. "But better safe than sorry."

The airport medical team took forty-five minutes to complete their evaluation. 17C underwent standard tests—blood pressure, oxygen levels, neurological response. All normal, as expected. But the process consumed time. Required forms. Created records.

By the time he was cleared, the terminal had transitioned into evening operations. Ground transportation had thinned. Police presence had reduced. The security checkpoint had returned to normal staffing.

Ward waited in the main concourse, watching. He had maintained distance after the initial intervention, allowing procedures to unfold without his visible involvement. Dr. Kline had completed her testimony and departed for her connecting flight. The airport supervisor had filed her incident report and moved on to other duties.

17C emerged from the medical facility alone. He carried his bag. Scanned the terminal. Spotted Ward.

The man walked over. Stopped at a respectful distance.

"Clever," 17C said.

Ward said nothing.

"Medical containment. No aggression. No exposure. Just civilian concern and institutional procedure. That takes patience."

"You taught me that," Ward said. "Twelve years ago. When you ran training scenarios in Prague. You were using a different name then."

Viktor Hale's expression did not change. But his posture acknowledged the recognition.

"Elias," he said quietly. "I wondered if you would remember."

"The operation's burned," Ward said. "Your cover held for the police, but my report goes to different channels. You know that."

"I do."

"Then why are you still here?"

Viktor smiled. "Because I'm not leaving. The micro-SD was bait. Mara's death was real, but the intelligence was always controlled. We needed to test response times, decision matrices, and operational ethics. Specifically, yours."

Ward absorbed that. "This was an evaluation."

"Yes. And you performed exactly as predicted. Methodical. Non-violent. Contained. You prioritized operational security over personal risk. You engineered solutions instead of confrontations."

"That's not a compliment."

"No," Viktor agreed. "It's a file update. Because next time, we'll know exactly how you think. What constraints you accept. What lines you won't cross. And that information is worth more than any data payload."

Ward felt the weight of the admission. "You burned yourself to profile me."

"I burned a legend I'd already retired. Small price. Your response patterns, however, are current intelligence."

They stood in silence for a moment. Terminal sounds washed around them. Announcements. Rolling luggage. The ambient noise of transit.

"So now what?" Ward asked.

Viktor adjusted his bag strap. "Now I leave. You file your report. We both move forward. The game continues."

"And Mara?"

"Died in a car accident three days ago. Unrelated to intelligence work. Tragic. Documented. Her family received death benefits."

Ward processed that. Felt the edges of the operation clarify. "You used her death as operational cover."

"Opportunity," Viktor corrected. "Waste not."

He turned to leave. Then paused. Looked back.

"One more thing, Elias. Dr. Kline. The physician who helped today. She's exactly the kind of civilian you'll sacrifice when the choice becomes binary. Remember that. Because the next evaluation might not let you avoid that decision."

Ward said nothing.

Viktor walked away. Passed through security. Disappeared into the evening crowd.

Ward remained in the terminal. Watched the departure board cycle through destinations. Felt the operation settle into memory. Mara was dead. The intelligence was compromised before he'd ever boarded. The entire flight had been theatre. A test. A measurement of how he responded when procedures failed and constraints multiplied.

He had passed. Or failed. The distinction felt irrelevant.

At cruising altitude, every decision felt abstract. On the ground, they left marks.

Ward pulled out his phone. Opened an encrypted app. Began typing his after-action report. Names. Times. Observations. The data would flow up channels he did not control, be analyzed by people he would never meet, and inform operations he would never hear about.

Dr. Hannah Kline would return to Stanford. Resume her shifts. Save lives. Never knowing she had been a variable in someone else's equation.

The patient from row 22 would recover. Be discharged. Return home to family and routine. His medical emergency had been real. His role in the operation had been coincidental. But coincidence was just another word for exploitable circumstance.

And Ward would board another flight. Accept another assignment. Carry another set of constraints into another closed system where the only certainty was that procedures would fail and decisions would matter and someone, somewhere, would measure the outcome against predicted behavior.

The intelligence war continued. Unchanged. The only measurable difference was that Viktor Hale had confirmed what both men already knew: Ward would prioritize containment over confrontation, procedure over improvisation, and operational security over personal connection.

Every single time.

Until the day that choice became impossible, and the evaluation measured what happened when it did.

Ward finished his report. Hit send. Watched the encrypted file compress and transmit into networks beyond his access.

Then he walked to the departure gate for his rebooked flight. Found a seat near the window. Watched aircraft taxi and takeoff and disappear into the dark.

At 38,000 feet, everything looked small. Manageable. Abstract.

But here, on the ground, the weight remained. The marks stayed visible. And Ward knew he would carry them forward into whatever came next, because that was the only way the game allowed him to play.

The only way he knew how to survive.