

Wildcat

Sample

PROLOGUE

NASA, Johnson Space Center,
Clearlake, Texas.

“Look over there, just beyond those trees. You can see the top of the rocket that took the Mercury astronauts into space. I think it was an Atlas rocket.”

Seen from the tan BMW window, across six lanes of Interstate 45 and the broad South Texas coastal plains, the silver nose section of the NASA rocket glistened like a polished diamond in the bright Texas summer sun.

“You’re right, Mom. It was an Atlas rocket,” eight-year-old Sean Roberts said. “We learned about it in school last week. A guy named Glenn flew it. He was the first man in space.”

Sandy Roberts turned to her son, who was sitting in the rear seat of the car. “You’re almost right, Sweetie,” she said with a grin. “The man’s name was John Glenn. He was the first American to orbit the Earth. Yuri Gagarin, a Russian, was the first man in space.”

Meg Sanders, also eight years old, was sitting beside Sean in the car’s rear seat. She smiled. “See, dummy? You never listen in class!” she said with a slap on Sean’s arm. “Miss Arthur told us some foreign guy did it first.”

“I do, too, listen,” Sean insisted and slapped her arm.

“Ouch,” Meg shouted. “Mom, he hit me. Make him stop.”

Camille Sanders looked at Sandy, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, Lord. You know Sandy, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“Nonsense,” Sandy said with a faint smile, then turned to the rear seat. She raised her index finger, “Sean, you were the one who wanted to come to NASA. I’m in no mood for horseplay. It’s going to be crowded and hot, so if you don’t cooperate, we’ll turn right around and go back home. Do you understand?”

“But, Mom...!”

“Meg,” Camille said, staring at her daughter in the rear view mirror. “The same goes for you, too.”

“Mom...”

“Not one more word! Both of you just sit still and try to act like good kids. You know what good kids are,” Camille said and smiled at Sandy. “You saw them once on TV.” Then she added, “Here’s the NASA exit now.”

Sandy smiled at Camille. She leaned over and whispered, “It’s almost like they’re brother and sister, they fight so much.”

Camille nodded, smiling faintly.

As she was leaning toward Camille, Sandy lightly touched her leg. “Camille, you’ve been quiet ever since we left home. Is anything wrong?”

“It’s not serious, nothing worth talking about.”

“Humph. Usually when people say ‘It’s nothing serious,’ it usually is. When we reach NASA, we’ll let the kids run around. It’s huge. There’s no way they can get into trouble. We’ll talk then,” Sandy said and paused, waiting for an answer. “We’ll talk then?” she repeated, her finger pulling on her earlobe.

Camille drove, eyes fixed on the road.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” Camille finally acknowledged with a slight laugh. “Maybe we should talk. It involves the company, so you might be interested.”

“The company?”

“Oh,” she said with a renewed smile, “it’s probably nothing. Bryan tells me I

overreact.”

Camille flipped the turn signal and moved over to the far right lane. She tapped the brake pedal as she entered the exit ramp. The smile ended, replaced very quickly with a clenched jaw.

Sandy looked over at her friend. “Camille, we’ll talk,” Sandy said. “It’ll be okay.”

Camille’s eyes widened as her fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly. Her mouth opened, as if to speak, but nothing came out.

“Cam...” Sandy’s words froze in her throat as her eyes went to the roadway along the exit ramp. A blur of green grass and bushes was rushing past the car much faster than it should. “Camille, slow down. You’re going too fast.”

“Dear God...” Camille whispered as her foot repeatedly smashed the pedal into the floorboard, “...the brakes!”

Still at interstate speed, with two stopped eighteen-wheelers completely blocking the end of the ramp in front of her and with a steep drop-off to the right, Camille shouted, “Hang on,” and aimed for a small space between one of the trucks and the concrete overpass abutment.

She swerved in front of a slower moving car, bounced over the curb and sped out of control down the grassy embankment.

The left fender hit the concrete, sending the car to the right, struck one of the truck’s wheels and started spinning. Contact with the curb flipped the BMW onto the main drive into NASA.

It came to rest on its side, in the center of the southbound lanes. For a long moment, nothing moved; the world seemed strangely muted. Camille looked first at Sandy, then at the kids. An exhale seeped out of her lungs and mouth.

They’d made it.

She looked up. A car was rushing toward them, a terrified expression on the

driver's face. The high-pitched cry of squealing tires filled the inside of the car. The front of the BMW exploded in a spray of glass fragments and bits of metal. They sailed backwards, spinning and flipping over, landing on the passenger-side doors.

For an instant, nothing happened. Then the acrid odor of gasoline fumes filled the car. With a faint whomp, fire erupted under the hood. Partially blinded by a stream of blood from a deep gash in her forehead, Camille fumbled with the buckle to the seat belt. A wave of heat swept over her as the flames ate through the firewall, into the passenger compartment. The buckle finally gave. She turned to check the others.

Sandy wasn't moving and had a blank, open-eyed expression.. Blood ran from a gash in her neck. Flames attacking the car burned away the leather dashboard. The back seat was empty. Smoke filled the car, choking and nearly blinding her.

Searing pain tore at her face and arms. Panicked, Camille pulled on the sides of the broken out window and pushed up with her feet. Blisters bubbled on her arm. Bits of smoking flesh fell away as she dragged herself out of the window and onto the car door.

She checked the car. No children. Sandy was dead.

She was about to jump, when a faint voice caught her ear.

"Camille. Help."

"Jesus," she whispered and looked into Sandy's eyes.

Daggers of yellow-orange flames exploded from the dashboard, flicked at the seat covers. The once tan leather turned dark brown.

"Sandy..."

Flames swirled around the interior of the car, igniting the seats and steering wheel, then erupted out the window in a wide column of fire. Camille fell back, her hair smoking, and rolled off the car door and onto the street.

"No. No. God, don't do this," she said when she righted herself.

“Meg! Sweet Jesus, where are you Megan?” she shouted.

Silence.

“Please, someone...” she cried out to the rapidly gathering crowd, “...find my daughter.”

“Hey, lady,” a voice called out, “over here.”

Camille ran to the voice. Meg was lying in the median, face down in the grass.

“No, Honey, no!” she screamed and rushed to her. She rolled her over and hugged her. A soft breath blew across her neck. Meg’s eyes opened. “Mom...” she managed, then passed out.

Camille picked up Meg and carried her away from the flames.

At the front of the car, Sean stood, his hands pressed on the windshield staring at his mother as the flames brushed across her face and body. “Mommy! Mommy!” he cried.

As the flames filled the car, Sandy shrieked, “Get out. Get out now!”

From out of the crowd, a man in shorts and T-shirt grabbed Sean. The man shouted. “You gotta get away. This might blow up.”

“No,” Sean cried as the stranger snatched him out of the broken window.

Camille held Meg to her breast then, as if hypnotized by the horror, turned to face the car.

A blackened hand, then an arm appeared through the window as a ball of fire engulfed the BMW.