

## *Pandion* - Prologue

Atticus Forester had never before been late for a flight on the company jet when his father Hugo was at the controls, but the Thanksgiving after he turned twenty he *was* late, and that changed everything.

It was in what Atticus later would recall as the “Apex,” the days when Hugo was the “hedge fund king” and the Foresters ruled the world.

“I’ll give you an extra hundred if we make it,” he said to Joseph, one of their regular drivers.

With his snout on Atticus’s leg, Ghost looked up as if to say there was no use fidgeting. The dog was right, of course; there was nothing more he could do. And there was no sense calling ahead. Hugo wouldn’t wait. He’d do a final instrument check, curse his irresponsible son and order the door closed. He’d take off on schedule and see Atticus if and when he found his own way to Pandion. He wouldn’t even mention the incident later, to show his son he alone was responsible for his own actions.

But Atticus would hear about it from his big brother Bode, for sure. He was such a jerk sometimes Atticus wondered how he could really be his brother.

The minutes ticked away. The general aviation airport at Teterboro was small, and they wouldn’t be held up for security, but the timing was still close. Even light traffic could clog the Lincoln Tunnel entrance.

If his mom had a say Hugo would wait. Atticus knew she found his rules draconian, but she wouldn’t tell *him* that. She did everything possible to avoid conflict in the rare times she had with her husband. Atticus sometimes worried this made her give up too much of herself.

“Here we are and three minutes to spare,” Joseph said, screeching to a stop curbside.

Atticus saw no way to make it, but he jumped out of the car, not even shutting the door.

“Hey, what about that hundred?” Joseph called out.

“Yeah, *if* I make it,” Atticus shouted without turning back.

He ran with his backpack falling from his shoulder and Ghost close beside him. People jumped out of their way and laughed as they rushed past. They were sure to miss the flight. This was a disaster.

He kept going over the morning. He’d been all ready to go until Ghost got sick. Bode would have let the housekeeper or a driver take him to the vet, but Atticus couldn’t leave his dog behind, not when he was sick. He was just being responsible! Isn’t that what his father

wanted? He took his dog to the vet instead of leaving it to the staff. And for that he might waste a whole afternoon stuck in nowhere New Jersey? He wondered if he should take flying lessons, like Bode, and someday pilot his own family up to Maine. He'd never leave *his* kid behind.

Bursting through the door to the tarmac he spotted the Gulfstream already on the runway! Hugo must have left precisely on time and would take off right in front of him, like a big slap in the face.

He stood frozen to the ground, panting. Sweat trickled down his sides. He knew he shouldn't wait; he should be checking when Uncle Ted was flying so he could hitch a ride on his charter. Otherwise, he'd have to cab it to Newark Airport and try to find a commercial flight.

He knew his father's rules: at company functions you played the dutiful son and made small talk with investors; you never embarrassed your mother or interrupted Hugo when he was doing business; and you were never ever late for a flight when Hugo was captain.

But this time he *was* late, and Thanksgiving be damned, he was on his own. At that moment Bode would be sitting back in comfort, laughing that Atticus was left behind. Hugo would be focused on his checklist for takeoff. Atti's mother would be staring out the window, waiting for him to call. But calling would serve no purpose until he figured out how he'd get to Maine. He set his backpack against a fence and dialed Ted.

At the far end of the runway, his dad's jet sat behind what had to be an Arab royal, given the markings on the plane. There was some justice in this; Hugo couldn't hold up five minutes for his son but he'd have to wait his turn to take off.

"Atti?" Ted answered. "I thought you'd all be in the air by now."

"I'm glad I caught you, Uncle Ted. My dad is just taking off, but I got here late."

"So, he left you."

"Afraid so."

The Gulfstream powered up and started down the runway. Atticus paused to watch and then said, "So, I was wondering..."

"Of course you should join us. I chartered a flight at four, so you'll have to sit tight for a few hours. We'll see you then."

He hung up and kept watching the jet. He had often flown on his father's aircraft but had never seen one takeoff from the ground. For some reason he thought of *Foreign Correspondent*, the Hitchcock film where the hero goes down in a clipper plane shelled by the Germans. But he dismissed that morbid association and looked down at Ghost.

“We’ve got a ride, buddy,” he said. “Just have to kill some time.” The dog paid no attention, distracted by the airport smells.

The Gulfstream rolled by and lifted effortlessly. It rose and banked to the north, and Atticus turned to leave.

But someone shouted, and a marshaller in a yellow vest pointed up, mouth open wide.

Atticus turned back. The Gulfstream careened, flames trailing, and plummeted. A heavy boom shook the air. The jet hit out past the runway with a flash and another blast.

He dropped the leash and grabbed absently at the fence, unable to turn his gaze from the squiggly, pure white cloud lingering in the sky. Wild barking came as if from far off. Ghost stood between him and the wreck, snarling and yapping like a mad dog. Even in the sudden chaos, everyone shied away from them.

Sirens sounded. People shouted and rushed in all directions. Atticus fell to his knees and gathered Ghost to him, his heart and the dog’s beating together like two angry drums. He couldn’t know it then, but this was only the prelude.