

## CHRISTMAS, COOKIES, AND CHOICES

The aromas of baking permeated the house, as they did every year the week before Christmas. Curtis Janofsky shucked his jacket, hung the garment on a peg in the mudroom, and stamped the last bits of snow from his shoes.

“Grandpa’s back!” he called out. Moments later, two grandchildren rushed to each hug a leg.

“What did you buy?” cried four-year-old Rudy, who often reminded everyone he was almost five, and who now reached for the shopping bags Curtis held high enough to be just out of little hands’ reach.

“Nothing for you. Santa tells me you weren’t a good boy this year.”

“Was, too! Was, too! Mommy sez I’m a good boy!”

“Well . . . we’ll have to see on Christmas morning,” said Curtis.

Felicia was more restrained, as was appropriate for an elder sibling. After all, six and a half was almost grown, as she frequently stated and sometimes behaved beyond her years. Today, her head bobbed from looking up at the bags and back to the kitchen, where she had been helping her mother and grandmother make Christmas cookies.

“Do I smell Christmas cookies, Felicia?”

“Yes, Grandpa. We’re making the ones with the cherries on top. They’re my favorite, especially the stars. We already made reindeer.”

“What about bells?”

The girl’s brow wrinkled. “Oh. We just made stars and reindeer. We already used all the dough for cookies we cut out with the shape things. I’m sorry. I forgot you like bells best. Now we’re making . . . uh . . . Grandma says they’re called wedding cakes.”

Curtis smiled. “No problem. They all taste good. Now . . . you go back to help with the baking, and Rudy, you need to let

me loose so I can put away these shopping things I KNOW have nothing to do with you and your sister.”

Two squeals were followed by laughter and a final leg hug. The two perpetual-motion objects zoomed away.

He shook his head. *Oh, to have that much energy again*, he thought.

He walked down the hallway, glancing into rooms as he passed each door: the living room with the nine-foot tree resting, as it did every year, in the only place with a high-enough ceiling once the star was placed on top; the dining room with Christmas tablecloth and napkins, a holly-and-bells centerpiece, and figurines recreating the manger scene on top of the sideboard; and a kitchen overflowing with warmth generated by the oven and human emotion.

At the end of the hall was the master bedroom. He put the bags on the bed. Sarah’s final list of the season had been longer than usual—small items for stockings hung on the fireplace mantle, a wish for a garish pair of running shoes his wife had wheedled out of their daughter, who was half-embarrassed about wanting shoes that looked like a spray-painter gone wild; a rubber dinosaur to add to Rudy’s collection; and a *Frozen II* book Felicia insisted she was old enough to read, either now or in the next year.

He and Sarah had six months earlier agreed their Christmas present to each other this year would be two February weeks at a beach cabana in Belize. The accommodations were rudimentary, with no Internet or TV, a simple kitchenette, essential shopping a two-mile walk away, and no immediate neighbors. Yet it sat on a pristine beach with a view of three small, tree-covered islands a quarter mile offshore.

The rental was cheap, they had scored on a bargain flight, and they would fall asleep to the sound of gentle waves, spend warm and quiet days sitting under foliage or the sun, and just enjoy being together. It sounded wonderful then and still did.

He walked back down the hall and waved in passing at the women and the children deep into cookie making. Even Rudy was involved, using a wooden spoon and stirring something in a bowl with great effort.

“I’ll be out a few minutes,” his wife called out. “Just something I have to pick up at the grocery.”

The store was only a few minutes away, and he had just gotten home. Still . . . he made an honest offer.

“What is it? I can go back out.”

“No. I’ll do it. Relax.”

He gratefully acceded and sat in a living room armchair not far from the tree, its light strings on a slow dim-and-brighten cycle. The icicles stirred slowly, wafted by air currents generated by the house’s heating.

Next to the chair were today’s mail and the morning paper. He finished the sports page and was halfway through the main news section when he dozed off. An undetermined time later, he woke to more sounds of laughter and the hall clock chiming 5 p.m. The paper section lay in his lap, but he refolded it and put it aside. He might finish later, but for now he picked up the day’s mail Sarah had left for him to go through.

He started sorting: bills, advertisements, Christmas cards. He open the last stack first. A Snoopy Santa from his brother. Nativity scene from their church’s pastor. Elves surfing in Hawaii from Sarah’s mother (she lived on Oahu).

He stopped, looking at the next senders’ names. Charlotte and Ned Gonzales.

\*\*\*

She had been his titular supervisor for six years at the National Transportation Safety Board, though, as a senior accident investigator, once assigned to a case he had near carte blanche in making decisions. Tragically, as far as he was concerned, Charlotte had taken a position in industry six months ago. She told him it was for more money and a chance to work with an airline manufacturer struggling to regain customer confidence after a series of accidents caused by a faulty wing design.

“I know it seems like I’m selling out to the enemy,” said Charlotte when she told him of her decision, “but since Delacour retired from being the NTSB chair, I find I’m too used to how he delegated. Peterson’s style of management is too different . . . at least for me. At first, we hoped our new NSTB chair would mellow out once he got the sense of the position and the

competence of the staff. Unfortunately, time and reality betrayed us. He's not a delegator. As the weeks, then the first months passed, Peterson's gotten to be even more of a micro-manager, seemingly insecure if he isn't involved in even the smallest decision. I decided to leave before it got even worse."

Later, Charlotte had been proved prescient when Peterson replaced her with a minion named, of all things, "Sincere," a man Peterson had worked with before and who magnified, to Curtis's view, the worst features of the new chair's style. Curtis's friction with his new superiors had been ameliorated by his seniority and high regard from industry and relevant congressional committees. He'd acknowledged to Sarah that he might have aggravated the situation by not hiding his lack of respect toward Peterson and Sincere enough.

Though Peterson and Sincere were hesitant to foment public strife on topics of Curtis's expertise and because of his reputation, Curtis suspected they had figuratively chortled to find him spending a small part of his time working on a five-year-old case whose final report was gathering dust in various filing cabinets and digital stores. United Flight 4382, San Francisco to Chicago, had come apart at 35,000 feet, eighty miles south of Denver. In such an event, it was assumed there would be no survivors.

Charlotte had assigned Curtis to be the IIC—Investigator in Charge—to lead the NTSB's determination of the cause of the disaster. He had directed the investigation by the book, which normally would have led to as definitive a conclusion as possible under such circumstances. That the destruction of United 4382 would remain a mystery was foreshadowed by eyewitness reports and unclear video evidence suggesting the airliner had collided with *something* before breaking up. Further compounding the uncertainty, the process of body recovery led to another enigma. The airliner's breakup and explosion occurred over empty terrain, and there was a clear expectation of recovering all the victims—or at least parts of them. No one expected the final body count to be short—missing two crewmembers and twenty-five passengers. In addition, the recovered bodies were in a distribution pattern different from plane debris—a detail with no rational explanation.

In the end, all relevant parties agreed the collision was unverified, the missing bodies unexplained, and the body distribution pattern impossible. But there it was. To Curtis's unease, the final NSTB report downplayed the anomalies as much as possible. The board's experience in past cases was that families and the media would grasp any thin thread to keep the investigation alive and the 24-hour news cycle fed. The NSTB needed to move on from what it couldn't resolve to new investigations waiting for attention.

Even though the case file was formally closed, Curtis had snatched minutes here and there, looking for leads to explain the unexplainable. He would have asserted that his other work had not been affected, but that was irrelevant to Peterson and Sincere.

"This is a clear violation of board policy to spend resources on closed cases," an obviously pleased Sincere had berated Curtis, after calling him into the presence of Peterson. "Only your past service is keeping you in your position, though we'll be filing an official reprimand. Any further incidents will lead to suspension or possibly termination, depending on the severity of the infraction."

It had been on Curtis's tongue to utter, "Oh, go fuck yourselves, you two incompetent jerks." That he'd held the words was due to uncertainty about the ramifications, as far as salary and pension were concerned. Plus, he was proud of the work he'd done, and leaving the NSTB after so many years was not something he could do easily. And there the status of the case stood, leading into Christmas.

\*\*\*

Hearing laughter again from the kitchen, he sat back in his chair and sighed, then leaned toward the cabinet beside the chair. He could just reach the bottom drawer, from which he pulled out a folder—one he'd opened and leafed through the last years more times than he cared to estimate: a copy of the final report's summary of the investigation into the United 4382 tragedy. He didn't bother reading it; he knew every line. Putting aside the clipped-together pages, he picked up a section that had been deleted from the final full report, which ran to more than nine hundred pages. This section was only four pages, two of which

were not text and were related: the seating diagram of Flight 4382, with numbers over seats referring to the list of missing bodies tallied on the final page. He knew every name on the list, their ages on the day of the flight, brief comments about their professions, and whether they had been accompanied by family members whose bodies were found.

In most cases, he knew far more than the few words on the sheet. Pierre Billard: He and his wife were returning to France after a vacation touring California. The Billard family was well-known in the wine-making world and had a fascinating history of hiding wines from the Germans in World War II by sealing off part of their winery's underground aging tunnel to hide the best vintages. Mark Caldwell: A General Dynamics engineer/executive whose obnoxious wife had harangued the NTSB for months to finalize the report, so she could have unfettered access to her husband's pension and stock options. Heather Chen: A petite teenage musician going to a music school interview. Joseph Colasco: A chemistry graduate student on his way to present major new work at a conference and whose family Curtis remembered as one of the saner during the investigation. Jolene Demmings: A captain in the Kansas City Police Department who was expected to rise to higher rank unless hired away by another city looking for African-American candidates. Lucille Greene: One of the flight's stewardesses and on her last flight. Days earlier, she had found out she was pregnant, and flying raised the risk of miscarriage in the first trimester.

Curtis skipped down the list, then stopped. Dan and Liza Oglethorpe: Both retired U.S. Army colonels in their sixties, flying home after visiting a daughter's family in Walnut Creek, California. He'd often wondered at the coincidence of couples surviving—both the Oglethorpes and the Steubens farther down the list. Were they holding hands when whatever happened took place, and did that somehow influence the reason their bodies were missing?

His reverie was broken when a child climbed onto his lap and a little hand touched his face.

"You don't look happy, Grandpa?" said Felicia. "Did you get a sad letter?"

He looked at her concerned expression.

“Maybe a little sad,” he said without thinking. “Just realizing that I don’t like my job as much as I used to.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, her face morphing in an instant from concern to excitement, as only the very young can do. “I know what will make you happy again!”

She jumped off his lap and raced away, her ponytail swinging wildly. She had decided that this hairstyle made her look more mature. “More grown up,” as she put it.

He could hear her excited voice in the kitchen, followed by those of Sarah and Linda, their daughter, and finally joined by Rudy, though his voice conveyed protest. After a few seconds, the decibel level from the kitchen lowered, stopped, and was replaced by the patter of small bare feet. Felicia returned, moving as fast as she could while balancing a plate of cookies.

“Wait for me,” complained Rudy, following his sister but having more trouble carrying his plate loaded with more cookies than Felicia’s. When she reached Curtis, she stopped, turned to look for her brother, and waited. She bounced back and forth until he stood beside her before she spoke.

“We made your favorite cookies, Grandpa. We made more dough, and Grandma went to buy the butterscotch chips. You can be happy now. Here’s the bells.” She held out the plate of cookie-cutter bells with red-and-green sprinkles.

“You said chocolate-ship cookies were his favorite!” complained Rudy, eyeing his sister accusingly and gripping his plate tighter.

“I told you butterscotch-chip, not chocolate-ship,” said Felicia.

“They’re both my favorite,” interjected Curtis before a conflict in miniature could develop. “When you’re older, you can have more than one favorite. Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

Both children considered the novel concept. Felicia nibbled on a lip before nodding vigorously, but Rudy was dubious until his sister clinched the agreement. “Oh, you mean that’s like when Rudy likes green one day and orange the next?”

“Yes,” said Curtis, “and like you sleep holding Hoppy the rabbit one night and Rocky the raccoon a different night. They’re

both your friends and both your favorites, so neither one will have their feelings hurt.”

Assuaged, Rudy held out his plate. Curtis took both children and sat them on his lap.

“Hmmm . . . bells . . . *one* of my favorites,” he said and put an entire cookie in his mouth. He chewed quickly and picked up a butterscotch cookie to hold next to his mouth before Rudy could complain. The second cookie followed before he’d swallowed all of the first.

“Hmmm.”

“Are you happy now?” asked Rudy.

“Hmmm . . . yeah . . . I’m definitely happier now,” said Curtis, once his mouth was empty enough.

“But are you just happy at home, or will you be happy at work?” asked Felicia.

“I’m really, really happy to be at home with my two favorite grandchildren.”

“What about work?”

“Well . . . maybe I’m still not happy about work, but that doesn’t mean I’m not happy here with you.”

“Maybe you should do other work.”

“You could be an astronaut or a football player,” Rudy offered excitedly, “or just stop working.”

“It’s *astronaut*,” corrected Felicia without looking away from Curtis. “But Grandpa needs to work to buy food for Grandma.”

“Grandma wouldn’t be happy if she was hungry,” Rudy agreed sagely.

“Uh . . . I don’t need to earn money to feed Grandma, but I’ve worked at the same place for a long time, and it’s hard to leave.

“Well,” said Felicia, huffing and shaking her head, “if you don’t *have* to work where you’re unhappy to get money or don’t *have* to make money, *I* think you shouldn’t work *at all* or work somewhere that makes you *happy*.”

“Felicia’s right,” said Rudy. The issue settled in his mind, Rudy slid off Curtis’s lap and raced away without announcing his destination. Felicia kissed her grandfather’s cheek and

walked back toward the kitchen, turning her head to do what her brother hadn't.

"I'm going to help Grandma make pumpkin pies."

He watched the swaying ponytail until it turned a corner, then was aware of the folder still in his lap, several sheets of paper now wrinkled from supporting small bottoms and legs.

"Out of the mouths of babes," he mumbled while smoothing papers and shuffling the disarray back together. He glanced again at the list of missing bodies, then his eyes moved to the stack of Christmas cards. He shook his head. He hadn't yet opened the next card, the one sent from William and Barbara Colasco, parents of passenger number 5, Joseph Colasco, who had sat in seat 28A. He reached into the bottom of the folder's papers and pulled out a seating diagram of the Boeing 737 with numbers indicating the seats for passengers whose bodies were missing.

There were no new revelations. He could draw the chart from memory. The concentration of missing bodies originally seated in the rear was consistent with the most severe damage at the point of impact with an unknown object at approximately the forward junction of the left wing to the fuselage, with fire most severe from row 6 aft to mid-fuselage or slightly farther aft. The problem was that the correlation didn't explain where the bodies of the aft-seated passengers had disappeared to simply because they avoided the worst of the initial fireball.

As for passengers Molinar and Tonagawa in first class, 3C and 3D, the reconstruction of the wreckage suggested the section of the plane forward of the initial impact broke free before the fuel ignited.

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had accepted that this mystery would tantalize him the rest of his life, but that didn't mean he wouldn't think about it. He smiled. *Who knows?* he thought. *Maybe I'll have an inspiration someday, or some new evidence will appear that leads somewhere.*

He closed the folder and set it on the table next to the stack of Christmas cards. Feeling better than before the cookie infusion, he picked up the top card and opened it to find a classic dove image and the wording "Peace on Earth." It was the fourth year the Colasco family had sent a card.

They had cornered him after one of the last briefings on the investigation. Protocol was that he should stay remote from family members of victims, but they had seemed so sincere in appreciation of his efforts that he had relented when they asked him to go to lunch that day. Despite NTSB public statements that the search for bodies was continuing, he told them the truth: they should expect that the mystery would never be solved and the body of Joseph Colsco would never be returned to his family. The mother and the pregnant girlfriend, Julie, had cried, but when they left, they thanked him for telling them the truth.

He had kept in occasional contact with the Colsco family, though now he had not spoken with any of them for almost a year. However, he knew that Julie and the child were a continuing part of the Colsco family, and she had married two years previously and had a child with her husband. He admired the family for moving on from the tragedy without forgetting the lost member.

Curtis put the card back in the envelope and stared into space. Felicia and Rudy had been right. If he didn't feel as committed to the work as he once had been, whether because of burnout or new supervisors, shouldn't he move on? The motive to solve the causes of accidents, of putting disparate pieces together, didn't engage him as it once had. Life was short, and why spend his remaining working years doing something he had lost his commitment to?

He rose and walked to the table near the front door. It was there, in a bowl, where he put his car keys and wallet after arriving home. From the wallet he pulled a card: "Henry Walchow, Chief Analyst, Enigma Solutions, Inc." Walchow had knocked on Curtis's front door three weeks previously and offered him a position in that company. Even after an hour of talking, Curtis was not sure what exactly the company did or where its funding originated, but Walchow claimed that clients contracted with them to advise or investigate, depending on the circumstances, anything that was difficult to explain or situations with complex options that required choosing a specific course of action.

A bemused Curtis had asked why he was being approached.

Walchow had said, “Come now, Mr. Janofsky. It shouldn’t be hard to figure out. You’re one of the most senior investigators for the NTSB and, if I may say so without appearing to blow smoke, probably the most widely respected, despite recent difficulties with personnel changes in the higher echelons of the board. Your reputation for diligence, open-mindedness, and an intuitive sense about accidents has been judged to be a potential valuable asset to the team we are assembling. We also believe you would find an association with Enigma Solutions to more than capture your interest.”

Several times Curtis had thought back to the interview-and-offer session, if that’s what it had been, but more out of curiosity than to entertain thoughts of leaving the NTSB. Now, his mind seemed suddenly open to the possibility. The address was Harrisonburg, Virginia, only a few hours’ drive from the NTSB, where he worked. Thus, he and his wife wouldn’t lose contact with friends inside and outside work. It was also hinted that the company was somehow associated with James Madison University in Harrisonburg, though Curtis couldn’t see an obvious connection. He chuckled. Maybe that alone was a piece of a puzzle. He didn’t fool himself. Yes, the Flight 4382 case was tragic, but it was the mystery of missing bodies that had captivated him.

He tapped his front teeth with a fingertip. Walchow had mentioned salary—not extravagant, but, if added to his pension should he retire, it would give him and Sarah more lifestyle options than they now had and the ability to help their three children more than before.

*Who knows?* he wondered. *Maybe I could continue thinking about 4382 as my side project. Maybe whatever this company is doing, it might have resources or connections I don’t have now.*

“Tomorrow,” he said aloud. “Tomorrow I’ll call and find out more.”

Having a plan, he pulled himself back to remember the season. He went to see if the kitchen crew needed supervision, assistance, or a cookie taster.

<b><u>PASSENGER</u></b>	<b><u>AGE</u></b>	<b><u>OCCUP.</u></b>
1) Bill Aderman	28	Rancher.
2) Pierre Billard wife on plane; wine industry.	46	French tourist;
3) Mark Caldwell	45	Engineer.
4) Heather Chen senior; music student.	17	High School
5) Joseph Colso grad student; UC Berkeley.	27	Chemistry
6) Jolene Demmings Kansas City.	48	Police captain-
7) Isabella Gallego sophomore.	15	High School
8) Jesus Garcia sophomore, political science, Stanford.	20	College
9) Lucille Greene Stewardess. Pregnant.	31	Airline
10) Robin Kelly economics; husband on plane.	49	accountant,
11) Jules Lawson Phd, Bank of America.	53	Economics
12) Cheryl Liu social studies teacher.	38	High School
13) Justin Molinar plane.	8	Parents on
14) Henry Murkowski junior; Parents and sister on plane.	16	High School
15) Dan Oglethorpe colonel, US Army, quartermaster	69	retired
16) Liza Oglethorpe colonel, US Army, intelligence & infantry	63	retired
17) Michael Posey mechanic, retired. Wife on plane.	72	Aircraft
18) Susan Scanlon	33	Advertising.
19) Haley Sewell	3 months	

20) Hakeem Stambouli	37	Math
professor, SF State Univ.		
21) Barbara Steuben	60	Librarian.
22) Daniel Steuben	61	Grocery store
manager.		
23) Glenn Timmons	50	Trucking
supervisor.		
24) Jerry Tonagawa	38	Google
Personnel manager.		
25) Terry Velada	35	Airplane
steward.		
26) Martha Whitworth	81	Surgeon,
retired.		
27) Stephen Yang	25	Taiwan grad
student, robotics, Stanford.		