

FULL BURN
SOFT LANDING
Michael Nicholas



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Don't even think about it passing this around.

Thanks.

To the four who fuel me: Kathy, Corinne, Thomas, and Chloe

The old freighter left the stars behind and began its fiery descent.

Shaking and rattling and glowing an angry red, it matched the mood of its pilot. She was in a communication blackout for the next minute or so, the ship simply dropping speed and altitude until it slowed enough to not burn the air around it. She simmered in her chair, drumming her fingers while the ship flared around her, blazing a trail across the sky.

She wasn't the waiting type. Patience wasn't a sequence in her DNA, but there was nothing to do. She once likened this moment to being buried alive, her ship the coffin, and the fires of hell swirling outside the windows.

She hadn't been gone more than two weeks and her good-for-nothing movie star sister moves in? At this stage of the game? Lucy and Jon were so old they were nearly dead, why would Violet make a move on Jon now, after all these years? After all these DECADES?

Sure, Violet was younger (by more than one of those decades) and a star (to a lot of sci fi convention fans, anyway) and had more money (Jon and I did well enough! Three kids through college and weddings and our property, everything paid off! Enough is as good as a feast, right?), but Jon wouldn't be looking. Certainly not at Violet. She was even more of a pain in the ass than Lucy, and that's saying a lot.

But maybe that's why he'd be looking. Before it's too late. Wasn't he always saying, "How much time do you think you have, Lucy?"

But that's what he said to Lucy when he wanted her to quit working, or at least back off a bit on the workload.

“There are other pilots, other ships, cargo is gonna get where it needs to go whether YOU take it, or someone else does. We have enough money. Back off and spend time with the grandkids, or do something you love -”

“I love flying,” she’d say.

“Do something ELSE you love.” And he’d leave it at that.

What he really was saying was “We’re getting old. Let’s spend time together while we can.”

But being a pilot was all she knew. It wasn’t glamorous, like being a movie star, but it paid well and she knew what she was doing and she was respected by her peers. Doesn’t that count? Why be stuck at home when you can ride a rocket?

Taped to the cockpit dashboard was a an old, faded picture of Jon, an actual photograph printed on paper. He looked the same today (to her), just grayer and weathered.

Lucy wondered if a lifetime of being away was taking its toll. Maybe temptation combined with growing desperation was too much to resist.

The police called it “motive and opportunity.” She knew how Jon was feeling but ignored it, and she knew Violet was in town, she knew she’d been by the house. Violet was in her late fifties (so much younger than me) and the past ten years had been good to her career (I could’ve been a movie star if Mom had put me in dance and theater class!) and a seasoned professional taking on rolls suitable for a mature kick-ass woman.

Violet’s career was hitting an all-time high, while Jon wanted Lucy to splash down.

They had all been lower middle class kids skating through days, no time for sleep or each other, buried under school work and part-time jobs. But the economy was gaining steam, business and industry and science taking off, and a technology savvy kid had a bright future. They each knew it was their ticket. Fearless Lucy punching buttons just to see what they do, Jon building systems from scratch just to see if he could.

And that very same technology gave them a chance to get to know each other often without being together. Texting, pictures, private messages...So much said in such short bursts. Some of it trivial. Some of it from the heart. All of it special.

Common high school classes, different colleges, drifting apart, coming back together. She saw a courage in him no one else did, and he saw a quiet strength she kept hidden. He dodged attention, she danced on tables. He read books, she dragged him to movies. She led the way, he always had her back.

Lucy got Jon to take chances he'd never take - rollercoasters, different foods, shortcuts off the beaten path.

And he was always there to help her down from the rides, and suggest foods that maybe weren't so hot and spicy, and taught her that sometimes the main roads were the quickest.

Lucy's sister, Violet, was six when Lucy was eighteen. Quiet Violet didn't like most of the boys that came over, probably because they were in some ways like Lucy - loud, rough, quick, reactive. Not dumb, but not exactly thoughtful.

But then sometimes Jon would come over, and Violet wouldn't leave him alone. He was OK with it - it was easy to get Violet to laugh, and he was more than patient enough to listen to her. She was so young and inventive and still lived in the world of a six-year-old. And she loved to show off and dance and act things out with him. She was quiet, but not shy.

Ten years later, Violet is Maid of Honor at the wedding, the culmination of an event whose planning threatened to tear apart the fabric of space. Lucy couldn't grasp the concept of "compromise", and certainly didn't have the patience for how long ANYTHING took.

It probably wasn't a good idea to plan the wedding the same year she was trying out for her pilot's license.

But Jon was there, talking her down, helping her study, easing her from one thing to the next, like a constant tinkering mechanic charged with the maintenance of a powerful rocket.

And Violet helped them both with bouts of cheerleading. She was the only one who could distract Lucy enough to get her to relax, and on those rare moments when Jon felt like he wasn't enough for Lucy, Violet convinced him he was the best thing to ever happen to her.

And then the wedding and Lucy got her license and Jon left the big tech giant to be her ground mechanic and a legendary team was born.

In the cockpit, as the ship fell to earth and Lucy could see nothing through the windows, she felt she should have seen this coming. Lucy had always been a pain in the ass, she knew that (so did he! He knew it going in!) and Jon and Violet had always been close.

The first ten years were hard, and busy, all about sustaining a business and wooing clients. Lucy hated that shit, but Jon was good at it and sometimes Violet was a pretty face for their little shipping company. Jon and Lucy hated how sexist some potential clients could be, but at least Jon could bury it (for the duration of a sales meeting). Lucy was always "away on a job" while Violet filled in at the meeting.

Then the second ten years, Violet went off to Broadway and then California, and Jon and Lucy had Jessica and John. Lucy was barely on the ground enough to give birth, but her away missions were mostly quiet periods where Jon could focus on the kids, and she was always conferencing in at breakfast and dinner, and usually during homework.

Lucy flew a little less during the third ten years. Deeper missions paid better and she could stay home more, but she was needed less at home, too. The kids were older, able to care for themselves, then drive themselves around. And by now the kids had a big network of their own. Jessica and John were handsome, smart, honest, their mom was an astronaut pilot with a spaceship in the backyard and their aunt was a movie star.

Their fourth decade together came in on a tide of technological changes that altered business models. There was less shipping traffic between earth and everyone else, and advances in ship design started to make theirs look old. Jon worked hard at keeping it up to spec, but he didn't see the point in any major reinvestments. Jessica and John were building unrelated careers of their own, and Jon and Lucy had enough money. Jon mentioned mothballing the ship and turning it into a museum for the town.

Lucy answered that idea by booking as many trips as she could.

And now the last ten years, a fifth of their time together. Jon's voice in her head, "Slow down! Relish this! Enjoy that! How much time do you think you have?"

She hated that phrase.

Lucy had two speeds, Jon always said. Sound asleep or full throttle.

And there's no denying her energy forged a legendary career and laid the groundwork for an enviable family, but at what cost, she wondered now. Was I selfish? I shouldn't have been away so much.

The insecurities of a lifetime coming back to haunt a 70-year-old pilot, she thought.

Well, fuck that. I'm not 70 yet.

Violet was so much younger and always beautiful and Lucy spent so much time away. She didn't blame Jon.

But her sister? The movie star? Her she could blame.

Back in the cockpit, decreasing turbulence brought Lucy back to the present, and she started focusing on the screens in front of her.

The ship broke through the clouds and the radios crackled and the whole dashboard came back on-line. Her nostalgic mood ripped away like cobwebs, and she threw switches to "manual" and plotted a course to land the freighter.

Jon Hawley had about 18 minutes before Lucy touched down. Surely he could say something to cool her off before she landed?

He thought maybe just tell the truth, but that would greatly disappoint so, so many people.

In a northern New Jersey town, an hour northwest of the George Washington Bridge, a house with a pie-shaped backyard expanding out into 20 acres hosts a grandfathered launch pad.

The town was quiet and industrial, and the house was at the end of a cul-de-sac. Behind the house, on a hill, a barn and silo stood against the dusk sky. A pair of sat dishes spun lazily on towers on either side, feeding data to the control room inside the barn.

On the far side of the hill, past the barn, was the pad, currently lit by stadium lights bought from the local high school when they town renovated the school's football field, about twelve years back.

The whole pad and infrastructure though was built decades ago, before the space renaissance and having survived the regulatory fights and technological waves of innovation that followed, it bordered a railroad yard that made it ideal for inbound and outbound freight. Today, it was still a family-run space freight pad (even though the kids in the family wanted nothing to do with it, nor needed it since they were grown with their launched careers) but more tourist attraction than actual freight yard. A big science class draw for every school in 50 miles.

The couple running it had a spotless safety record, but although rockets were as safe as self-driving cars (which made sense - much of the underlying software and hardware was the same, except three dimensions instead of two...and all that explosive fuel), people had always been and still were skittish about backyard launch pads. The town tolerated Lucy and Jon's freighter though, mostly because of the tourist money it brought

in. It was the last of the big backyard freighters, the kids loved it, and you couldn't argue with their record.

Lucy and Jon could've banked more money had they reinvested less in upgrades, but it was a competitive and highly regulated business. Thanks to all the upgrades, though, you'd need a series of cataclysmic, cascading, random and even intentional events to bring down a freighter on something other than its designated launchpad.

Or, one very pissed off pilot that was determined to exact revenge on her lyin' cheatin' good-for-nothin' husband of fifty years who'd always had a thing for your sister, that skinny bitch. (Her words, not his. He could hear her saying it.)

Jon sat in the control room in the upper level of the barn, under a glass roof, and looked up. She was pissed, to be sure, but probably wouldn't land right on the barn.

Probably.

The freighter hadn't yet outlived its usefulness. It was one of only a few that had several oversize bays, and so catered to a small market. There was a viable niche market for freight that needed to be shuttled between earth and the moon, or Mars, or any of the orbital platforms. But the need for the freighter was dwindling as those facilities grew more independent, and flights became less frequent.

So tonight was special. The schedule was posted in advance on the town's web site. Lawn chairs all around town were being set up - if you are within ten miles, you'll see it drop, looking surreal as its speed decreases the closer it gets to ground. Faces were already craning up, looking at the rising moon on one side and sunset on the other. Soon, a star would appear, and it would descend from the heavens and sit its ass on Jon and Lucy Hawley's launchpad. Kids always lined the chainlink of the property and cheered when Lucy, now a grandmother and too old for this shit, emerged from the ship and waved as she climbed down.

Sound baffles and modern engines kept noise to a minimum, and night launches and landings were rare and beautiful (the flare from the engines would light up the whole neighborhood, and the mayor had already dispatched someone to turn off all the streetlights for the last minute of descent) so tonight was a big deal and a real spectacle. A rare sunset landing on a Friday evening, capping a crystal clear windless spring day. Everyone within fifty miles would be watching this, the way people gather at old rail stations to watch a vintage but still working locomotive roll through.

Jon was grateful that no one knew Lucy had disabled all the automatics. Wouldn't be the first time she flipped everything to manual (she had a bit of an exhibitionist streak) but Jon knew more than the public sitting in the front row.

Jon scrunched his eyes and white-knuckled the edge of the console. He unmuted the speakers.

“—HELP ME I'M GONNA LAND THIS FREIGHTER RIGHT ON YOUR ASS JON HAWLEY!”

Her voice over the speakers was loud and clipped and distorted, and it was easy to picture her spitting hatred into the radio as she squirmed in the cockpit. Easy to imagine because he knew she was doing it. “Spittin' mad” wasn't just an expression, and she hated that tiny cockpit, and it was the end of a two week round trip to the moon. A boring trip getting out there, days of loading and unloading (which meant nothing for the pilot to do), and a boring trip back. About as tedious as you can get, and Lucy didn't handle confined spaces very well. The money was barely worth it. But her love for spaceflight and the business outweighed her mild claustrophobia.

“Lucy -”

“DON'T YOU LUCY ME HAWLEY YOU ARE DEAD TO ME AND SOON YOU'LL BE DEAD TO EVERYONE ELSE”

Aw, Lucy... he thought. It's not what you think.

The console clock was ticking down. She was still 16 minutes out. Plenty of time to fix this. Plenty of time to talk her down, get

her to land on the pad in the west field instead of on the roof of their barn.

“MY SISTER? MY SISTER!?”

Jon rubbed his face and looked through the glass roof. Lots of stars tonight. One of them was Lucy.

From the beginning, this was a bad idea. He knew she'd see through it, or catch wind of it, or both. He knew when Lucy's sister called last month there was going to be trouble. Lucy's sister, twelve years younger, the successful movie star (exhibitionists, the whole family), who had more ex-husbands than Irish families have kids, calling out of the blue.

He flicked on the microphone. “Lucy, please - “

She started yelling at him again. He lowered the volume, but kept listening, glad there was no video link. She'd see him smiling, and that would infuriate her even more. Lucy, even nearing 70, was a fountain of fire and passion. A force of nature, a power for all things right, and a thing to fear if you wronged her. She was an archetype - the warrior mother to emulate. And those who loved her would do anything for her, because they knew she'd do anything for them.

Jon, on the receiving end right now of all this anger, would probably have been terrified had he actually done something to earn it.

He couldn't talk to her while she was yelling at him. She must have locked down the mic button. But speaking wasn't the only way to talk to her.

He opened another window and started texting her. He flagged his texts “Urgent” and “Do Not Reply” so they'd pop up on her display and she'd be unable to text back.

Ground control here in the barn was set to take over the ship the moment she brought autonomous controls back on line, but he knew she wouldn't do that. For one thing, she hated NOT landing the freighter, and when laws were passed making it mandatory, he wrote, for her thirtieth birthday, a broadcast filter fooling every watching system into thinking the ship was on auto

mode. It even fed matching telemetry to the broadcast, but what no one knew was that Lucy was at the helm, every time. It's what made her so good and so experienced and still working at her age.

It was their only secret, her manual piloting aided by his telemetry-masking software. A potentially dangerous one, too, but her skills had save many a bad landing. But now his birthday gift to her was going to bite him in the ass, or land on his head. Ironically, that was thirty years ago nearly to the day.

She couldn't possibly yell at him, fly the ship, AND read his messages at the same time. He was hoping the yelling would yield.

He typed:

My dearest Lucy.. please believe me that nothing is going on between me and Violet. As you know, somewhere deep down, I've never betrayed you, nor will I ever.

[Send]

It took a moment, but her yelling stopped.

I don't know why you think something is going on, but I imagine you know she's in town. She's a big star and can't go anywhere without attracting attention, so maybe you saw the local news or someone told you. But I have not seen her, although she's called a few times.

[Send]

A crackle over the radio. "Why is she in town at all?"

He typed:

Like I said, I haven't seen her. I can tolerate only so much of her. She's your sister. I'm sure after you land you can give her a call?

[Send]

"I saw pictures of her on the property. I saw your car in the background."

Mmm, thought Jon. Should've seen that coming. Paparazzi were everywhere, and Violet loved giving them what they wanted, even when she was supposed to be discreet.

He typed:

I was home, but here in the barn. Upgrading the weather forecaster. That took two days, mostly because the new parts they sent didn't fit our old system. Anyway, I didn't see her. By the time I made it back to the house, she was gone.

[Send]

All true, he thought. He hadn't seen her, and she did call a few times. They spoke on the phone, though, but he didn't need to elaborate about that. Not yet.

He typed:

I have loved you, old lady, for more than 50 years. Surely you must know by now I'd never hurt you? You are why I sleep easy at night, and why I get up in the morning (it isn't just to make you breakfast ;)

[Send]

She had to crack a smile at that, right?

8 minutes left.

He wanted to tell her everything - they were together this long because both of them were so uncomfortable with secrets. But he needed more time for that. And she would know soon enough.

A whisper over the radio. "I saw news clips of her in town, laughing at the diner. Our diner. Talking with Macy and Greg. She has no idea how lucky she is. She never did. She was always able to walk into a room and own it. Never mattered how big the venue was - a kitchen or a stadium. She owned it the minute the lights hit her."

He typed:

Yes, she's like that. But she isn't you. She might be able to own everyone at the Oscars, but she doesn't own me. Lucy, my love, please. I'll get dinner ready. We can talk more after that. But the clock is ticking and eyes are watching.

[Send]

A minute ticked by. The sweeping hand on the green screen still plotted her course as barn-bound, and it was blinking red because of it. Forging off her current position was a dashed line

heading to the pad. Next to the fork was a moving counter - about 45 seconds until changing course wasn't an option.

About three minutes until landing.

He typed:

Lucy?

[Send]

30 seconds. He wondered if it would hurt.

He typed:

Maybe you're right. Maybe it's time to cash out. I'm over 70, you're almost as old as I am. The kids are established. We're in good health today, but who knows what the years ahead are like...

[Send]

The green course plot screen started blinking. UPDATING.

He watched the landing dot slide across the map from the barn, across the yard, and rest on the pad.

He didn't type:

Thanks, Lucy.

While still a mile up, Lucy lit the rockets and made a broad sweep over the town. Not exactly regulation, but she could say she needed to burn up excess fuel. And the kids on the ground loved it.

A moment later, the braking rockets were flaring over the pad, and the freighter touched down. Smoke and fire and noise like that vintage locomotive, then landing gear stretching toward earth and gently touching and springing back from the tarmac, like an early May beachgoer toeing the water, testing the temperature. Then the ship settled, an unstoppable and slow descent, landing gear pistons accommodating great weight, then...nothing. The cooling ticks of contracting metal.

Nothing more than the usual amazing spectacle to everyone watching. The kids lining the fence could be heard cheering even though they were a good 1000' away. Every time was the first time.

He met her at the base of the ladder, helping her climb down. She frowned at his outstretched arm, a wrinkly look on a weathered face, but took his hand and stepped down. She said, "I'm shuttling crap from here to Mars and back for 50 years, and you're helping me take the last rung on a ladder?"

"I helped you take the first one, too."

They started walking back. Behind them, an automated gantry rolled up to the freighter and began debriefing the ship. In front of them, a small electric cart waited.

"You sure you want to keep doing this?"

She shrugged. "What the hell else am I gonna do?"

"You could teach."

"I'm as good a teacher as you are a pilot."

They climbed into the cart from opposite sides. Jon told it to go to the house. "I already shut down the barn, as soon as you touched down. Did you need anything from in there?"

"Nah. Let's just get to the house." Lucy looked around. It was past dusk now, but not full dark. "Is she here?"

"Violet? I don't think so, but I haven't been to the house for a few hours. Was catching up on some updates in the barn before you began your descent."

"Catching up on updates? Is that what we're calling naps, now?"

He smiled. They bounced a little in the cart as it meandered its way to the back door of the house. "What makes you think Violet is here?"

"I was trying to track her stupid car from orbit, but I couldn't focus on that because of the damn landing strut alarm - "

"I thought I fixed that."

"I thought so, too, and clearly the strut is OK, but the alarm always goes off when I prime them before re-entry. No big deal. Anyway, I tried tracking her car, then I started descending, then the blackout, and then I was screaming at you..." She pursed her lips and frowned. "Then I touched down."

The cart rolled to a stop at the rear of the house and they got out. She started walking toward the door, but he gently touched her arm, and she stopped and looked at him. "What'd I forget?"

"Nothing," he said. "But we're going to go in and get busy with.. You know.. Distractions. Dinner, and the kids are going to call and then it'll be late and we'll be tired and then there's who-knows-what to do tomorrow... I just wanted you to know I'm glad you're home. I always am. Every time you fly away, I'm grateful for the safe landings."

She laughed. "They haven't all been safe."

"Well, you've walked away from them all, so that's a pretty good barometer. But I'm always glad when you're home."

She took a deep breath and frowned. "I know you're the more sentimental one, but what brought this on? I probably wouldn't have really landed on the barn."

"You had me going, for a while. But that's not it. I just want you to know how much you still mean to me. Always have."

"Well, I couldn't be me, without you."

And she leaned in and kissed him. She smelled like flight jacket leather and cockpit grease and moon dust, and it was wonderful.

He patted her on the ass and said, "Let's get you inside and cleaned up."

"Ha! In your dreams, old man," she said. "I'm brushing my teeth and going straight to bed-"

Then she opened the door to the house and all the lights inside turned on and a crowd yelled, "SURPRISE!!"

Lucy stood stock still, a deer in the headlights, holding open the door.

Jon, behind her, said, "Either commit to re-entry or abort the landing, sweetheart."

The back door opened into a short stairwell that led up to the kitchen. At least two dozen people at the top of the stairs, crowding around, big open smiles, wearing party hats.

Party hats. Some were shaped like astronaut helmets with propellers on top.

And in front of all of them, at the top of the kitchen stairs, and looking as grand as if she were standing on the stairs to the Oscars, was Violet, holding two glasses of champagne. "C'mon up, Luce. I got a party here waiting for you."

Lucy, still standing in the doorway and holding the door, looked at Jon. "Did you know about this?"

He wasn't sure how to answer that. "Well, they're all in our house, so... yes. Happy birthday, sweetheart."