

*Rise Like the
Phoenix*

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Chapter 5 - *Crash: Stop Poisoning Yourself*

Ninety minutes before every departure, flight attendants arrive to complete check-in procedures. I walked through the doors to the Southwest terminal of Hartsfield-Jackson Airport a few minutes early, as was my habit, wearing my crisply pressed uniform.

I was ready for another day of the dream.

But before I could begin, a man in a suit waved me toward a half-open door.

“Phoenix?” he called.

“Yes?” I said.

“Come with me.”

“But sir,” I said, “my check-in procedures start in less than five minutes.”

He frowned. “You’re not checking in.”

My mouth fell. Why would they pull me from the flight like this? I took out my phone to double-check the time and schedule, but the heavy expression on the suited man's face told me that this wasn't a matter of the day and time. Something much worse had happened.

I slipped through the open doorway to a dark conference room. There was a long table in the middle of the room, and on the far side were two more airline executives, a man and woman. Both wore grim frowns.

"Have a seat," the man said, gesturing to a chair.

My heart pounding, I lowered myself into the seat. I took a breath, held it, and didn't exhale.

What the heck was going on!?

"I'm sorry to have to do this," the man said, strolling to the far side of the room. He laid a manila folder on the glossy wooden surface of the table and thumbed it open. "But there has been an incident."

I blinked. "An *incident*?"

"That's right," he said.

My mind burned with panicked thoughts.

An incident? What did that mean? Only a few answers came to me, and none were good. Terrorist attack—an emergency with my family—problems with the airplane—

"What happened?" I said, the agony of waiting too much to bear. "Why am I not on my plane?"

The man pressed his palms onto the table and sighed.

"A passenger assaulted a flight attendant en route to San Francisco," he said, his voice grave.

"Oh no. Are they alright?"

"Yes, they're fine," the man grunted. He sniffed and wiped his nose.

Why was he stalling?

“Can you just say it?” I said. “What does this incident have to do with me?”

The man lifted his head to stare me in the eye. “The offending passenger is your companion. She was on that plane thanks to your benefit pass.”

My stomach whirled and I took a quick gulp of water. “I... I’m terribly sorry.”

“You’re grounded,” the man said. “There’ll be an investigation. Until it concludes, we need your airline badge.”

My fingers flinched as if to grab the precious medallion and hide it. I had spent years earning my badge after decades of dreaming. Now I had to surrender it, all because a person I thought I knew had done something unthinkable.

“Please,” I said, my lips trembling, “I can’t believe she did this. I’m so sorry—”

“You’re responsible for the conduct of passengers who use your flight passes,” the man interrupted.

“I know,” I stammered, and the printed text from the employee manual flashed in my memory. “Please, there has to be a way—”

“Phoenix,” he said, once again silencing me. “It’d be easier if you just gave us the badge.”

I drew a long breath through my nose.

This can't be happening. This can't be—

I stood, my legs shaking like pudding. Then, my arm moving as if by a ghost lifting it, I took my beloved Southwest badge and unclipped it from my uniform. I placed it on the table and it hit the wood with a bang.

When I left the airport, it would be my last day of my dream job, and the first of a new, terrifying season of uncertainty.

What Comes Before the Crash

What happened on that flight to San Francisco was not my fault. No one ever said otherwise.

What *was* my fault was my association with the woman responsible. Assaulting a flight attendant isn't merely a crime; it's a federal offense. The only reason she was on that plane was because I trusted her.

My friendship with this woman—we'll call her Becca—was well into its fifth year. While our bond had been powerful for quite some time, Becca also knew that her actions would have an effect on me if she flew with my benefit pass. How could she be so foolish?

Things only got worse when we spoke. Becca refused to take any responsibility for what had happened. From her point of view, it was the crew's fault and she was completely in her rights to have responded the way she did.

Since then we've barely spoken.

Before the sudden and violent crash of my Southwest career, I'd been enjoying the good life. But it was a life based on fast-paced materialism, the kind of existence that always needs the next best thing in order to stay relevant and thrilling. Becca was apparently living a similar existence, but with much greater entitlement. The next thing I knew, my career—and friendship with her—was over.

Looking back, it's easy to blame everything on Becca. Her actions were wrong, no matter how she tried to justify them, yet I was the one paying the price.

But as I reflect, I see evidence that something like this was coming. The more reckless one becomes, and the more one welcomes reckless people into their orbit, the more likely everything's about to hit the fan.

The truth was I had been living on a steady diet of toxicity.

First was the toxic food and drink. By this time I was sober only when work required it. Across the world, I had friends and boyfriends who bought me almost anything I wanted, and I always chose what was pleasurable. Much of it was short-sighted, providing quick gratification but long-term dependence.

These relationships were growing more and more toxic as well. Some of my male companions were giving me their credit cards so I could spend as much as I wished. I tried not to think about what they expected in return, even though it always hovered in the back of my brain like a throbbing tumor.

The higher my Southwest career took me, the further I grew apart from my purpose. I didn't spend much time with my family. I hadn't planted and grown any food like Oma and Opa taught me in over a decade. Heck, they had both passed away, and my life on their farm was a mere vapor of memory. Frankly, I didn't *want* to remember much about them, for with every sweet piece of nostalgia came bitter flashbacks to Mom in the trailer, funerals, divorces, and my sister's drug habit putting on the streets.

I wanted to escape, so I'd fled into a life of decadence and numbness. Then everything with Southwest happened.

Perhaps I should have seen it coming, But a quick, luxurious lifestyle tends to blind you from any wisdom or foresight.

The same is true for anyone caught up in such a lifestyle. Its immediate sensations are quite pleasurable. But they never last, and they never move you toward a missional, purpose-centered life of self-sacrifice and discipline.

They just consume you until you're gone, like a poison.

Choose How You Crash

My termination from Southwest was not my choice, nor would it have ever been. But it triggered a new type of termination in my life, one that I could control even though it brought me even more suffering.

I had begun to find some self-awareness prior to my firing, mostly about my diet. I was clearly addicted to a number of chemicals; one only needed to look at my trash can to see how much alcohol I could consume in a week.

So I decided to “crash,” but in a healthy way. I began drinking nothing but water and eating nothing but raw fruits and vegetables. I consumed only the most basic, fundamental nutrients in order to give my body the chance to completely reset itself.

I’ll be honest: I was miserable!

Yet every pang of hunger or throb of a headache from withdrawals was a reminder of who was *really* in control. Yes, I felt pain, but I was alive and entirely in command of my behavior. I wasn’t a slave to any food, drink, or any craving anymore. It was just me and the earth, rediscovering our dance of survival.

It was in the peak of this crash diet that I was fired from Southwest and my relationship with Becca imploded. With that began the next layer of cleansing: friendships and romantic relationships.

If a partnership wasn’t helping me toward bodily, mental, and spiritual peace, then it had to go. I deleted and blocked phone numbers. I told friends I was no longer available. I ghosted wealthy, influential boyfriends.

I had to get clean in every sense. That meant my social life had to crash, too, forming a second burning pile of rubble next to the ruins of my addictions.

This, too, was painful. But I was still in control, no longer allowing myself to drown in the tempestuous sea of fast-paced relationships.

These interactions had caused me to drift away from my true calling. I was living for one thing: the pleasure of the one moment I was in, the future be-damned.

When your life is shrouded in the fog of moment-to-moment living, you'll never see the purpose that lies outside of the mist.

This isn't to say that life shouldn't be enjoyable, or that we cannot have moments where everything is about the "now."

But there's a difference between enjoying a drink after work on Friday or partying with friends on Saturday, and living a life of daily drunkenness and falling into shallow friendships and romances that amount to little more than the next "thing."

I also don't want to urge you to cut off every relationship. This would be foolish advice, especially if you're a person blessed to have people in your life who genuinely care about you and your future.

With that in mind, here's a good guide to the relationships that are worth keeping.

If someone has shown to truly care about you and the purpose you have been made to fulfill, treasure and protect your relationship with them.

Make these people and your relationships with them a priority. Replace other, lesser events in your schedule with time spent in this person's company.

If someone is only concerned about medicating their trauma and seems to dodge all devotion to purpose, then you need to get away from them.

These people don't know it, but they are toxic to those of us attempting to pursue a higher purpose. To them, their presence is "fun," "laid back," or "chill."

But the truth is that they will relentlessly pressure you to put aside the hard, important work of life and substitute cheap, pleasure-focused escapes that do nothing but lasso you into more addiction and dependence.

Application: Do the Hard, Divine Work

Remember that your purpose is to build something new or rebuild something broken. It may be to help others dealing with their own brokenness. Such work is never easy. The entire inertial force of the universe flows against it. Creation is hard; recreation perhaps harder, as it is plagued with trauma and past flaws.

But it is divine work. It is what composes all good endeavors. Nothing good has happened except that which was done through hard work, suffering, and greater vision than just the pleasure of the moment.

To discover, fight for, and achieve your purpose, you must choose a “crash” diet that removes all foods, drinks, material pursuits, distractions, and relationships that hold you back and tempt you to settle for anything less.

It's that simple, and that damned-near-impossible.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this story is this:

The crash is coming, no matter what. The question is whether or not you'll have any control over it, and any input about how it's going to hurt.

Worldly living always leads to pain. It is the way of all shortsighted, pleasure-seeking journeys. We just don't like to admit it.

Hunger always leads to gut-ache, followed by more hunger mere hours later. One glass of liquor always creates thirst for another and

another. And we don't even need to elaborate on how sex never provides long-lasting satisfaction, especially when it is inspired by loneliness or insecurity.

Each of these worldly things has a healthy role to play in a purposeful life, if it is pursued in moderation. Food is a wonderful thing, especially food that is natural and sustainably grown. Alcohol can transform an awkward gathering into a delightful celebration. And love-making is unspeakably important both relationally and reproductively.

But each of these things have the potential to tempt us beyond our wisdom and self-control. They all have the potential to rise up and compete for the role of Ultimate Good that life is truly about.

Life is about finding that tiny fragment of God's creative spirit that was implanted in you before Time began to turn, and developing that creativity into something that restores life in a world blanketed in death. No one can accomplish this while drowning in fat and sugar and alcohol and meaningless relationships.

It's time to plan your crash before it's too late.

It's time to take control and start making painful choices before the pain starts making choices for you.

- For 15 minutes or more, journal about your greatest temptations, and how they distract you from finding, fighting for, and achieving your deepest purpose:
 - How is **food** a temptation?
 - How is **drink** a temptation?
 - How is **material gain** a temptation?
 - How is **physical pleasure** a temptation?

- What relationships might be a **distraction** from your deepest purpose, and need to be reduced or eliminated?
- What relationships are currently a **support** to your purpose and should be cherished and prioritized?
- Consider the phrase, “tiny fragment of God’s creative spirit that was implanted in you before Time.” How does your creativity or love of helping others lead to healing and growth in the world?

Chapter Takeaways

- As long as we’re not living a purpose-centered life, a crash is going to happen. Either we can embrace it and its pain, or avoid it and prolong the suffering even further
- Some relationships are poisonous to fulfilling your purpose; others are incredibly helpful. Learn the difference and change your social landscape accordingly
- Change your diet so only good things are going into you; don’t be a slave to any food, drink, material good, or physical pleasure