

Flying in the Face of Reason

The pile of charred scrap metal was to one side of the highway, crumpled against some of the trees that lined both sides of the road. It wasn't meant to be scrap. Its true nature was just discernible on a panel that had escaped the worst of the carnage. N1064. Not long ago this had been an aircraft. The FAA register showed it to be a Cessna 172; a single engined high-wing light plane owned by Philip Mullaney, of Gainesville, Florida.

Peter Wincroft considered what he was seeing. He had arrived from the National Transportation Safety Board's Western Pacific Regional Office just minutes earlier. He'd flown in from Seattle arriving Missoula at lunchtime and driven his hired car the fifty miles down Highway 12 to the crash site, which was in Idaho about 8 miles past the state border. The remains of a person were still in the wreckage, barely recognisable as being human. Likely it was the body of Mullaney, though that would have to be confirmed by dental records or DNA. "Florida," thought Wincroft. "He's a long way from home."

He approached the police officer in charge, and showed his NTSB identity card. "How was it reported?" he asked.

The officer looked at the Wincroft, and then at the wreckage. He appeared exhausted. He'd been there all night, making sure the body and wreckage weren't interfered with. Finally he nodded towards some steps leading into the trees lining the road. "There's a picnic area down there," he said. "A family was here on an outing. They drove until they got a mobile signal, and then called 911. They said they saw it flying quite low overhead, and then heard a loud bang. The father, a Mr Johnson, said that he ran to the road to get a view clear of the trees, and saw the aircraft descending and turning and then trying to land on the road. It clipped a tree, cartwheeled, and caught fire." The officer grimaced. "At least the children didn't see it happen."

The NTSB investigator surveyed the scene. Landing even a small plane on the road here was always going to be tricky, so it wasn't very surprising that it hadn't worked out well, and especially when it was attempted from a low level in the first place. Yet there was little other option for the pilot of a single engined aircraft flying over this kind of terrain when the propeller stopped turning. Certainly there were no nice flat fields of the kind that trainee pilots used to practice forced landings. Wincroft thought about what the pilot must have felt while trying to land a 172, with its 36 foot wingspan, between trees, onto a road that was only 25 feet wide, not including the shoulder area. He shuddered.

He took some photographs, and then told the officer that some people would come out the following day to retrieve what was left of the aircraft after the coroner had removed the body, and that it needed to be kept secure until then. After saying goodbye he returned to his hire car.

The investigation file, such as it was, was sitting on the passenger seat. Wincroft took out a pen, opened the file, and wrote a few notes. Then he briefly scanned the sparse information on the only other sheet present. "Departed GNV, 15:00 local time, Tuesday," it said. "GNV?" The owner lived in Gainesville, Florida. Could GNV be Gainesville? An app on his smartphone confirmed his suspicion. Gainesville Regional Airport.

Wincroft shook his head, pressed the speed dial for his office, and hissed with annoyance. "No signal".

The drive back to Missoula was uneventful, but Wincroft was mildly irritated. Light aircraft can fly out of many kinds of airfield, so their departure points were not always recorded, but N1064's departure point definitely wasn't Gainesville, and someone should have noticed that already. "Two thousand miles, non-stop, in a 172? Absurd."

With the hire car returned to the rental company, and Wincroft checked in for his flight back home, he finally had time to call his office. The speed dial worked now, and he was soon talking to a junior investigator.

"John," he said, "I've just been looking at the Cessna that came down near Missoula. The file says it was out of Gainesville, Florida, which is clearly impossible. Could you chase that up? I'll see you in the office tomorrow. Thanks."

That done, Wincroft bought a paper, and headed for the cafeteria to await his 90 minute flight back to Seattle. It would be late by the time he got home. An entire day expended just to take some photographs and add a few notes to a file.

The next day, when Wincroft arrived back at the open plan office he shared with John and a few other junior investigators, John was already there, and looked up. "I followed up on the Cessna," he said. "Gainesville Tower says it departed there at 15:00 local time."

Wincroft sighed, raising his eyes as he did so. He pulled the file from his briefcase, and examined his notes. "So, allowing for time zone changes, and regardless of whether he landed somewhere on the way, Mullaney was supposed to have flown two thousand miles in five hours in an airplane that has a top speed of less than one hundred fifty miles per hour. Well, I suppose there's no point in trying to argue with Gainesville about whether it was there, or when. Check with airfields closer to Missoula. If nothing shows up, change the departure field to 'unknown'."

Wincroft put the matter from his mind. Other people would pursue the reason for the failure, if it was indeed possible to discover anything after what the crash had done to the engine. Different people again would check the identity of the deceased pilot. In a month or so, a preliminary report would be published, and in perhaps a year, a final report detailing any findings.

Tom Hellier was a journalist. At least, that's what he liked to think. What some others considered him to be is unprintable. Let's just call him a 'hack', and leave it at that. Tom's speciality was stories involving pretty much anything that mainstream journalists wouldn't touch, giving him a field that was getting noticeably narrower, year by year. The Florida Daily Reader was his employer, and outlet for his implausible musings.

Members of the public were often e-mailing him with odd details. It was clear that most of these people had a tenuous grasp on reality, but sometimes the reports seemed genuine. Tom suspected that not all his informants were avid subscribers to

the Reader, and that some were just baiting him. Still, he looked into anything promising.

One of the possibly baiting kinds of e-mail had arrived about a month earlier. Someone claiming to work in air traffic control in Florida had allegedly picked up a call on the aviation emergency frequency of 121.5 MHz. They'd provided a transcript:

“Mayday Mayday Mayday, I’m losing control. There’s lightning all around and strange shapes...there’s a kind of vortex forming. It’s pulling me in. I don’t know what they...”

That had been all that had been received. Nothing had been done about it, because it had contained no information about the identity or whereabouts of the aircraft. At the time, it hadn't seemed enough to hang a story on, even for the likes of Tom Hellier.

However, today, Hellier noticed a small item in the paper he usually subscribed to (which was not the Reader). It was about a preliminary report into the fatal crash of a Cessna 172, with a comment about how it wasn't known where it had departed from. And the date of the crash was the same as the date of the alleged Mayday report.

Hellier made some inquiries. Yes, the earlier report of the Mayday call had been genuine, and the call was pretty much as he'd been informed. No, nothing more had come of it. The general consensus was that it had been a prank.

That was more than enough fact checking for Hellier. His story would appear in the Reader two days later, on the Thursday.

When Wincroft arrived in his office on Friday, it was devoid of people, but there was a copy of Thursday's Florida Daily Reader on his desk. It wasn't immediately obvious who had put it there, but it was rather obvious why. On the front page was the glaring headline:

“Aliens Cause Plane Crash: NTSB Investigating”

The article then continued:

“On the afternoon of Tuesday, the 25th of June, Philip Mullaney set off from Gainesville in his private plane headed for Atlanta. He would never get there. About an hour after departure, he made an emergency call saying that he was being hit by lightning, seeing strange shapes, losing control and being sucked into some kind of alien vortex. He said that he didn't know what the aliens wanted. We don't know either, but it's clear that the aliens used the vortex to capture him, held him for four hours, and then crashed his plane into the ground two thousand miles away on the other side of the US. Confidential sources in the NTSB tell me that they are still investigating how the aliens killed Philip Mullaney, amid concerns that they might do the same thing to an airliner full of passengers.”

That was as far as Wincroft got before John arrived back from where he'd been making the cup of coffee that he now held in his hand. “I see you found the paper. O'Brien says you're to call him as soon as you get in.”

“OK, thanks.”

O’Brien was the head of the NTSB regional office. Wincroft called him, and O’Brien said “Can you come to my office? I don’t want to discuss this over the phone.” Wincroft hung up.

“Gotta go see the boss”, said Wincroft. John nodded. When Wincroft reached O’Brien’s office, he saw that his superior had another copy of the Reader on his desk.

O’Brien got straight to the point. “This nonsense is gaining traction, and the top brass are very annoyed about the leak. They’ve told me to do whatever it takes to kill the story...”

Wincroft interrupted. “We don’t know that there really was a leak, do we? I mean, the only information Hellier claims to have got from a confidential source is clearly untrue anyway. Most likely he just made it up.”

O’Brien conceded the point. “We’ve issued a denial that we’re investigating any alien involvement, and made it clear that we don’t believe this accident has any ramifications for airline safety. But you know that official denials are routinely disbelieved by some in the community. To kill the story, we need to be able to say exactly what did happen. You’re to hand whatever you’re doing to other people, and devote your time entirely to this.”

Given that he didn’t really have a choice anyway, Wincroft nodded assent, and left the office. He snarled to himself. “Investigate nonsense. Great.”

Back at his desk, he called up the preliminary report. He scanned it quickly. Under “Engine” he read “...portion of the number 4 cylinder had separated from the crankcase...” and later “...a fatigue crack that began at the outer surface of the barrel...”

It seemed reasonably straightforward. The engine had failed due to a fatigue crack, perhaps initiated at a manufacturing defect. That would certainly have caused the bang that the witnesses said they heard, and the engine would not have continued to run afterwards. Such things happened occasionally. Had he been flying at a sensible altitude over more forgiving terrain, Mullaney would probably have survived.

He looked further down. “Wing and fuselage: Some small burn marks were noted on the skin that are consistent with low energy lightning strikes. No lightning was noted in the crash area.”

Wincroft felt a shiver run up his spine. That hack Hellier had obviously not actually read the preliminary report itself, or he’d have mentioned this. The link with the Mayday call was obvious. And disturbing.

He picked up his phone and called his boss. “This is Peter. I’ll need to go to Florida.”

“Why?”

Wincroft hadn’t really thought that far ahead. He certainly wasn’t about to tell O’Brien that it looked as if there was something in Hellier’s story after all. “Hellier claims that the aircraft departed Gainesville on Tuesday afternoon. Unfortunately, that’s what Gainesville’s records say as well. I need to prove those records wrong, and prove it in a way that doesn’t rely on assuming that Hellier’s story is nonsense. For that, I need to talk to the people on the ground in Gainesville. I don’t think I can do this over the phone.”

It sounded a bit lame when he said it, and O’Brien was clearly annoyed. NTSB budgets don’t usually run to providing transcontinental flights and hotel accommodation to investigate light-aircraft crashes. Still, if that’s what it took to get his superiors off his back, so be it. “OK, then.”

An eastward flight across the continental USA from Seattle to Gainesville takes seven or eight hours, depending on connection times. Add that to the three hour time zone change, and the journey effectively takes up an entire day. It was already too late to set out on the Friday, so Wincroft spent the rest of the day passing on the work that he had been doing, arranged to visit the control tower at Gainesville Regional Airport at 11am on Monday, and booked a room at a motel near the airport there. Then he copied all the NTSB's internal investigation documents related to the accident onto his laptop. Lastly, he obtained a recording of the Mayday call, and copied that onto his smartphone. Then he went home. He spent Saturday with his wife Fiona. On Sunday she drove him to the airport and he flew to Atlanta and caught a connecting flight to Gainesville. He took a cab to the motel, and struggled into reception, for the first time not having the benefit an airport trolley to help carry his laptop, briefcase and travel bag.

The ground-floor room he'd been allocated was basic, but adequate. There was a bed, a table, and a couple of chairs. In a corner were tea and coffee making facilities, so he made himself some tea, dangling the tea bag in the cup while pondering what to do next. Then he took out his laptop, put it on the table, sat on a chair, and called up a file on Mullaney.

Mullaney was, or rather, had been, the owner of a very successful light manufacturing business. He was 35, single, never married, and lived alone. The executors of his estate had advised that that he owned the house he lived in, and that there was no mortgage. He had investments in a considerable portfolio of shares. There was no debt other than that on a credit card account, which was paid off in full every month. He owned a BMW sedan, but apart from that and the Cessna there was nothing to tell people that he was quite wealthy.

The autopsy had found nothing to suggest that he had any significant medical problems. He had been of moderate build, and was just slightly overweight. A photograph from his Facebook page showed a face that was, as far as Wincroft could judge, moderately, but not especially, handsome. In summary, Mullaney had been successful in business, and didn't appear to have any serious problems.

Wincroft reflected on the usefulness, or otherwise, of the information. After all, they knew how Mullaney died, and but for that worthless hack Hellier, the preliminary report would already be gathering dust, and Wincroft would be at home with Fiona.

He cradled his head in his hands, knocking his spectacles off in the process. He closed his eyes, "Can this really make any sense?" He didn't expect an answer, and he didn't get one, so he went out and found something to eat. When he returned, he set his alarm clock to 9am, since there was no point in starting his investigation suffering from jet lag, and went to bed.

The cab dropped Wincroft with his briefcase outside the public passenger terminal at 10:50am on the Monday morning. He went in, and headed for the airport administration office. At the reception desk he gave his name, and said he was there

to meet Paul Plander. He was invited to take a seat, and within a few minutes a middle-aged man approached, offered his hand, introduced himself as Paul, and led Wincroft out of the building, and towards the control tower. As they walked the intervening 400 yards, Paul asked what he could do for the NTSB.

“We’re looking further into the crash of a Cessna 172 in Idaho ...”

“Oh yes, that Daily Reader article,” interjected the other.

“... and I thought I’d start right at the beginning. I’d like to see for myself how the airport appears from the control tower.”

The lift carried them quickly to the observation deck, and Wincroft looked around. The main runway ran across in front of the tower, about 300 yards away, with a taxiway running between it and the tower. However, there was a secondary runway off to the left, at an angle to the main runway. Its far end was perhaps two thirds of a mile away.

“Which runway did the Cessna depart from?” he asked.

“What was the date?”

“June 25.”

Paul turned to a computer console, entered a query, and said “There was quite a strong south-easterly that day. Everything was departing from runway 11.”

“That’s the one in front of us?”

“Yes, from left to right.”

Wincroft mused “So, it would have been in clear view as it took off.”

In the distance, Wincroft could see a number of small aircraft apparently parked, and surmised that that was where the general aviation terminal was.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ve seen what I need for now. Could I get a copy of your records for departures and arrivals of the Cessna - it was N1064 - for the three months leading up to the crash?” The records were printed out and handed to him. “And now I need to visit the general aviation terminal.”

Paul gestured out the window. “It’s a long way away - and more than two miles by road. I’ll see if there’s an airport vehicle available to take you.”

At the general aviation terminal, Wincroft thanked the driver, and stood outside for a moment. As he’d expected, there was a high fence between the road and the apron. The only way to get to the latter was either through a locked gate or via the terminal itself. He went in. Across a large hall, directly ahead of him, was another door that lead to the apron. Beside it was a reception desk, at which a young woman was sitting.

Wincroft approached her, said he was from the NTSB, and asked to speak to the manager.

The receptionist requested some identification, and he showed her his NTSB identity card. Then the receptionist made a call and after a minute or so, a woman approached, and introduced herself with “Hello, I’m Christina. Please come through.”

She led the way to an office, where she gestured for Wincroft to take a seat, and sat herself down at her desk. “How can I help you?” she asked.

“N1064 used to spend a lot of time parked here. You may be aware that it crashed a month or so back.”

Her expression darkened. “Yes. Philip Mullaney was killed. We knew him well.”

“I’m wondering how certain it is that it was Mr Mullaney who piloted that aircraft.”

She looked startled. “Is there any doubt?”

“You’re presumably aware that the timings are difficult to explain, if we don’t involve, um, aliens. At the moment, I’m just trying to pin down all the details.”

Christina did something on her computer, then picked up her phone and pressed a couple of digits. “Wendy? Could you come to my office please?”

A moment later, the woman Wincroft had seen at the reception desk appeared in the doorway. “Yes?”

“You were on the reception desk when Philip Mullaney came through that last time, weren’t you? Mr Wincroft here from the NTSB wants to know whether you’re sure that it really was Philip.”

Wendy seemed bemused. “Yes, of course.”

“You saw his face?” asked Wincroft?

“Yes. And talked to him. It was definitely Philip.”

“Thank you,” said Wincroft. Christina nodded to Wendy, who left.

“I’d like to see the place where the Cessna was parked.”

Christina got up, and invited him to follow her. She approached the door leading to the apron, and glanced at Wendy, now again at the reception desk, who reached for something out of view. There was a buzzing noise, and Christina pushed the door open and went through, holding it so that Wincroft could follow.

When they reached the Apron, Christina stopped, and pointed to a marked area where there were some light aircraft.

“Just anywhere, or did he have an allocated place?” asked Wincroft.

“Oh, there are no allocated places. Basically, it’s first come first served. Most people just park as close to the terminal as they can, and Philip usually did the same.

“All right, I’ve seen enough. Thank you.” He followed Christina back into the terminal. There were some chairs and tables there. “Would it be OK if I just sat here while I look through some documents?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Christina. If there’s anything you need, please ask the receptionist. She said goodbye, and disappeared back into her office.

Wincroft pulled out the arrival and departure records he’d been given at the control tower. There was not much information there. Just the aircraft’s call sign, invariably N1064 of course, a departure time or arrival time, and, for departures, a destination airport name, if the pilot had given one. He hadn’t expected more. This was a privately operated light aircraft, not a public transport airline service. Indeed, in the normal course of events, if the pilot didn’t file a flight plan, no one would even check that the aircraft went where the pilot said it was going.

It appeared that the aircraft was most often at Gainesville over night, though by no means always. Atlanta South Regional airport was a regular destination, but other airfields scattered around Florida were also listed. The records indicated that Mullaney had mostly flown out one day, and back the next, or made a return trip somewhere in one day. On a quite a few occasions he’d made a return trip, and then flown out again, all in one day. Wincroft noted that that had happened on the day of the accident. In other circumstances, that might have made the investigator wonder about pilot fatigue, but it didn’t seem a likely factor in this case.

He put the records back into his briefcase, and asked the receptionist to call him a cab, which he waited for outside. It arrived within minutes, and he got in. A glance at his watch showed him that his entire visit to both the tower and the terminal had taken less than 90 minutes.

“Where to?” asked the driver. Wincroft blinked. “Um, wait a moment.” He thought, then looked up address of Mullaney’s business, and told the driver to take him there.

Mullaney might be dead, but his business was still operating, being run by its general manager, Marilyn Cummings, while the executors decided what should be done with it. When Wincroft arrived, he asked to speak to her.

Wincroft introduced himself, and Cummings was immediately on the defensive. "Why are the NTSB questioning us? We have nothing to do with aviation."

"Please bear with me," Wincroft said. "I'm not investigating the company at all. I have no reason to. I'm just hoping for some more background information on Mr Mullaney. So far all I have is information about his property and finances. I know nothing about the man himself. Did he have any friends? I know he was single, but was there anyone special in his life? Any interests that you know of?"

Cummings seemed less hostile now. "I don't really know much about him. I'm an employee, not a confidant. I know that he liked flying, and owned that Cessna. His life seemed to revolve around that and the company. When he wasn't away in his plane, he usually worked late. Beyond that ..." she paused. "I once saw a leaflet from a UFO group in his car. He never said anything about it."

For the second time in this investigation, Wincroft got that shivering sensation running up his spine. He tried, unsuccessfully, to hide his surprise. "UFO group" he croaked?

"Yes. It struck me as odd at the time. Philip was a pretty down-to-Earth kind of person. I would never think he'd be into that fringe science type stuff." She let out a short sigh. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Wincroft pulled out his smartphone, and played the recording of the Mayday call. "Does that sound like Mr Mullaney?" he asked.

"The quality is not very good." She hesitated. "I'm far from certain, but if you forced me to answer yes or no, I'd have to say yes."

Wincroft decided to return to his motel room. On the ride back in the cab, he tried to fathom how the UFO group could fit in with what he knew already. Bizarre coincidence? It didn't seem likely, but if not that, then what?

In the motel room, he called the executors. No, they knew nothing about UFOs and didn't want to, and no, he could not enter Mullaney's house without a warrant.

He hung up, and stared at his phone with loathing, because he knew what he had to do next, and he didn't think it was going to be pleasant. He pressed a speed dial.

"O'Brien".

Wincroft took a deep breath. "It's Peter Wincroft. I need to get a Notice of Inspection Authority to enter Philip Mullaney's house to search for material about UFO groups."

The stunned silence from the other end was somewhat expected. Rather less expected was that the rest of the reaction would be quite so strong. Wincroft had to pull the phone sharply away from his ear when it happened.

"Are you completely out of your frigging mind?" O'Brien shouted. "What are you going to do - file a report explaining that Mullaney was silenced by aliens because he was getting too close to the truth?"

When it seemed that that was all that O'Brien had to say, Wincroft took another deep breath, and said "Sir, all I seem to be achieving here is to gather evidence proving that Mullaney took off from here in his Cessna, issued a Mayday call after an hour, and then crashed his plane two thousand miles away an impossibly short four hours after that. The UFO link is tenuous, but it's all I have to move forward with at the moment. Even if it's safe to assume that there are no real aliens

implicated in this, the belief that they exist seems to be involved, somehow. I need to find the UFO group that Mullaney may have been taking part in, and all I can think of is that there may be material in his home that will help me.”

O’Brien had calmed down perhaps just a little. “OK, OK” he said, “I’ll arrange it.” The line went dead. Apparently O’Brien had simply hung up on him. Presumably the NTSB’s lawyers would contact him tomorrow.

For the moment, there was nothing to do but go out for a meal, and hope there was a movie somewhere worth seeing.

Early on Tuesday morning, he got a call, but it wasn’t from the lawyers. Instead it was O’Brien. “The lawyers say that you can’t have a Notice of Inspection Authority for Mullaney’s house” he said. “The accident didn’t happen there, there’s no wreckage there, and no reason to think that anything related to the accident is there either. Indeed, they point out that you’re not really investigating the accident at all, which puts the investigation outside the NTSB’s jurisdiction, unless you want to argue that you’re trying to determine how aliens caused it.”

Wincroft slumped back into his seat. “Then can they at least lean on the executors enough to get me Mullaney’s bank and credit card statements for the last six months? Maybe I can find the UFO group that way.”

It seems they could, because a few hours later, a courier arrived with a package for him, containing copies of the financial records he’d asked for.

Actually, Wincroft was far from optimistic about this approach. After all, what did he know about UFO groups? Did they have bank accounts? Membership fees? This group could be nothing more than handful of people meeting at someone’s house on occasion. On the other hand, there had been the leaflet that Marilyn Cummings had seen in Mullaney’s car, which at least suggested some level of organisation.

Unsurprisingly, there was nothing in either the bank or credit card statements that said “UFO”. He glared at the documents as if that would force them to confess. The credit card statements showed frequent payments to fixed based operators, usually known as FBOs, at various airfields, probably for fuel, landing fees and parking. The bank statements showed monthly, though varying, payments to the FBO that ran the general aviation terminal at Gainesville. It was likely he had an account with them. About three months before the accident, an entry in the bank statements showed the receipt of one million three hundred thousand dollars from an entity that, judging from its name, was a share broker, and then a payment of the same amount to another company. Wincroft sighed. This kind of transaction never appeared in his own bank account. The lives of the rich and - well Mullaney wasn’t actually famous.

Wincroft looked back to the credit card statements again. In amongst the payments to FBOs, and the kinds of transactions found in anyone’s credit card statement, he finally noticed a pattern. There were repeated payments to four different companies, one per week, save the occasional gap, in a four-week cycle. He used his smartphone to look them up. They were all restaurants, and all in Atlanta. He took the arrival and departure records out of his briefcase. Yes, there was a departure to Atlanta South Regional each week. Always in the mid-afternoon of Tuesday and Mullaney invariably flew back the next morning.

If Mullaney had lived to continue the pattern, then this afternoon he would have flown his Cessna to Atlanta South Regional, and then made a payment to a company that simply called itself “Fredrico’s”.

Wincroft looked at his watch, and used his smartphone again to check flight times. It was just after 2pm, and there was a flight to Atlanta at 3:30pm which would get him there before five. He’d have to stay overnight in Atlanta. He gathered his things, and went to checkout from the motel, scowling when he was told that it was long past checkout time, and that he would have to pay for that night anyway. Not that it was his own money, he remembered.

On arrival in Atlanta, he realised he didn’t have time to check into a motel first, so rather than take a cab to Fredrico’s, which would have involved taking his luggage into the restaurant as well, he hired a car and drove there himself, arriving at 5:30pm.

The restaurant looked as if it had seen better days. The sign on the door said “Open”, and there were some staff inside, but otherwise it was empty. Wincroft went in and noted that a number of tables had been pushed together, and a sign saying “Reserved” was displayed there. He asked for a table for one, was shown to a seat next to the window, and ordered coffee.

When the waitress brought it to his table, he explained who he was, and asked her if she knew anything about a UFO group.

“Well,” she said, glancing at the reserved tables, “I expect you’re talking about the people who’ve booked those tables. They’re here every fourth Tuesday. A bit rowdy for my taste, but we need their money.”

Wincroft pulled out Mullaney’s Facebook photograph. “Does he come?” he asked.

She looked at it. “Maybe. Sorry, I’m not sure.”

“OK, thanks. It would help my investigation if, when they arrive, you didn’t say anything about me.”

She nodded.

People started drifting in at about 6pm, and by 7pm it appeared that most of the group had arrived, since almost all of the seats had been occupied. Wincroft ordered dinner and ate it while he quietly observed the goings on from across the room.

With one notable exception, they were a pretty ordinary crowd. The notable exception was a woman who was probably in her early thirties. She was slim, very attractive, vivacious, and clearly the focus of a lot of attention from the rest of the group, which was more than two-thirds male.

Apart from that, Wincroft divined two things about her while he watched. The first was that she was named Gillian. The second was that she was, in Wincroft’s considered judgement, stark raving mad. He hadn’t expected a huge level of rational thought from these people, but the woman seemed to seize on any notion about aliens and space ships, no matter how improbable, and enthuse about it as if it were well established proven fact.

Eventually it seemed that the group were preparing to leave, and Wincroft realised that if he was going to learn anything more, he had better talk to them while he had the chance.

He got up, walked to their table, and said. “Good evening. I apologise for the intrusion. My name is Peter Wincroft, and I’m an accident investigator from the National Transport Safety Board.” He was about to say more, but was interrupted.

“Wow! Are you investigating the aliens that killed Philip?”

Answering that question without putting the group offside was going to require a degree of tact. "I'm investigating the circumstances surrounding the accident, to tie up some loose ends," he said carefully. "We're keeping an open mind about the aliens."

It was, of course, not surprising that they'd known about the UFO angle, and they mainly expressed their profound certainty that he'd been abducted. They were also sure that the aliens had never intended for him to die.

"So why did they abandon him over difficult terrain so far from home?" Wincroft asked.

They had no answer, and Wincroft suddenly realised that the question had been absurd, and that he was being seduced by their delusional collective worldview. He shook his head to clear it.

He considered playing them the Mayday recording, but thought they'd probably have claimed it was Mullaney even if it had sounded like Donald Duck. Instead, he said "Leaving aside his possible involvement with aliens, can you tell me anything about Mr Mullaney?"

They looked at each other. Then a middle-aged woman replied "We didn't really know him very well. He was always rather quiet. In truth, I'm not sure he was a believer."

"Believer?"

"In aliens."

"Oh. So why was he here, then, Ms...?"

"Call me Joanna." She opened her mouth as if to continue, but glanced at Gillian briefly, and closed it. Eventually, she just said "I don't know."

Mullaney turned his gaze to each of the others and they shook their heads. By now some of the group were getting up to leave, so Wincroft said good-bye, paid his bill, and walked to his car, with the intention of finding a motel. As he was getting in, Joanna approached him.

"I didn't want to say this in front of Gillian, but I really think that she was the reason Philip came to these meetings."

"Were they in a relationship?" asked Wincroft.

"On no, she never even looked at him, but I could see that he was infatuated with her."

"Did the others know?" he asked.

"Maybe one or two of the other girls did. We never talked about it. I doubt any of the guys had a clue."

"Do you know her full name?"

"It's Gillian Williams. She's quite well known in ufology circles."

She turned back towards her friends, and Wincroft got into the car. As he started it, Wincroft could see her with the others, one of whom was talking to her, and pointing in his direction. Whatever excuse she was giving for talking to him alone was something he'd never know.

He'd passed a motel on the way from the airport, so he headed back that way to see whether they had a vacancy. While driving, he considered what he'd learned. Despite having come to Atlanta suspecting it would turn out to be a wild-goose chase, he felt he'd discovered something important, though he couldn't put his finger on what.

Wincroft returned to Gainesville the next morning, and hired a car. Then he checked back into the motel he'd left the day before. He was given a different room. The receptionist explained that his earlier room had been taken the previous night, and the motel had been full until some guests checked out this morning. Wincroft reflected on the fact that this meant that the motel had been paid twice for the same room, but said nothing. As he'd noted before, it wasn't his money.

However, his new room was essentially identical to the one he'd foregone. He sat his laptop on the table, connected it to his smartphone so that he could access the Internet, called up Google, and entered "Gillian Williams". There were many results, including some photographs, many of them attractive women, but none looking like the Gillian he'd seen. He tried again, this time adding UFO to the search term. Now he had more success. It was clear that his Gillian Williams was, as Joanna had said, quite well known in ufology circles. Indeed, the correct word was probably "notorious." On several occasions, she'd started relationships with men who'd received significant media interest by claiming to have suffered alien abductions. These relationships inevitably fell apart when the abduction stories were found wanting, but Gillian never seemed to learn from the experience.

It wasn't hard to obtain a phone number for her, so he called. He gave his name, and she immediately recognised him from the previous night.

"Ms Williams, could you tell me when you first met Philip Mullaney?"

She thought for a bit, and then said "It was about a week before he first came to one of our meetings. I was handing out fliers outside a shopping mall, and he stopped and took one. He talked to me for a bit, and then said he'd come to our next meeting."

Wincroft said "I'm sorry, but I need to ask something a bit delicate. How shall I put it? Did he express any particular interest in you?"

If Gillian felt this question was overly intrusive, she certainly didn't show it in her voice. "He did ask me out for a coffee, but I declined."

"That was the only time?"

"Yes."

"Thankyou Ms Williams, that's all I wanted. Goodbye."

That rather confirmed a growing suspicion he had. This whole affair was starting to make a twisted kind of sense, but it also meant that he'd been looking at it the wrong way almost from the very beginning.

Wincroft called up the maintenance records for N1064 from amongst the internal documents he'd copied onto his laptop before leaving Seattle. The aircraft had had its most recent 100 hour check done on the 29th of May. He pulled out the flight records provided by the tower, and did some rough calculations. He estimated that, if its only flights had been to and from Gainesville, and the flights for which destinations were given were representative of the few for which they weren't, then before taking off on the fateful flight, the aircraft had flown another 40 hours. Add six for the round trip to Atlanta that Mullaney presumably intended to fly, then by the time it got back it would have been getting close to needing a 50 hour check.

It was time to talk to O'Brien again. "Hello sir, it's Peter Wincroft. I'm calling to tell you I think I'm making progress in this investigation. I'd rather not go into details, because I could still be completely wrong, but I'm going to need some help accessing information. I was hoping you could call in a favour with the FBI."

“Can you at least promise me that there are no aliens involved, and that you can prove it?”

“If I’m right, yes.”

“What do you need?”

“I need to know about...” he looked at the bank statements, “... Myfield Investments. Specifically, the company of that name that received a payment from Mullaney’s bank account. I’ll e-mail you the details.”

O’Brien said, with a quizzical tone, “Are you sure about this? It seems a very unusual course for an aviation accident investigation.”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Yes, well OK then. Is that all?”

“For now.”

Wincroft ended the call and looked at his watch. More time had passed than he would have thought, and it was already well past lunchtime. There was nothing more for him to do on the investigation until (and if) the FBI provided the information he’d asked O’Brien to get. He headed for a shopping mall with the intention of finding something to eat. After parking in its parking lot, he looked around for the entrance to the shops, and spotted some elevators, to which he walked.

He’d waited only fifteen seconds before the doors opened on one of them. He started walking in, but almost immediately bumped into a young woman coming out. To his surprise, he recognised her. “Hello Wendy. Having a day off?”

“Oh, Hi. No, I only work the morning shift.”

“Ah, well, have a nice day.”

Reflecting on how often these strange coincidences seemed to occur, he continued on into the mall, and had a rather unsatisfactory meal of Indian curry and rice.

Wincroft hadn’t expected an immediate response from the FBI, and none was forthcoming, so now he found himself away from home, in a motel room, with nothing to do. A quick search on Google revealed that he could spend the day improving his golf handicap, which seemed to him as worthwhile a pursuit as any. Whether he would succeed in claiming it on expenses would probably depend on the eventual outcome of the investigation.

It was already 7pm when he got a call from O’Brien. The FBI would cooperate, but preferred to talk to him face to face. An appointment had been made for Wincroft to see special agent Mulligan, at 9am Friday morning in the FBI’s Gainesville office, or it could be changed to a different time if 9am was inconvenient.

“9am is fine,” said Wincroft.

Whoever O’Brien had contacted for a favour obviously had some considerable clout, because special agent Mulligan was actually waiting for Wincroft at the reception desk of the FBI office when he arrived on the dot of 9am. They shook hands, and Mulligan gestured towards a meeting room.

Mulligan explained, "People get strange ideas from television and movies about what we can do at short notice, or indeed at all. Some information in the hands of government agencies is readily accessible, but otherwise we have to issue subpoenas, and give people time to comply with them, or, as they do on occasion, object to them in court. However, in this case we were able to determine that Myfield Investments was wholly owned by Philip Mullaney. So we informed the executors of its existence, persuaded people to expedite the process that would give the executors access to Myfield Investments' bank account, and convinced the executors that it was in the public interest for account details to be made available to us for use in relation to your investigation."

"What form did that persuasion and convincing take?" asked Wincroft, suspiciously.

Mulligan remained expressionless, and said nothing, but handed Wincroft a file that contained just two sheets of paper.

The first was a print out from an on-line banking system for an account held by Myfield Investments. It showed the receipt of the payment from Mullaney, and just two outgoing payments. One was in excess of one million dollars to a Wilfred and Jennifer Holloway. The other was for two hundred fifty thousand dollars to a Cornelis Dubich.

The FBI had done some research and had been able to find the Holloways in a retirement home. They learned that Myfield Investments had purchased what had been their wheat farm near Statenville, Georgia.

The second page was a map showing the farm's location, some eight miles from the town.

"Do we know anything about this Dubich?" asked Wincroft.

In reply, Mulligan handed him another sheet of paper. It contained details of the driving licence of a Cornelis Dubich living in Spring Hill, some ninety five miles by road, south of Gainesville.

"How do we know that this Cornelis Dubich is the one to whom the money was paid?" asked Wincroft.

Mulligan shrugged. "It's a rare enough name, and he lives in Florida. It seems a good bet."

Wincroft examined the page. Dubich was 29 years old, and his photograph showed him sporting a substantial beard. He had reported his licence lost a couple of months ago, and obtained a replacement.

Wincroft glanced at the file. This is mine to take with me, presumably. Mulligan said "Not Dubich's licence extract. The Myfield file, yes."

Wincroft copied down Dubich's address, handed the sheet back to Mulligan, and departed.

He entered the farm's address into an app on his smartphone. It told him that Statenville was something under three hour's drive away.

The drive up took the rest of the morning, and it was nearly 1pm when Wincroft arrived at the farm. The driveway from the road led to a house, and some farm buildings, which included a large barn. He went to the house, and knocked at the door. No answer. He tried again, with the same result. It seemed there was no one around, which was rather to be expected in the circumstances, so he walked over to the barn, and then beyond it to a single large field surrounded by trees. The field had been sown with grass, perhaps to help keep the weeds down after Wilfred Holloway had stopped farming the land. It was rather uneven, as would be normal for a field that

had been ploughed, but Wincroft noticed a substantial area that someone had obviously gone to some lengths to level.

The barn was completely open at one end. Wincroft looked inside, and saw some tins of paint. The drips down the side showed that they'd been used, and that one was white, and the other black.

Having spent less than half an hour at the farm, Wincroft returned to his car, for the long drive back to Gainesville. He was sure he had almost the entire picture now, yet there remained a glaring hole. Mullaney had been seen to depart from Gainesville that Tuesday afternoon, and had been positively identified by Wendy.

He was approaching his motel when he suddenly saw a significant inconsistency. He turned round and headed instead for the general aviation terminal. When he got there, he immediately asked to speak to Christina.

She invited him into her office, indicated the chair, and waited for him to speak.

"When I was last here I asked how certain it was that it was Mullaney who left here on that Tuesday afternoon. You called Wendy in, and she said that she'd seen him, recognised him, and talked to him. But the other day, I met Wendy at the mall, and she said that she only works the morning shift."

Christina said "Yes. That's right. Philip came through early in the morning, and flew off somewhere, then returned at about 2:30pm." She pointed to the parking area, visible from her office. He parked over there, quite far from the terminal, and then left again, for Atlanta, at 3pm."

"So he didn't come in?"

"No."

"Didn't it seem odd that he'd park for a while, then leave again?"

"Not really, at least not for him. He did it quite often. Sometimes he'd come in to get a coffee, or use the bathroom. Sometimes not. We were used to it."

Wincroft said, "So no one actually saw Mr Mullaney after he left in the morning."

"Well, we could see him in the plane, and he wears a brightly coloured jacket that is quite recognisable even from a distance."

Wincroft said "I see. Tell me, did he have a passenger with him when he left in the morning?"

Christina called up her records. "Yes."

"And what time did they leave here?"

"5am."

"And did that passenger return with him later?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. If Philip had brought his passenger back, he'd have to have accompanied him to the terminal. We'd certainly have remembered if the passenger came in alone, and would have said something to Philip about it."

"Thank you for your time, Christina."

Back in his car, Wincroft called O'Brien. "I need airline records for anyone named Cornelis Dubich for the 25th of June, and the few weeks preceding. I also need

to know whether Dubich has a pilot's licence." He provided Dubich's home address." If at all possible, I'd like to get that tonight."

"Is this thing nearing the end?" asked O'Brien.

"I believe so," said Wincroft. "If the travel records and licence details show what I think they'll show."

The information arrived in his e-mail later that evening. Wincroft looked, and nodded. His sleep that night was restful. There was just one more thing to do, and then he could return home to Fiona.

Wincroft got up very early, checked out of the motel, and drove the one hour forty-five minute trip to Spring Hill, arriving at 8am. It was time to confront Dubich. Since it was still early on a Saturday, Wincroft was hopeful that Dubich would be at home. He knocked on Dubich's door. The man who answered could not be said to have a beard, but it was clear he'd not shaved in some time.

"Mr Dubich," the investigator said. "I'm Peter Wincroft, of the NTSB. I'd like to talk to you about Philip Mullaney."

Dubich was clearly shocked. He stood there speechless for a few seconds, before saying he had no knowledge of Mullaney.

Wincroft said "I'm quite certain that's not true. Why don't you let me tell you what I think happened, and then you can decide how you want to proceed. Otherwise I'll have to get the FBI involved." Wincroft wasn't sure he could have made good on that threat, but it had the desired effect.

Dubich nodded with obvious reluctance, and led Wincroft into his living room where they both sat.

Wincroft got started. "Now, some of this remains conjecture, and a few of the details may not be quite right, but I'm sure I have the overall picture."

"Sometime earlier in the year, Mr Mullaney approached you with a strange proposition, and for your cooperation you'd receive at least two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, minus whatever your expenses were."

"Then sometime after the 29th of May, you obtained the use of a suitable Cessna 172 on a dry lease. Both you and Mr Mullaney flew your respective aircraft to a farm near Statenville, landing on an area that had been smoothed down, and hid them in the barn."

"There you painted the leased aircraft to look like Mr Mullaney's, and did something to make a temporary change to the registration number of Mr Mullaney's own aircraft so that it matched that of the leased aircraft. Lastly, you used some device - perhaps an arc welder--to make some burn marks on the skin of Mr Mullaney's aircraft to simulate the effects of lightning strikes."

"When that work was complete, you flew Mr Mullaney's aircraft away, and Mr Mullaney returned to Gainesville with the leased aircraft, where he used it to continue a carefully constructed pattern of activity designed to make what would happen on the 25th of June seem not unusual to the staff at the general aviation terminal."

"Meanwhile you took your time in moving Mr Mullaney's aircraft to the other side of the continent. I imagine you stuck to minor airfields to minimise the risk of anyone noticing the temporary nature of the changes to the registration number, or the deliberate damage to its skin. Finally, you placed it somewhere suitable near

Missoula, and made your way to Seattle, where you caught a morning flight back to Gainesville via Atlanta, on the 24th of June, getting you back home in the early evening.”

“The next morning, you were the passenger that Mr Mullaney had with him when he departed at 5am. It was probably after departing Gainesville that Mullaney took off his conspicuous jacket, and you put it on, which would be awkward in the confines of the cabin, but not impossible with two pilots on board. You shaved off your beard, which I notice is now regrowing, and Mullaney put on a false one. Since it was very early, before the tower opened, the destination isn't recorded, but I'm pretty sure that if we checked, we'd find you arrived at a field near Jacksonville. When you got there, you represented yourself as having been the pilot. Mr Mullaney, represented as the passenger, would have left the airfield, and caught a cab to Jacksonville International Airport, from where he took a flight to Seattle under your name, and using your allegedly lost driving licence as ID. From Seattle, he made his way to where you'd left his aircraft. You waited around at the airfield near Jacksonville International until you could fly back to Gainesville. You arrived there at 2:30pm, parked on the FBO's apron until 3pm, and then called the tower for clearance to taxi for Atlanta in accordance with Mr Mullaney's usual custom. When you were approaching the farm, which is about one hour's flying time away, you played a recording made by Mr Mullaney over the radio on the distress frequency, and then descended rapidly to land, and again hid the aircraft in the barn.”

“I'd guess that you and Mr Mullaney had some way of communicating that couldn't be traced back to him - a 'burner phone' perhaps - and that you confirmed that your side of the arrangement had gone without a hitch. Had something gone wrong, such as your being recognised as not being Mr Mullaney, then you'd have said that you were there on his authority - perhaps you even had a document or video to prove it - at which point the thing would have been called off. But nothing did go wrong. So Mr Mullaney, having removed the temporary registration changes from his aircraft and taken off his false beard, donned a duplicate of the jacket he'd given you, and departed from wherever you'd left the aircraft, flying low towards Missoula.”

“I suppose Mr Mullaney's intention was to avoid being spotted on radar before announcing his miraculous arrival, courtesy of aliens, in the skies near Missoula. But now something did go wrong. His aircraft suffered engine failure, and given the terrain and his having to make an emergency landing from low level, the resulting crash killed him.”

“You couldn't admit to anything, because some of your actions were clearly unlawful, so you returned the leased aircraft to its owner, and resumed your normal life, albeit considerably richer than you had been.”

Dubich wasn't looking happy, and said “It's a nice story, but how much do you think you can prove.”

“Fair question. The commercial air travel under your name is on record. We can probably find security footage clear enough to show that it wasn't you who travelled to Seattle on that Tuesday. We know that you leased a 172 from somewhere, and that you had to have painted it in part, if only to change its registration number. I doubt that you could undo that in a way that left no trace. So most likely you did something to disguise what you'd done, and didn't return it in the same condition you got it. There are only so many 172s in existence, so you know that if we search for it, we'll find it. Once we find it we'll know its registration number, and can look for records of an aircraft with that registration number at airfields across the USA. You must have landed a number of times and bought fuel. We may even find Mr

Mullaney's DNA in it if we look. We can certainly prove that he paid you the money."

Dubich mulled that over. "So why are you telling me this. Why haven't you just arrested me?"

Wincroft said, "Well, for a start, I don't arrest people. I'm not a police officer. Secondly, our primary goal in this is to show that Mr Mullaney's accident had nothing to do with aliens, and that there is no threat to airline passenger safety. If we get your cooperation, in the form of a full statement, including any significant facts that I've missed out, that will achieve our goal much more quickly than putting you in front of a jury. It would also be more likely to be believed by the section of the public who are inclined to disbelieve statements from government agencies on matters of UFOs and aliens. In return, you'll get more lenient treatment for the offences you committed."

"Think about it. Talk to a lawyer. Here's my card. But if you're going to cooperate, do it quickly, because otherwise we will have to act."

On that note, he left. Within two hours, he had driven south to Tampa Airport, dropped his hire car there and was on a flight back to Seattle via Detroit, and would arrive home in time for dinner with Fiona.

At 11am on Monday, Wincroft got a call, not from Dubich, but from his lawyer. In return for a guarantee that there would be no other repercussions, Dubich would provide a complete statement of the facts as he understood them, and plead guilty to a number of relatively minor aviation offences. The lawyer advised that Dubich, when returning the aircraft to the lessor, had immediately insisted on paying for the damage he caused to it while concealing what he and Mullaney had originally done. This was to ensure that no one would look too closely at whether the damage was really accidental. As a consequence, no fraudulent insurance claim had been submitted.

Wincroft said he'd get back, and went to discuss it with O'Brien.

Approval came from O'Brien's superiors later that day, and Wincroft caught Dubich's lawyer by phone, just before he was leaving his office in Gainesville.

Wincroft received the signed and witnessed statement on Wednesday, and spent some time telephoning people to check the facts. As far as he could tell, Dubich had told the truth. In addition to confirming what Wincroft had said to Dubich, it filled in a few gaps.

On the Sunday morning, Mullaney's aircraft had been left by Dubich at Cottonwood Municipal Airport, an airfield that has no control tower, and is deserted much of the time. There had been little chance that the aircraft would be interfered with for the time that it would spend there. Dubich had walked to the town of Cottonwood, and caught the daily Greyhound bus service to Lewiston, which it reached in a little over an hour. Dubich had then hired a car, and driven it to Seattle International Airport, where he parked it in a parking lot before staying overnight in a motel, flying back to Gainesville the next morning. He had given the car keys to Mullaney, who later used the vehicle to get to the airfield at Cottonwood. He'd hidden the key for Dubich to find again since he didn't want it in his possession when, as he anticipated, he landed at Missoula.

Dubich had heard about the crash, but realised that to cover his own involvement properly, he'd need to complete his side of the scheme. So some days

later, Dubich had flown back to Seattle, used the Greyhound service for the entire distance from Seattle to Cottonwood, retrieved the car, returned it to Lewiston, and made his way home again.

To hide what had been done to the leased aircraft, he'd 'accidentally' spilt paint over the affected areas.

Dubich and Mullaney had spent some time making their radio calls sound sufficiently similar that the difference wouldn't be noticed in the utterance of the few required words over a low quality radio channel. A recording of Mullaney had been used for the fake distress call because it was longer, might be subject to greater scrutiny, and its wording could be fixed in advance.

Wincroft took the statement to O'Brien, and waited as the latter read it.

Eventually O'Brien looked up. "But why?" he asked. "What was the point of it all?"

Wincroft said "Ultimately, we'll never be completely sure. As you see," Wincroft indicated towards Dubich's statement, "Mullaney didn't explain that part to Dubich. I think Mullaney was a wealthy, but lonely, man who had fallen deeply in love with an unusual woman; a woman who was mad about UFOs. Mullaney would have known from the reports on the Internet about the woman's tendency to get involved with men who'd achieved some media coverage relating to their alleged alien abductions. He'd also have known that those relationships had failed as a result of the stories unravelling. Mullaney had the money to construct a convincing, and more importantly, enduring, alien abduction story, and he was willing to spend it to get the woman he loved."

O'Brien looked sceptical. "Would it have worked?"

Wincroft shrugged. "Perhaps. Probably not. But I think that Mullaney believed that it would, and that's all that matters here."

O'Brien nodded in reluctant agreement. "I suppose so. And the crash..."

Wincroft grimaced in a gesture of resignation, "... was just an accident."